THE CASSIODORE CASE

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BY

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METHUEN & CO. LTD.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

First Published . . . . September 5th 1927
Second Edition (F'cap 8vo, Cheap Form) 1928

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

To

A. A. B.

IN ALL FRIENDSHIP

AND AFFECTION

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THE CASSIODORE CASE

CHAPTER I

WE ARE CALLED IN

MY cousin Branders Noble and I had been spending the week-end at Alfriston, that delightful village hidden in a fold of the Sussex downs. Warm spring sunshine and an odorous breeze blowing in from the sea had decided us to play truant from our daily haunts and to prolong our visit till Wednesday morning—"borrowing two days from the week," as Branders phrased it. There were no "cases" of importance just then to lure the enthusiast back to his psychological workshop where the souls of men were taken to pieces to lay bare the springs of iniquity—I cannot conceive any circumstances in which he could have been got away from town at all if this had not been so—while I was free of engagements as the wind, and Mrs. Twinkle, with whom we were stopping, as willing as we could wish to continue her ministrations to our comfort on the terms agreed to. From everybody's point of view, then, it seemed an entirely wise and satisfactory arrangement.

That was the decision come to overnight. But Monday morning brought a reminder of the vanity of man's proposings in the form of a telegram, which Branders read with one of his characteristic scowls and then handed across the breakfast table to me. It had been forwarded by Jonson from Branders' London address, and read :

" Branders Noble, care Twinkle, Alfriston, Sussex.

" Wire received reading : Gregory killed. See papers. Come at once. Helen Cassiodore.

" Jonson."

' Who is she ? ' I asked ; for the name seemed vaguely familiar, though I was at a loss to remember in what connection I could have heard it.

' Oh, just a woman I have met,' Branders replied in a tone suggesting that he took no interest in the lady or her affairs. ' She is sister,' he added after a pause during which he seemed to travel away to a great distance in thought, ' of Sir Gregory Cassiodore, the so-called " mystery man of Balkan finance." They are half Greek.'

' That man ! ' I exclaimed, looking at the name in the telegram again.

Dim recollections of club-room gossip and of the lucubrations of paragraph writers were stirred by the name, of whispered innuendoes, and of the but half-formulated legend of an unseen figure moving through the background of the worlds of finance and politics in an

accompanying fog of melodramatic mystification. That was all Sir Gregory in life had been to me, as to ninety-nine out of a hundred of those who had heard of him—an obscure and almost sinister figure pulling strings behind the scenes of the European comedy ; but now in death his name was to leap into sudden, sensational world-wide notoriety, to become a household word in China and a topic of conversation over the tea tables of Peru, as every minutest circumstance of his life was dragged forward from the shadows and submitted to the full illumination of the spotlights of press publicity.

'They must suspect foul play or they would not send for you,' I added somewhat feebly, with a dawning realisation of the full magnitude of the thing which had happened.

'That seems a safe enough inference,' Branders sneered.

I must say here, once and for all, before I go any further in this narrative, that there perhaps never was a man so rarely gifted, and yet cursed with so unpleasant an exterior, as Branders Noble.

You must picture him as a figure of medium height, stooping, narrow-chested and emaciated, a mere framework of bones covered with a drawn, leathery skin, disfigured by that peculiar livid pallor which is so often the sign of the wastrel and the debauchee. It was impossible for anyone with eyes to deny the unwholesomeness of Branders' appearance, the atmosphere of degeneracy which seemed to have sullied him

from birth; but once special attention was directed to his head, people were forced to revise their first unfavourable impressions. In its proportions and massiveness Branders' head was an extraordinary contrast to his shrunken and undersized body. It was the head of a thinker and of a man of inexhaustible energy part mathematician's and part soldier's. But there, too, unfortunately, there were repulsive details. The domed outline of the head and the clear sculpture of the brow and temples could hardly have been finer, but the features, considered separately, appeared to belong to the deformed and puny body rather than to the magnificently powerful head. The eyes, it is true, were dark, penetrating and glowing, but they were rather too close together under their beetling brows; the hawk-like nose was set crooked on the face; and the mouth, though iron-firm in its line of decision when closed, was too large, and when open disclosed fang-like, discoloured teeth, and was in its general effect not a little suggestive of both cruelty and sensuality. To these disfigurements of form it must be added that his nerves were often jumpy and uncertain, so that his features would twitch and grimace in a horrible and quite involuntary manner at the slightest excitement or irritation.

For the rest, Branders was always well dressed and careful of his person; he not only was, but looked, a gentleman, even if a repulsive one. I have not concealed, and I do not wish

to minimize, the unfavourable impression which Branders Noble produced on nearly all strangers who met him ; and where there is smoke, they say, there must be fire. I can only assert that, having known him from childhood, I have never observed anything in his character or conduct to justify the almost universal ill opinion entertained of him by those who only knew him superficially. That he triumphed over so great a social handicap, only makes his positive achievement the more wonderful. It is necessary to bear in mind, however, that when Branders laughed and talked and argued, he would appear to any casual observer to be sneering, snarling and scowling, and that considerable time and familiarity were needed to discover the true man behind the grotesquery of the mask.

Since Branders had last spoken—that sharp, sneering sarcasm with which he had snubbed me—he had been searching through the paper impatiently, running his finger down column after column of print without result, and he ended by throwing the offending sheets, wisped to a ball, into a corner across the room.

'There's not anything about it there,' he grumbled.

'Not a late enough edition, perhaps ? '

'Nonsense ! ' he snarled. 'There were no papers out in any case when the original of that wire was dispatched. Look at the time. The woman was in hysterics, telegraphing nonsense.'

'It will be in the first evening papers,' I

suggested. 'They must be out in London by now.'

Branders, his eyes absently scanning the tree-crowned hill-top which closed the view from our sitting-room window, ignored my remark.

'We must catch that early train, Vernon,' he said, suddenly alert, as if waking from a dream. 'We have just time. Run down to the village, old man, and order a car at once; while I see to our things and settle with Mrs. Twinkle.'

That meant going without breakfast, for I had scarcely begun; but I knew the imperiousness of my cousin's temper too well to protest, and in hardly more than a quarter of an hour we were out of the house and on our way to the train.

Thanks to our driver we had a few minutes to spare at the station, which Branders employed in procuring copies of all the papers he could get; only, as it turned out, to stuff them one by one under the seat in the carriage as his search proved unavailing. I reflected with some amusement that, in view of what he had said about the time of the telegram, his getting the papers at all must be regarded as a temporary victory of curiosity and impatience over sober reason. For my part, I had confined my purchases at the bookstall to a popular red-covered book of reference, in which I turned up and eagerly read one particular article.

When Branders had finished with his papers I acquainted him with the results of my researches.

'I have found out all about the Sir Gregory of the telegram,' I said.

'In that case you have done more than anyone else has ever done,' Branders commented mordantly.

'I have found out several quite interesting things, at least,' I said, ignoring the snub because I knew it meant nothing. 'Shall I read? This is what they say:

'"CASSIODORE, SIR GREGORY KRAPULOS, K.B.E., LL.D., M.A. (Oxon), 47A, Surreyview Mansions, London, W. 2. . . . financier . . . born 1867, Scarborough . . . son of George Cassiodore, merchant, of Athens and Marseilles, and of Eva, daughter of Peter Perkins-Perkins, Esq., . . . Educated, St. Paul's, Heidelberg and Oxford . . . Knighted, 1919, for services to the Allied cause during the war . . . Unmarried . . . Clubs: Athenæum, Philhellenic Circle, Royal Automobile . . . Publications: *A Holiday in Albania*, *Observations on an Ancient Gold Vase.* Recreations: old china, golf."'

'That gives you an idea of the man, doesn't it?' I asked.

'As what?'

'As a sort of semi-foreigner,' I replied. 'British born and a British subject, of course; but there is the Greek blood and the Greek name, and possibly a dash of French as well. Those Greek merchants of Marseilles intermarry with the Provençals, I believe—have been doing it for centuries. I see him as little

affected by the English part of his education, a cosmopolitan by blood and tradition as well as habit, a man without instinctive patriotism, one half of whose social conscience is in consequence unanchored. He must, I fancy, have been nearly impervious to the public school and university tradition. Mystery-mongering is not an English trait. And just look at that un-English touch of putting his old china before his golf. You would hardly suspect the man of having been to St. Paul's. Old china by taste—there's that little monograph on an antique gold vessel—and golf by his doctor's orders, I believe it must have been. And consider that knighthood " for services to the Allied cause." You observe how much more the notice tells of his recreations than of his business. There is a gold vase, old china, at least one holiday, golf, motoring and a polite interest in things Greek—and against all that a " financier " who " rendered services." There is a fine reserve in that phrase which may cover many things. Do you know anyone who could say off-hand what those services were ? So far the notice, by its silences, justifies our calling him a mystery man. For the rest I picture Sir Gregory as a smooth-spoken, gentle-mannered, infinitely subtle intriguer of accommodating principles, gliding noiselessly through all the back corridors of life, content to allow other people to have the kudos provided he has the substance of power. Don't you agree ? '

Branders lay back in his corner of the carriage

which we had to ourselves, with eyes half closed, and pulling at his pipe, while I added this gloss to the text of the red book.

'Your imagination is in great form to-day, Vernon,' he said with mock gravity. 'What a man you would be to write history without the distasteful preliminary labour of research! And I suppose that, in all probability, your Sir Gregory has now got himself shot in final settlement of the said services?'

'How can you tell that?'

'I can't. I wish I could, now that he is dead. It would be so appropriate. Otherwise his death seems sheer waste. I can't regard the man as anything but an international pest, and probably nine out of every ten decent people in the Balkans take the same view. One of them may have put it into practice.'

'And this sister who wired to you?'

'Oh, the Cassowary woman is all right. That's what she's always called—the Cassowary. She's that sort of woman, one of those long-toothed, carroty, virile spinsters, who get all the fun they need out of a motley succession of crazes. She has taken up some new fad every time you meet her. Yet she always manages to have her sanity only just round the corner and within call. She is fundamentally harmless. I am sorry for her.'

'So you won't refuse to take the case up, however strongly you feel about Sir Gregory?'

'My dear Vernon, have you ever known me refuse a case . . . that had anything in

it? I don't know about this one yet, of course.'

It was I, after all, who was the first to obtain at a wayside station a newspaper which gave the desired information. It was a later edition than any of those Branders had purchased, and it contained a heavily-leaded paragraph in the 'Late News' column.

'GRUESOME DISCOVERY

'SUSPECTED DOUBLE MURDER IN WEST END'

"At an early hour this morning a policeman on night duty in Rutland Square, Lancaster Gate, came on what are believed to be the evidences of a horrible crime, the dead bodies of a middle-aged man in evening dress and of a young woman. There were no outward signs of violence, but all the circumstances point to murder. The bodies had been propped up, evidently after death, against the railings of the square in the shadow of some trees, and were held in position by the upper part of their arms, which had been wedged down between the spikes. The police have no record of any similar crime having ever been committed in London. The identity of the victims is still a mystery.'

'That must be it,' I said, handing the paper to Branders.

'It is only just round the corner from where

he lived, at least,' Branders commented when he had read the paragraph. 'Either it is the same mystery as ours, or else it is another one coincident in time and place. The mathematical chances against the latter alternative are, I suppose, many millions to one. So we may provisionally assume that the man is Sir Gregory. It suggests a very interesting problem.'

'Who the young woman could have been? And what Sir Gregory was doing in her company late at night? And how two dead bodies could be abandoned in the street at the heart of Bayswater and no one know anything about it?'

'My dear Vernon!' Branders' face was distorted with one of his crooked, sneering smiles. "When will you learn to exercise a little judicious caution? In the present stage of our knowledge we can ask questions profitably only about the unique circumstances in the report before us. Our object is to lay hands on the murderer; and we can only hope to do so by following up the clue he has so kindly left for us, as readers of the newspaper, to discover.'

I read the paragraph through once more and shook my head.

'I can't see it,' I confessed.

'No? Then will you tell me this: Why on earth should anyone, having murdered two people, leave their bodies propped up against the railings in a London square?'

'To get rid of the bodies, I suppose.'

'No doubt. But it was a suggestively odd way of doing it. And I presume the bodies were placed in an upright position so that if anyone chanced to pass, seeing them only in the dark shadow of the trees, he would think that they were . . . well, shall we say drunk? Their attitude would rule love-making out of the question. But if the bodies had been left lying on the ground, the first person who passed would have been almost certain to come and investigate to see what was the matter. This murderer, we see, must be a true artist in his own *macabre* medium. But if my suggestion is correct, it follows that time was in some way an essential element in the murderer's calculations when he placed the bodies where they were found: it may have been simply that he wanted to make good his escape before the discovery raised the hue and cry. But where would you say that the crime could have been committed?'

'It may have been in one of the houses close by.'

'Surely not! When people murder their guests they don't expose their bodies on the doorstep to advertise the fact. The architects have provided cellars for the purposes of concealment, and the trunk-makers chests. There is really nothing less original than a murderer's procedure.'

'It must have been in a car, then. I am far from saying that all motorists are criminals,

but nearly all criminals nowadays seem to be motorists.'

'But if the murder was committed in a car, can you suggest any likely reason why the criminal did not take the bodies to some less exposed place? Think of the risks the man ran. London is never wholly deserted, however late the hour. He could, one would think, have driven out into the country and have dumped the bodies in a field.'

'But by that sort of reasoning you could prove every locality impossible for such a crime. On the face of the facts it does seem an impossible crime, and yet it has happened. You don't suppose that the murder was carried out in the open street, do you?'

'At the moment I am not supposing anything,' Branders replied with a sudden frigidity of manner which told me that his mind was made up, and that he had no desire for any further discussion. 'We really know nothing about the affair as yet,' he added. 'These two people may have died of broken hearts, have committed suicide while gazing into the depths of one another's eyes. We don't even know for certain that the man is Sir Gregory. I have only been turning over some interesting possibilities.'

'And the clue you hinted at?'

'Only holds if it *is* Sir Gregory.'

At that point I had to be content to leave our sadly unequal and one-sided discussion; for neither then nor for many days afterwards—

not, indeed, until it was pointed out to me—did I see any clue, however faint, in that jejune paragraph which first brought to the knowledge of the public perhaps the most sensationally mysterious murder case of recent years.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY IN THE FLAT

IN our taxi across London Branders was sunk in apparent listlessness and apathy, and repulsed me with morose brevity on the only occasion when I attempted to break the silence. But his air of boredom and bad temper was belied by the alacrity with which he went bounding before me up the flight of stone steps which led to the swing doors admitting to the towering block of Surreyview Mansions.

In the spacious, marble-paved hall we were met by the porter, who emerged from a little office just beyond the lift shaft. The man, who was of an elderly and quiet type, appeared preoccupied and almost dazed. He was the first person we saw who was suffering from the repercussion of the morning's discovery.

'Number 47A, please,' Branders said, stepping past him into the lift with unconcern and

feigned unconsciousness that anything unusual had occurred.

But the porter hesitated before setting the cage in motion.

'You have heard, sir?'

Branders nodded.

'A friend of the family perhaps, sir?'

But as Branders did not nod again, the porter continued with more show of opposition.

'The police are in the flat, you know, sir, and Miss Cassiodore has given me the most strict instructions.'

'But I have come specially to see Miss Cassiodore.'

But the porter, evidently a man who prided himself on his strict conscientiousness, was not quite satisfied even with that.

'I don't know whether I ought to let you go up, sir. There was a gentleman from the press came . . .'

'I assure you I am nothing of that sort. I will make everything quite all right with Miss Cassiodore. She is expecting me.'

In his perplexity the porter had been studying Branders' rather forbidding features with that unobtrusive observation which characterizes many servants of the older type. Something in Branders' personality, deeper than surface repulsiveness—it may have been the 'habit of authority'—overruled the man's hesitations. He stepped after us into the lift and the cage began to move slowly upwards.

'You weren't on duty here last night, I

suppose ? ' Branders asked before we left the lift on the third floor.

' No, sir. I went off at nine last evening, sir. But I saw Sir Gregory leave. Mr. Phrett—that's his chauffeur—drove round in the car at half-past eight, and Sir Gregory came down almost at once. They were back again, Mr. Phrett tells me, at about a quarter past eleven, and Sir Gregory went upstairs to bed, as was supposed. No one knows what happened after that. It had just struck one when the policeman found the body. Mr. Phrett was, as far as is known, the last to see him alive.'

' Sir Gregory was always a man of mysterious habits, I believe ? '

' I never saw any of that, sir,' the porter replied with greater warmth than he had shown hitherto. ' Sir Gregory was a very quiet gentleman. He would spend most evenings by himself in his flat, reading or writing. He seldom went out anywhere in the evenings, and he had very few visitors. Business gentlemen from abroad, most of them. You would have taken him for a very studious sort of gentleman ; but if it hadn't been for what they put in the newspapers—and that's mostly lies, I reckon—you would never have supposed that there was anything particularly mysterious about him. The second on the right, sir, down the passage. Thank you, sir.'

A faded little woman of about sixty, dressed neatly in black, opened the door in reply to our ring.

She appeared surprised when Branders asked for Miss Cassiodore; but on his assurance that we had been wired for, she took his card and left us to wait in the hall-lounge of the flat.

I cannot say how Branders spent that interval —his expression was that of a man engaged in difficult mental calculations, and he was doubtless digesting what he had learned from the porter, storing it away in his memory in accordance with a system understood only by himself, —but for my part, I fell at once to observing my surroundings. Everything visible—the scheme of decoration, the furniture, the ornaments (genuine amphoræ from the buried civilizations of the Mediterranean, and delicate modern porcelain alike), the pictures, the little bronze statuettes, the tall vases filled with flowers (yesterday's flowers, I could see, untouched to-day)—all were of excellent quality and in the best of taste; but there was nothing to suggest the millionaire or the financial magnate, not a trace of ostentation or of exotic costliness. The porter had described Sir Gregory as a man of studious habits, and there was confirmation of his report in the simple elegance of this interior, which must have come into existence to satisfy the requirements of a most accomplished dilettante.

The housekeeper returned and we were ushered into Miss Cassiodore's presence in a sort of breakfast-room, plainly and indeed almost barely furnished. The dull distempered walls made a most effective background for the

vividness of that lady's personality, throwing it into the strongest relief.

Nothing that Branders had said about her had prepared me for my first impressions of Miss Cassiodore. When we came in she was standing behind the table facing the door, with head thrown a little backwards, a tall, slightly-built woman of about forty, blue-eyed, with a pink-and-white complexion, clear-cut, cameo-like features, and with a great mass of coiled red hair in the meshes of which the strong morning sunlight glinted like gold. Her dress, too, was as boldly striking as her personality. She wore a brilliantly coloured jumper of some rough silk material over a swinging pleated skirt, short enough to show the fine lines of her legs. A wide-brimmed picture hat with trailing draperies lay on the table in front of her beside a confused litter of papers. There was something a little hard to define—it may have been a touch of Bohemianism, or of eccentricity even—in her appearance, which, though bearing no easily recognizable relation to the fashions of the day, was none the less wholly effective and very attractive.

'I am so glad you could come, Mr. Noble,' she said, holding out both hands impulsively. 'It is so like you. And this gentleman . . ?'

The wide blue eyes rested on me in friendly questioning.

'Yes, allow me. This is my cousin and colleague, Vernon Campling—Miss Cassiodore.'

Branders explained that as well as being

cousins and old schoolfellows, we had been working together for some years now. He had, he said, been in need of assistance from a man who was thoroughly at home among the idle and vicious section of the community, and had approached me in the belief that I had that qualification, if no other.

'Vernon,' he added, 'is a man cursed with a competence. He never did a stroke of honest work in his life till I compelled him to by annexing him for my own purposes.'

'I am sure,' the lady said, 'Mr. Campling must have a great many virtues you are unwilling to give him credit for.'

Again I received the frank smile of the blue eyes, and I could not think how Branders had ever come to describe their owner as a "long-toothed, carroty, virile spinster." To me she appeared exquisitely feminine, an unusually handsome woman in the very prime of her mature attractiveness.

'What is it you want me to do, Miss Cassiodore?'

We were now seated round the littered breakfast table and Branders' question was spoken in the most casual of conversational tones.

'I am afraid that they are trying to hush something up, Mr. Noble, and I want you to stop that if possible.'

'You mean that the police are already manufacturing a mystery?'

'Yes, I am afraid so. Do you know Chief-Inspector MacBee of the C.I.D.?'

Branders nodded emphatically.

'One of the cleverest heads they have at the Yard. A very blunt sort of chap, but sound. It is a great mistake to under-estimate the police.'

'Well, Inspector MacBee has been here for more than two hours. The servants here 'phoned through to me at once when they heard the news, and when I got round I found the inspector already installed with another officer in the library. He has seen me, of course, as well as everybody else,—turned us all inside out. He certainly does seem to know his business. But when he was through with me and I had come in here and was talking to the chauffeur Phrett, the telephone bell over there rang. But when I took up the receiver I found that a conversation was already going on between the inspector and some man he called Mr. Kantsellory. I suppose the wires were crossed somehow, and in any case I only heard a few sentences before something clicked and I was cut off. But I heard this Mr. Kantsellory telling MacBee that, whatever came out in the investigation of the crime, nothing must be published which might prejudice Britain's relations with a certain foreign power. He didn't say what power. MacBee answered, "Yes, sir, I understand. I shall report to you in the first place and not to the Commissioner." That struck me as extraordinary and most disturbing: they seem to think my brother's death is the outcome of some international intrigue, and the

matter is already taken out of the hands of the regular authorities and placed in those of some other person; apparently with the intention that the crime is to go unavenged, if that course should appear politically expedient. The only Kantsellory that I can find in *Whitaker* is an Assistant Under-Secretary to the Treasury.'

'I thought it was with the Foreign Office that Sir Gregory had more or less mysterious relations?'

The lady threw out her hands in despair.

'I really can't say, Mr. Noble,' she said. 'My brother's position was very peculiar in several respects. If my nephew were here I daresay he would be able to tell you everything. But he can't be found this morning. No one seems to have any idea where he can be. That worries me, too. My brother and I never saw much of one another. He was the sort of man who found his occupations wholly absorbing and satisfying. That made him very independent of personal relationships. There was, too, a considerable difference in age between us, and we had different tastes and different friends. I really know only what everyone knows about Gregory's public life, what got into the papers. He was very secretive, and I was not in his confidence.'

'So what you really want me to do is to carry out an independent inquiry into all this, parallel to that of the police?'

Miss Cassiodore considered for a moment.

'I want you to watch the case in our interests

—in my nephew's and my own. We are Sir Gregory's nearest representatives and you will have every facility.'

'Then perhaps, Miss Cassiodore, you will tell me everything you have learned since coming here this morning?'

Again the lady made that gesture of almost comic despair. I did not for one second doubt the genuineness of her distress, but I observed that by some inner necessity of her nature she seemed compelled to externalize and dramatize her emotions, in a way which would have made an unsympathetic spectator, more especially one of her own sex, tax her with insincerity. Knowing his caustic and unfavourable opinion of women, I feared that this might be the effect her manner would have on Branders; but if that were so, I could detect no signs of his disapproval in the grave, intent expression of his eyes and mouth as he listened to Miss Cassiodore's statement.

'The trouble is,' she began, 'that I have been able to learn so little. Everything seems to be wrapped in impenetrable mystery. Mrs. Braid, the housekeeper, tells me that my brother spent the whole of yesterday at home, reading in his study—the room we call the library. I saw the book, a treatise on the American banking system, still lying on the table with a paper-knife inserted between the leaves as a marker, when I went in there to see the inspector. Sir Gregory dined at seven, eating very sparingly, he always did. At half-past eight Phrett

brought round the car and he drove into the country to see a certain Mrs. Fimms, a woman of whom no one knows anything, and whom he had never visited before as far as Phrett can say, at a place called " The Hollows," near Reigate. That in itself is an extraordinary thing; for my brother very seldom went out in the evening, least of all to visit women. He returned in the car some time about a quarter past eleven, came upstairs, opened some telegrams which were waiting for him on the hall table, threw the light coat he had been wearing across the back of a chair in his bedroom, where it was found this morning, rang up a club and asked for a friend who was not there at the time—that was just before twelve—then put on a heavy coat over his dress clothes and went out again, nobody can say when or why or with whom. It was a few minutes after one when the policeman found him. Phrett was the first here to miss him, when he went to call him this morning—Phrett acted as my brother's valet as well as chauffeur. That, and what you have seen in the papers, is all that is known at present. The inspector didn't know who the girl was when I saw him.'

'And what about this man Phrett? A tremendous lot seems to depend on his evidence.'

'I really don't know much about him. He has been with my brother for about five years. He was injured internally during the war and is very delicate. I believe he suffers terribly.

He seems to have always given satisfaction as a servant.'

'And the police don't seem to suspect him particularly?'

'How should I know?'

'Well, you know, in this sort of case everyone is suspect at first.'

'Are they really? I am so glad you say that, because . . .'

A shade passed over Miss Cassiodore's face and she left the sentence unfinished.

'Because of your nephew?' Branders prompted. 'I noticed what you said about him—and how you said it. Tell me about him.'

It was not until she began to talk about her nephew that I really understood the sort of woman Miss Cassiodore was. When she had spoken of her brother it was evident that she was genuinely shocked and distressed, but not immoderately, not so as to lose self-control even during the first numbing hours which commonly follow the delivery of such a blow. That Miss Cassiodore was a thoroughly competent, practical, strong-minded woman of the world was a fact not to be disputed. But her whole bearing altered once her nephew was in question; her expression softened, and the voice of instinct could be heard in the deep throaty notes which began to interrupt the silvery clearness of her ordinary utterance.

When she began to speak of him, however, it was with a half-apologetic little laugh.

'Oh, Gerald! It is always *so* difficult to tell about a person you are specially interested in, don't you think? One has to step out of oneself, as it were, and take a dispassionate view. His name is Gerald Savonier—his father was of French extraction, and Gerald is very particular about having the name pronounced in the French way. You see what a mixed lot we Cassiodores are. I am afraid that, when all this gets into the papers, it will seem horribly like a mess-up among obscure aliens down in Soho. And yet Gerald and I are absolutely English, as far as upbringing and traditions go. We are not like my brother who was always a cosmopolitan in every sense. Gerald is the son of my elder sister, Gregory's twin. Sir Gregory, as you know, never married, and he adopted Gerald years ago when both his parents were killed in a railway accident. Gerald has been like a son to him ever since, and for some years now has acted as his confidential private secretary. In a way, I suppose, he knows more about Sir Gregory's activities than anyone else, and might be able to throw a great deal of light on what seems unaccountable in Gregory's movements yesterday.'

I could see from Miss Cassiodore's manner that her emotions almost got the better of her during the last few sentences. She was suffering from some strong passion, fear or terror it might be; fear lest some accident had happened to her nephew, or terror lest he should be suspected of being in some way or other con-

nected with the crime. I felt quite sure that she herself did not suspect him, because she knew him to be incapable of crime ; and in some quite illogical way her confidence infected me, so that I dismissed him from the case as a possible murderer with far too great levity to satisfy the exacting standards of Branders Noble.

All the time that Miss Cassiodore had been speaking she had kept her eyes fixed on Branders' rather sinister face ; and when I looked at him to see if he was sympathizing with her emotion, I found that he was meeting her troubled gaze with an inscrutable scowl, which, however disconcerting she may have found it, was, I daresay, quite involuntary on his part.

'I see,' he said enigmatically. 'And frankly, Miss Cassiodore, what sort of young man is he ? I want his type.'

'Oh, very ordinary, I suppose. Good-looking in a way, and the sort of young man whom people call "nice." Harrow and Oxford. He has expensive tastes, and I expect knows how to amuse himself pretty thoroughly. But I know that my brother was quite satisfied with him as a secretary, and Sir Gregory was very exacting. Gerald was one of the few points of sympathy and complete agreement that existed between Sir Gregory and myself.'

'And your nephew lived here ? '

'No ; he lived at a club. He kept too late hours. My brother was a light sleeper and did

not like to be disturbed in the small hours by someone coming in.'

Branders nodded.

'What do you think can have happened to him now?' Miss Cassiodore asked, unable to keep her anxiety from finding an outlet in words, however idle.

Branders shook his head.

'You must not expect me to answer questions at this stage, Miss Cassiodore,' he said, not unkindly for him. 'I don't think it likely that anything very dreadful has happened or will happen to him. What I should like now is to have a few words with this man Phrett.'

CHAPTER III

A GOOD WITNESS

WE found James Phrett a dapper, clean-shaven, self-confident little man. He may have been forty-five, though he scarcely looked it with his fair skin and light-coloured hair and eyebrows. There was a touch of the old-time servant in his manner, silent and discreet, combined with the alert resourcefulness of the modern mechanic. He held himself well, shoulders braced, head thrown back, eyes front, with something reminiscent of the Army in the

carriage of his body and his firm tread, but without military stiffness.

My first impression of the man was that he would be smart and efficient in everything he did, as well as intelligent and alive to all that went on around him ; a very useful type of man to have as a principal witness. There was little in his appearance to suggest that he was, as Miss Cassiodore reported, a martyr to a secret and trying malady. His cheek, indeed, was perceptibly lank, the orbits of his eyes dark and hollow, and the rather one-sided lines about his mouth were scored into his face with rather greater energy than might have been expected at his age. These signs, however, scarcely detracted from his general appearance of physical and mental alertness, and might easily, had it not been for one's knowledge of his condition, have been put down to nothing more serious than a sleepless night.

He had come in promptly in reply to the bell and stood to attention while Miss Cassiodore explained the reason of our presence.

Branders conveyed a silent request to Miss Cassiodore, expressed only in a slight movement of his brows, and she, reading his meaning, gathered up her hat and papers from the table and left the room without speaking.

Once the lady had gone Branders turned and concentrated his whole attention on the chauffeur, staring at him fixedly, and seeming to hold him with his eyes as a snake is supposed to fascinate a bird. Accustomed as I was to

Branders' methods, I gathered from his manner that he harboured some measure of suspicion of this man. But turning over in my mind all the facts of the case, as far as they had been disclosed, I could see no good grounds for concentrating particular attention on Phrett; except in so far as his evidence, if accepted, must be regarded as the corner-stone of any attempted reconstruction of the events of the preceeding evening.

I watched the man attentively all through the long pause before Branders began his examination, and I saw that he bore the disconcerting scrutiny without flinching and with apparent unconsciousness.

'Miss Cassiodore tells me,' Branders began at last, 'that you never had been to this place "The Hollows" before? Nor had you ever heard of Mrs. Fimms?'

'That is so, sir,' Phrett replied, speaking slowly in clear, metallic tones, with a slight northern accent. 'I had to ask directions from a policeman when two miles this side of Reigate. That was at about half-past nine. It was a quarter of an hour later when we reached the house, for I took a wrong turning twice. Sir Gregory stayed about half an hour, and we were back here by twenty past eleven. It took us about an hour to do the run each way. I can get more than that out of the car, you may think, sir; but yesterday was so fine that the roads were unusually crowded, and getting in and out of London was very difficult driving.

'When we got back here Sir Gregory said good-night at once, and I took the car round to the garage in the mews. It was half-past eleven then. I noticed that because a man called Nogens who lives over our garage heard me about and asked me the time. I put away the car and returned to the flat on foot—it's about eight minutes' walk. I let myself in with my key and went straight to my room. I heard it strike twelve just after I got into bed.'

Branders interrupted him with a question at this point.

'Did you notice,' he asked, 'whether there was anyone about who saw you come in either time, either when you brought Sir Gregory in the car or when you returned after putting the car away?'

'I did not notice anyone about either time, sir.'

'That is unusual. There generally are people about.'

'We are often very quiet round here on Sunday evenings, sir.'

'I see. Go on, please.'

'At half-past seven this morning I knocked at Sir Gregory's door to tell him that his bath was ready. Sir Gregory always rose at that hour, no matter what time it had been when he went to bed. As a rule that would not be later than eleven. When I received no answer to my knock I went in and found that the room had not been occupied. But the light overcoat Sir Gregory had been wearing

when I saw him last was hanging over the back of a chair. That surprised me ; for Sir Gregory was an exceedingly tidy gentleman, and would always put things away in their places without waiting for me. I always had to take his clothes out of the wardrobe when they needed brushing or pressing. As Sir Gregory was not in his study or anywhere else in the flat, I went along to Mrs. Braid's room and told her through the door that the master was missing, and had not been in the flat all night as far as any signs of his presence went to show.

'On Mrs. Braid's suggestion I rang up Mr. Savonier at his club where he resides, only to learn that he had gone out at about ten o'clock last night and that they did not know where he was. But a few minutes later a friend of Sir Gregory's, a Mr. Mixon, who also lives at the same club as Mr. Savonier, rang up, wishing to speak to Sir Gregory. He said that Sir Gregory had put through an urgent call to him last evening a little before midnight, when Mr. Mixon had been out, and that the message had only just reached him owing to some mistake which occurred when the man who took it had been relieved by the night watchman. We have since learned from the exchange that Sir Gregory's call was put in from here. The police rang up almost immediately after Mr. Mixon for someone to go down to the mortuary and identify the body, which had been recognized by a policeman who knew Sir Gregory by sight. I went down at once and identified

him. He was still wearing the clothes I had last seen him in, with the exception of a heavy overcoat which took the place of the light one he had left behind. There were no papers in his pockets; and that struck me as a remarkable circumstance, because Sir Gregory was a man who always carried a good many letters and papers about with him, as though not caring to trust them off his person. It was a habit of his to attend to correspondence while being driven in the car. He would carry writing materials with him and hand me the letters to post when we reached our destination. And last evening he did stop me on our way home, at a place just a little outside London, and pointing to a red letter-box in a wall gave me a letter to post. It was just like Sir Gregory to be in a hurry to do a thing at once like that; for, of course, as you can see, sir, the letter would not arrive any sooner than if he had kept it and had it posted when we got back here. But Sir Gregory was so fond of posting in odd letter-boxes that I sometimes wondered if he suspected someone of tampering with his correspondence in the post. But you would say that letters burned his pockets.'

'You didn't notice the name on the envelope of this letter, I suppose?'

'No, sir.'

'And you don't know the name of the place where it was posted?'

'No, sir. But I could easily identify the place. . . . There were no papers on the

body, as I said, sir; but his gold watch and chain and money were untouched. The police found about fourteen pounds in cash in his pockets. They are satisfied that robbery was not the motive.'

'Unless robbery of his papers?'

'It might be that, sir; but nothing was said about it.'

'Sir Gregory was the sort of man whose papers some people would try to steal?'

'I can't say about that, sir. The Sir Gregory I drove was a very different man from the Sir Gregory of the newspapers.'

'But you said yourself that he seemed to be afraid of people tampering with his letters in the post.'

'That was only a fancy of mine, sir.'

'I see. And did you see the young woman?'

'I did, sir. The police asked me to look at her. To my knowledge I had never seen her before. She was a tall, good-looking young woman, of, I should say, something less than thirty. She was smartly dressed, too, but hardly what you would call a lady. But perfectly respectable, as far as appearances went.'

'And did you see this Mrs. Fimms?'

'I saw no one at "The Hollows" except the man who opened the door to Sir Gregory. It was a big house with a pillared entrance, in front of which was a gravelled sweep. The house was mostly in darkness, on that side at least, but from the little I could see of the

grounds it appeared to be a well-kept place, and had all the signs of money about it.'

'And how did you come to learn this lady's name? Sir Gregory was not communicative as a rule. Did he tell you?'

'Yes, sir, when I stopped to ask the policeman. "Mrs. Fimms's place, 'The Hollows,'" Sir Gregory said.'

'I understand that Sir Gregory was hardly a lady's man?'

'No, sir. In the five years I have been with Sir Gregory I have known him visit very few ladies, and ladies seldom came to see him. The few who did come much into contact with him were wives of business friends of his. I am sure there can have been no lady in whom Sir Gregory took any particular interest. He seemed to restrict himself to men's society on principle.'

'I suppose he didn't often go to places about which you knew nothing?'

'When he was in London Sir Gregory seldom went out anywhere except in the car, and that I always drove. He would go to a number of addresses in the City and to various clubs; and I have known him visit the House of Commons every day for a fortnight. And he would go to various offices in Whitehall fairly frequently, the Foreign Office and the Treasury especially. Sir Gregory was very conservative in his habits.'

'So that driving out to Reigate late on Sunday evening to see an unknown lady was a very astonishing thing for him to do?'

'It was, sir, very.'

'Did you notice any signs of anxiety or worry in Sir Gregory's manner?'

'Sir Gregory seemed to be exactly as usual, sir.'

'How was he usually?'

'Very quiet and self-possessed and collected, sir.'

'So that although what he was doing was very strange, there was no suggestion that anything serious was impending?'

'None whatever, sir, that I saw.'

'And from your knowledge of Sir Gregory's habits can you suggest any reason why, later on that same evening, he should be out with this young woman with whom he was killed?'

'None whatever, sir. I believe that Sir Gregory was a strictly moral man. He was what you might call ascetic in all his habits.'

'And you never saw anything at all about him to suggest that in reality he took more interest in women than on the surface he appeared to?'

'Never, sir.'

'But if we are to believe reports, there were mysterious comings and goings in the world to which Sir Gregory belonged. It was a world of secret agents. Wasn't any one of the various women you ever saw in his company likely to be that sort of person?'

Phrett shook his head.

'I couldn't say, sir. In private life there was nothing melodramatic about Sir Gregory.'

Branders smiled, not unkindly for him.

'Confess the truth, Phrett: you are a great reader of the Sunday papers?'

'I do look at them sometimes, sir.'

'They repay study. And I suppose you have never before been in a household where there has been a murder?'

'Never, sir.'

'And, putting sentiment aside, it is very interesting to be near the centre of the limelight?'

'Sir Gregory was a very good employer, sir.'

'I see. Well, you may not be as much of an artist lost in the disinterested contemplation of life as I thought you were. But there's one other matter I want to ask you about, Phrett: did you come much into contact with Mr. Savonier?'

'Mr. Savonier was here most mornings attending to Sir Gregory's correspondence. He had a little table with a typewriter on it in the dressing-room opening out of Sir Gregory's study, which was originally intended for a bedroom. And Mr. Savonier would sometimes stay on working through the afternoons; or if Sir Gregory had something special on hand, through the evening as well and right up to bed-time. Mr. Savonier is a very particular gentleman about many things, particularly about his appearance. No matter how much work he had to do, he would always take a hot bath, shave, and change into dress clothes before dinner; and when he stayed on for the

evening I would have to valet for him. He was very difficult to please about some things. I have never known anyone who was so hard to satisfy with a razor. And he would always use powder on his face, though you couldn't see it unless you knew it was there. I have seen a good deal of Mr. Savonier in that way; but apart from that, Sir Gregory would sometimes ask me to drive Mr. Savonier in the evenings. I didn't mind doing that, as Mr. Savonier was always generous about tips.'

'And your impression was that Sir Gregory and he were always on excellent terms?'

'I believe Sir Gregory placed the greatest confidence in Mr. Savonier's abilities.'

'And you haven't known them quarrel?'

'Not exactly quarrel, sir. Sir Gregory had a hot temper for a man usually so quiet, and he would raise his voice at times. I have heard him speaking very sharply to Mr. Savonier.'

'Do you know what it was about?'

'I am sure I can't say, unless it was that when Mr. Savonier went out amusing himself he was sometimes a little too free with his wine. That naturally annoyed Sir Gregory, who was a very temperate man himself and very silent, and liked other people to be the same. I have always noticed that Mr. Savonier becomes very talkative when he has been having wine. I don't say that he is the worse for it, but he becomes excited.'

'And has this sort of scene occurred recently between Mr. Savonier and his uncle?'

'It will be three weeks to-morrow, Tuesday, since Mr. Savonier last asked for the use of the car. He told me to drive to a block of flats at Hampstead, where he went in for about a quarter of an hour. He came out accompanied by a young lady whom I had never seen before—a very good-looking girl, bare-headed and wearing a smart opera cloak—and I drove them to a club just out of Piccadilly, the "It" Club, where they went in. Mr. Savonier told me to call for them at one. That seemed rather late, especially if I had to go up to Hampstead again, return to drop Mr. Savonier at his club in Sloane Street, and come back here with the car. However, I knew that Mr. Savonier would make it worth my while. But when I got back to the "It" Club at one, Mr. Savonier came out alone and told me to drive straight to his club. I saw that he was very unsteady, flushed, and a little bit thick in his speech, and when I reached the club I found him doubled up in the car and dazed, and had to help him out and up the steps —I almost had to carry him. One of the club servants took charge of him then. He was ill for two days after that, and when he came here on the Friday I overheard some heated words between him and Sir Gregory. Sir Gregory told me later on that day that I was not to take Mr. Savonier out in the car again. I was very much surprised at Sir Gregory's speaking to me about a thing like that. It is the nearest I have ever known them come to an open quarrel. But since then Mr. Savonier has gone about his

duties here as usual, and Sir Gregory and he have appeared to be the best of friends.'

'No more "words"?'

'No, not exactly "words," sir; for I never heard Mr. Savonier answer back. But I did hear them disagreeing about something late last Friday evening. I said that Sir Gregory would raise his voice if he were crossed. Sir Gregory's voice was rather high-pitched and shrill and would carry. I overheard him saying something sharp about some "club" and "that girl." I assure you, sir, that I never did such a thing as listen. Even if I had been inclined to, that wouldn't have been a safe thing to do with a gentleman like Sir Gregory. He was too suspicious. He would go prowling about from room to room with a tread like a cat, and would be on you before you knew that he had left his study. He was very quiet and very gentle-mannered, was Sir Gregory, except when he was irritable and raised his voice; but you always felt that there was no weakness about him. I said he was like a cat in the way he walked—well, you always knew that the claws were there if he cared to use them. I never listened. I never wanted to, sir. It was a good place and I knew my duties. It just happened that I overheard those few words when I went in with some letters. Sir Gregory didn't seem to hear me at first when I went in, but as soon as he saw me he broke off in the middle of a sentence. Sir Gregory had wonderful self-control in all directions. At the time it occurred to me that

he might be talking about the young lady I had driven with Mr. Savonier to the "It" Club. But, then, Mr. Savonier goes about with a great many young ladies.'

'Indeed? Where does he go?'

'To dances and clubs and theatres. Mr. Savonier is a young gentleman who knows remarkably well how to amuse himself.'

'And his company . . .?'

'Is always what you would describe, sir, as being above reproach.'

I caught the sudden gleam of amusement in Branders' eyes, and judged that Phrett had been acquitted. I could not pretend to follow the line of thought which had dictated many of Branders' questions, but I knew him too well to suppose that he ever put an idle question. It was clear to me from his manner that he was rapidly resolving some doubt, though I could not imagine what it could be.

'There is one more thing I should like you to tell me, Phrett, before you go,' he resumed after a pause. 'Why should Sir Gregory wear a light overcoat while he was motoring, and change into a heavy one afterwards? It is usually the other way round, isn't it?'

'I don't know, sir; except it was because yesterday was so warm for the time of year. It is a wonderfully comfortable car, sir, with no draughts. Sir Gregory had the coachwork specially built for him. Afterwards, when he

thought of going out again, it may have seemed chill to him.'

When Phrett had left the room with a military click of heels and a metallic, 'Thank you, sir,' Branders put the tips of his fingers together, pursed up his lips and looked across at me.

'Well?' he asked.

'I can see no light,' I said.

'I don't suppose you can,' he said cheerfully. 'All I see is abundant confirmation of what they put in the papers.'

'What was that?' I asked.

Branders honoured me with a blank stare.

'Why, you read it and showed it to me yourself. I haven't seen anything else.'

'But I can't see any particular significance in it.'

'Well, you have plenty of other material to work on, then. So far we have collected quite a respectable array of questions to be answered,' he lectured me. 'Just exercise your wits on a few of them and let me know the result. There are, for example, the questions:

'(1) Had the visit to this unknown woman, Mrs. Fimms, any connection with what happened afterwards, and if so, what sort of connection can it have been?

'(2) Are we to regard Sir Gregory's impatience to post the letter—if we can confirm that part of Phrett's story—and his telephone

message to Mr. Mixon—and I must look into that, too—as evidence that Sir Gregory was suffering from some special anxiety?

'(3) Did Sir Gregory go out at that late hour because some person asked him to? If so, who could that person have been? Or did Sir Gregory go out by himself and without telling anyone?

'(4) Where did he go to?

'(5) How was he killed? And, when we hear what the doctors have to say about that, it may throw some light on—

'(6) Who killed him?

'Those are the elements of the problem as it presents itself to me, and our task is to collect all the facts we can and fit them together into answers to those six questions; always remembering that the answers will have to be consistent with one another, and that we must be on the look-out for the common element which binds all these apparently unconnected details together.'

'It *sounds* very easy,' I said. 'But I wish that young fool Savonier hadn't chosen just this moment to disappear.'

I couldn't help thinking of Miss Casiodore and her distress on his account. But Branders, I suppose, was impervious to sentimental considerations.

'Why?' he asked. 'It only makes the case more interesting, by complicating its possibilities enormously.'

'I am afraid,' I said rather gloomily, 'that

some people would jump to the conclusion that it simplified the case.'

'That is an aspect of the matter which hadn't struck me,' Branders said, rising and going to the door. 'Shall we imitate Sir Gregory and prowl about?'

CHAPTER IV

CHIEF-INSPECTOR MACBEE

WHATEVER Branders' proposed exploration may have been, he was allowed no opportunity for its accomplishment; for we found Miss Cassiodore hovering about in the lounge, evidently waiting for us.

'I have just come from the inspector,' she said. 'He has consented to see you, Mr. Noble. I am afraid you will get very little out of him. He doesn't seem to quite approve of you. He told me I ought to have "a prrrroperrr leegal adviserrr"—that funny Scotch voice of his, you know. I expect he will tell you nothing of importance.'

'Oh, I know MacBee and his ways, Miss Cassiodore. He will be quite open with me up to a point. He may think me a busybody, but I know that he doesn't think me a fool.'

'No?' That fleeting gleam of fun which always made her so delightfully attractive again passed over Miss Cassiodore's face. 'I rather gathered that it was I he thought the fool.'

We found Chief-Inspector MacBee seated at a large office table in the 'library,' the room which Sir Gregory had used as his study. It was the first time that I had met this officer, though Branders knew him well. He was a tall, angular, spare Scotsman, clean-shaven and high-cheekboned, with close-cropped, iron-grey hair. He was dressed impeccably, and yet inconspicuously, in dark, fashionably-tailored clothes, with white spats, white slip, butterfly collar and bow tie—the most dandified officer of the great force to which he belonged that I had ever met. A large crimson-lined bowler hat had been pushed forward out of his way across the table, as though to advertise the size of his brain to all the world. He was just in the act of replacing the receiver of the telephone as we came in, and he fixed the intense gaze of his hard grey eyes on Branders' face as he rose to greet us.

'Good morning, Mr. Noble,' he said in harsh, vibrating tones, rolling his r's so markedly as to suggest that he took pleasure in holding the note for as long a time as possible. 'Miss Cassiodore tells me that you are going into this terrible affair on behalf of the family.'

'Quite so, Inspector. May I introduce my colleague, Mr. Campling? Everything you say

to us will, of course, be regarded as strictly confidential.'

The inspector, seated once more in the chair of the man whose murder he had been called in to investigate and avenge, drummed on the table with his strong fingers and smiled grimly.

'I think you can depend on me, Mr. Noble, to be a fairly efficient censor.'

'Well, MacBee, I thought you knew me from of old. I have no possible interest except to see the criminal brought to justice, whether by your investigations or my own is a matter of complete indifference to me.'

The inspector smiled again, and, if possible, more grimly than before.

'That's as may be, Mr. Noble. But, mind you, there are to be no privileges in this case. You will hear what the Press hears and what Sir Gregory's family hears, and not one word more. No official secrets. I can't countenance the co-operation of outsiders whose activities I am unable to control, and you must expect no special treatment. There will be no disputes if you bear that in mind from the beginning.'

'I expected you to say something like that, Inspector,' Branders replied in his blandest tones, and then turning towards a man who sat bowed over the far end of the table writing rapidly, he added: 'My old acquaintance, Sergeant Jinn, isn't it?'

'The same!' the sergeant replied with a broad grin, deceptive in its geniality. 'Still

doing the superior amateur stunt, Mr. Noble, and come to tick us off for our blunders ? '

'I hope there won't be any blunders for anyone to be ticked off for. We want to have everything explained to the satisfaction of everyone. Sir Gregory was a public man . . . '

'In a sense . . . a restricted sense,' MacBee interpolated.

'In a very real sense, Inspector; and a public character demands a public vindication. Sir Gregory's family will insist on the interests of his reputation being respected.'

MacBee scowled heavily and renewed his drumming.

'I don't know what you're driving at, Mr. Noble.'

'Oh, yes, you do, MacBee; though you have no idea how I ever chanced to hit upon the truth.'

MacBee closed his eyes deliberately, and the action was magnificently expressive of his determination not to enter into a discussion with Branders on that point.

'I believe you wished to ask me some questions, Mr. Noble,' he said. 'Mind you, I don't say I'll answer them. As things are at present, it might not be advisable to answer every question. But I am prepared to oblige Miss Cassiodore as far as I can in accordance with my duty.'

'Then perhaps you wouldn't mind my seeing those telegrams you have there ? I presume they are those that came last night ? '

'Nothing at all in them,' MacBee said, laying his heavy hand on the three flimsy slips of paper. 'Just business advices sent by Continental agents the last thing on Sunday in time to catch the opening of the markets on Monday morning. We found the envelopes in the waste-paper basket. The telegrams themselves were held in a clip in the top right-hand drawer of this table. I have never been through papers which were kept so methodically as Sir Gregory's—or which gave so little information of any kind.'

'Quite so, Inspector. People weren't so far wrong after all in calling Sir Gregory a "mystery man." I suppose he had to be in order to do what he did. His knighthood shows what the Government thought of his services. I have no doubt that official quarters will be specially interested and active in this case.'

The words were spoken lightly enough, and though I was surprised to hear Branders discoursing in so smooth a style about the man whom a few hours previously in the train he had described as an 'international pest,' yet I thought I could follow his attempt to set a trap for the police-officer. Or it may have been that he was teasing the inspector. As, however, MacBee said nothing, Branders changed the subject abruptly and put a direct question.

'Have you yet found out anything about the young woman?'

'We have. We have practically eliminated her from the case'

'Eliminated! But surely, MacBee, she was murdered too?'

'She met her death, yes. But we have eliminated her as far as Sir Gregory is concerned. She was a girl called Muriel Hatterleigh, maid to a deaf old lady who lives at a flat in Rutland Square only a few yards from where the bodies were found. The girl had the day off yesterday and stated that she was going to visit a married sister who lives near Croydon. We have verified that she did go to her sister's, and we have found the train by which she returned to town. They remembered her at the station because she missed the train she had come to catch, and had to wait an hour for the next. Calculating from the time that train reached Charing Cross, it was physically possible for her to get to Rutland Square by 12.45, but hardly sooner—and our man found her dead at two minutes past one. That leaves just seventeen minutes margin. It seems certain that she must have died on the spot, just outside where she lived and on her way home. She had been in service with the old lady for several years and was a perfectly straight-living girl. There's not a scintilla of evidence to connect her with the crime, except that she met her death—or so it appears—at the same time and in the same manner and at the hands of the same person as Sir Gregory, in some way that we can't yet explain.'

'You mean that the girl came on the murderer and his victim, and was herself murdered so that there might be no witness?'

'That's my theory.'

'And why might not Sir Gregory have been murdered in trying to save the girl?'

'What was Sir Gregory doing there? It was a natural place for her to be, but not for him. Also, who would murder the girl? What would the motive be?'

'And the cause of death?'

'That we don't know yet. The surgeon who saw the bodies this morning suspects poison, perhaps some kind of narcotic. But we shall have to wait for the post-mortem and the inquest. In the meanwhile we are following up the clues we have.'

'Then there are clues?' Nicely balanced incredulity and surprise were expressed in Branders' tones. 'You have found something?'

'It's no good, Mr. Noble. You don't do it with me.' MacBee was almost genial in his denial of information. 'Every criminal gives himself away,' he added oracularly.

At that point we were interrupted by a third plain-clothes officer, who came to the door and called Sergeant Jinn out of the room. We could hear them talking outside. Jinn returned in a few minutes and whispered something into MacBee's ear, who asked us to excuse him and went out, leaving Jinn, as he expressed by a significant gesture, to see that we did not touch or examine the precious papers on the

table. MacBee was absent in all, I suppose, about seven or eight minutes, and we could hear his voice raised in anger outside. When he returned his face was flushed and his manner seemed to have hardened.

Branders took up the conversation where it had been interrupted.

'You are not prepared to say anything about the existing clues?'

'That would not be advisable at present.'

'And who is this Mrs Fimms Sir Gregory went to see yesterday?'

'I think we can eliminate Mrs. Fimms, too. She was a stranger to Sir Gregory, a lady of private means who lives in the country and who sees a good deal of society, entertaining on a large scale. I have had a special report on her from Reigate. I have found a letter from her here, dated on Friday, giving Sir Gregory an appointment—the appointment he kept. I have had a conversation on the telephone with her just now, and she has given me a satisfactory account of Sir Gregory's business with her. It seems that Sir Gregory believed that his nephew, Mr. Gerald Savonier, had been entrapped into some kind of entanglement by a young woman he had met at a night club. Sir Gregory understood that this young woman was in some sense a protégée of Mrs. Fimms's, and consulted her about the situation. Mrs. Fimms says that she was able to satisfy Sir Gregory that the young lady in question was not quite what Sir Gregory had thought

her at first; and also that Mrs. Fimms herself had no kind of control or authority over her, that, in fact, she had no special standing with the girl. The young lady's name is Mellisont. Miss Phœbe Mellisont. We have her address. Mrs. Fimms also confirmed the chauffeur's statement as to the time of Sir Gregory's arrival and departure.'

'You thought Phrett's story needed confirmation?'

'Everything in this sort of case does—as you know very well, Mr. Noble.'

'And the young lady's address was in Hampstead?'

'That I didn't say, Mr. Noble.'

Branders glanced quickly towards Miss Cassiodore who sat with folded hands studying the inspector's granite face.

'And about Mr. Savonier?' he asked. 'Have you yet got into touch with him?'

'Not yet.'

'Indeed? He might be able to explain quite a lot of things for us.'

'That is very probably true.'

It was abundantly clear that the inspector would not be drawn into any direct expression of opinion on Savonier's absence and the possible bearing it might have on the case. But Branders Noble was not the man to be easily discouraged, once he had embarked on a quest for facts.

'Just one more question, Inspector. How do you imagine, how do you suppose that a crime

of this sort could be carried out? In the street? What you said about the young woman's movements seemed to imply that.'

The inspector folded his massive hands on the table and stared stolidly at Branders.

'Mr. Noble,' he said, 'in this world every man has his own job. It's yours, perhaps, to figure out how things might have happened, and to imagine a train of circumstance, but it's mine to stick to the sober realities of fact. And, as I see them, the facts are: That at 11.52, when he 'phoned to Mr. Mixon at the club, Sir Gregory was alive in this flat, and that at two minutes past one, or a quarter of an hour earlier maybe, if we take the probable time of the girl's arrival in the square, his dead body was propped up in Rutland Square. There is no reasonable theory to account for his going there. It was contrary to all his known habits to go out at so late an hour. But, as he can hardly have been brought there by force, he must have gone of his own free will, and presumably in someone's company. If we could say whose, we might know everything. Now, though I won't go so far as to say I *know*, I may have formed some opinion as to who one person at least was who was with Sir Gregory in the square last night—and it might be that I have even got one piece of tangible evidence to be ranged with the evidence that is merely circumstantial.'

'Of course we have heard that sort of thing before, MacBee,' Branders replied, unabashed.

'And, quite frankly, we are not overawed. I don't think that in a case like this it is possible to build any theory on mere coincidence—else why don't you arrest Phrett at once? You have only his statement that he was in the flat at 12.45 last night.'

'That's where you're wrong, Mr. Noble. I have the statement of Mrs. Braid, the housekeeper, that she was awake and could hear Phrett through the wall. She heard him turn over in bed several times between twelve and one. It seems that they are both bad sleepers, and a sort of sympathy exists between them on the subject.'

'You can't say what the next move is likely to be?'

'I think it only right to warn you, Mr. Noble,' MacBee said firmly, but without violence, 'that any views I may entertain as to the probable future developments of this case are based on something much more substantial than coincidence. Everyone should be prepared for what may develop at any moment. This may easily prove a more painful case for everyone concerned than seemed likely at first.'

The inspector glanced swiftly at Miss Cassiodore as he spoke, but her eyes had dropped, and she sat very still, without speaking, and without any expression to betray whatever inner emotion she may have felt.

In the lounge before we left Branders said

what he could to allay the alarms which had evidently been stirred in Miss Cassiodore's mind by the detective's words. But she cut him short.

'No. I want to know the truth,' she said. 'You mustn't suppose that I can't bear it. I can nerve myself to bear anything, though there are some things I could never bring myself to believe. But I don't want to be dosed with opiates, or to take up the position of the ostrich. Tell me,' she asked almost pleadingly, 'was I right in thinking that he implied that he had some definite piece of evidence against Gerald?'

'My dear Miss Cassiodore, I am afraid that is what he did imply. As the case stands now, the only people known to us who might have been concerned, directly or indirectly, in what happened last night, are Mrs. Fimms, the girl Muriel Hatterleigh, Phrett, your nephew ,and this other girl, Miss Mellisont. MacBee has already eliminated three of them to his satisfaction, at least provisionally—I know some of his reasons for that decision, but not all—and that leaves, as still under suspicion, your nephew, who cannot be found, and this girl who was in some way associated with your nephew in opposition to his uncle. Now MacBee is a great logician with something of the old Scottish metaphysicians in his make-up, and he will never shy at drawing the inevitable conclusion from his premisses. Without knowing him well, you could never

guess from that rock-like presence he has or from his manner, how wonderfully subtle MacBee's mental processes really are. But that doesn't prevent him from being, *qua* police-officer, a man of routine. Anyone who knows the police . . .'

'Knows how often they make absurd mistakes.'

Branders laughed.

'That was hardly what I was going to say.'

'But their mistake is absurd!'

'Yes, I feel sure of that.'

'Oh, I am so glad to hear you say it!'

'I am afraid my saying it is of very little worth. You didn't call me in merely to give an opinion, but to solve the mystery. Now that I have the preliminary facts I must begin my investigation at once; for in spite of legal fictions, it's not much use being innocent, once a strong case of suspicion exists against you, unless you can prove your innocence.'

CHAPTER V

THE UNIQUE LOCALITY

OUTSIDE the Mansions we found the aspect of the street amazingly different from what it had been only a few hours previously. Then there had been nothing

to mark that anything unusual had occurred, beyond the presence of two uniformed policemen who stood at the corner across the street, and of a third man in plain clothes who sauntered up and down the pavement. I had seen and studied his type too often to be mistaken about him.

But now the news appeared to have spread, arousing sudden, intense, feverish interest, as it could hardly fail to do. A motley crowd of loungers, messenger boys, women in bright summery frocks, photographers with cameras, motorists drawn up in the roadway, craned their necks upwards towards the austere red brick building with its ugly facings of white stone. There seemed to be quite twenty policemen on the pavement, patiently persuading the people to move on.

A passing newsboy bawled the latest edition : ' Gryte Mystery of Financier's Death ! '

Then someone, recognizing Branders, pushed his way through the crowd and caught him by the arm.

' Branders Noble, of all pieces of luck ! My dear Noble, I am glad to see you in this business.'

' My dear Quiggle, I needn't ask why you are here.'

' No. Nor I you. I must say that you are always lucky in getting in on the best cases. Your presence must have got the wind up the police finely. MacBee, isn't it ? '

' My dear chap, MacBee is not the man to allow himself to be disturbed by a trifle

like my presence. But where are you going, Quiggle? I am rather pressed for time, if I am to look into all the things I want to before the police do something foolish.'

'Let me come with you, then, Noble. No, no; I promise you, I assure you that I shall be absolutely discreet. I shan't write one word you don't approve of.'

Branders hesitated for the fraction of a second.

'Right,' he said. 'I daresay we can help one another. But you know Campling, don't you? Mr. Quiggle, of *The Daily Flare*. You will recognize Quiggle as A.S.Q., our leading sensational reporter; but in private life he is not as bad as that.'

Algernon Septimus Quiggle, whom I had not had the pleasure of meeting before, was a small, wiry man of about fifty, who looked more like an actor than what he actually was, our most successful popular writer on the more gruesome type of crimes. I did not find his personality particularly agreeable. There was something rat-like about it, in the bright, prominent, dark eyes, and the long, pointed nose and thin, straggling moustache, as well as in the somewhat high-pitched, squeaky tones of his voice.

'Have you seen the place yet?' he began, as we forced our way out of the crowd.

'No, I was just going to have a look at it.'

'Right. Let me be your guide. The peculiar locality of this crime is very important. I saw that at once. And I have picked up the

scent of a new mystery, of which I can make nothing. I am sure you are welcome to it, if you can solve the riddle. And I have got a clue, a mere pointer perhaps, but significant. Really, you know, Noble, I believe I ought to have been on your job.'

'So you are, apparently, Quiggle. You are a great man. I only investigate these mysteries; but you not only investigate, you write. You sway the passions of the multitude. You are like Cæsar, both conqueror and historian—a combination too rare nowadays.'

The little shrivelled man took out an immense pair of horn-rimmed glasses and adjusted them to his nose and ears, becoming thereby in some way more rat-like than ever. Ever since he had forced his company on us I had been watching him with amused attention. I have seldom seen a case of more patent or naïve vanity. As A.S.Q. I had known him for years as a sensation-monger and purveyor of scandals, elements which accounted for a great part of the circulation of *The Flare*, and I wondered that Branders not only tolerated his company, but stooped to flatter his childish self-importance.

'I want you,' he said, waving his arm, 'to have a look round at the square first, and afterwards at the mews. Funny places the mewses are in this part of the town. Nearly all the stables round here have been transformed—garages nowadays. But you can still see what they once were by the doors on the upper floors

at which the hay used to be taken in, and in some cases there are the pulley-blocks still in position. It seems that all kinds of unexpected people live down the mews. There are private families, the kind that are "waited on daily," living in what once were lofts, but are flats now. And they pay high rents, too. What do you say to a hundred and thirty a year for a three-roomed flat over a stable? There are even artists who have a studio there. And there's an engineer's workshop, or it may be an inventor's. There's a dancing academy, and a workmen's club, and a midwife. It's quite a little village. But of course you know the sort of place, Noble.'

'I don't know that I am particularly familiar with this part of London.'

'No? He has been to Cambridge and received a liberal education, which, I daresay, qualifies him to discourse on the topography of Troy; but you can puzzle him when it is a question of Bayswater! But my knowledge, and you know how encyclopædic that is, is at your disposal. Let us stop a moment at this corner.'

'You see this terrace?' he continued. 'It's mathematically straight, and runs north from the gardens. Tall, uniform houses—hotels, boarding-houses, flats—a mixed neighbourhood. Well, you can take what you see as the unit for the whole district. There are half a dozen other terraces or more, all parallel with this one, between here and Queen's Road. I thought

everyone knew that. They all end in Bayswater Road. It's like a gridiron, or almost like a bit of an American city, except that the cross-roads aren't so regular. They run at odd angles, and there are fitted in among them queer little squares, the existence of which you don't suspect till you turn the corner and see them. And the very queerest square of all is Rutland Square. It isn't really a square, of course, but two pieces of enclosed garden, with the road running between them. But the road leads nowhere, as a road; it just ends in a narrow passage, a sort of lane, scarcely wide enough to allow the smallest milk car to pass through it, which leads out into another long terrace, running at right-angles. And each of the private roads, one to the right and one to the left, which lead to the houses in the gardens forming the square, is a cul-de-sac. The whole square, in fact, is shaped exactly like the Greek capital letter Ψ, with the two closed ends pointing towards the lane. And the queerest thing of all about the place is, that the houses immediately facing the spot where the bodies were found are not houses at all, but dummies.'

'Dummies!' Branders exclaimed. 'What do you mean?'

'Yes, dummy houses in the West End. The Metropolitan Railway passes under the square just there, and there is a stretch of open cutting, ending in an immense blank wall carried to the height of the houses on either side; and the

surface of the wall facing the gardens is painted to represent houses, and provided with real flights of steps and pillared porticoes. If you don't look at them too closely they are completely convincing in ordinary light. I wonder how many people there are who know that such an odd bit of London exists within five minutes' walk of Whiteley's? I have deduced from that, that the murderer was familiar with the district, and knew that the houses facing him were mere *simulacra*, with no one behind the sightless windows to spy on what he was doing. Just beyond the dummy houses, at the end of the cul-de-sac, there are two real houses, in one of which the girl was a servant, and in the other lives a very interesting and suspicious character—my clue.'

By this time I was beginning to realize some at least of the reasons for Branders' toleration of our companion, and to perceive that he was a man of real knowledge and power of observation, not a person to be brushed aside lightly.

'My dear Quiggle, you are an extraordinary man,' Branders said, patting him on the arm. 'Your exposition, could he hear it, should fill MacBee with envy. By all means let me hear about this suspicious person.'

'But here we are at the square,' Quiggle said, wafting us on.

We came to a halt with a sense of relief, having been hurried along hitherto at a pace far too precipitate for our inclinations, while

Quiggle poured out into our ears his store of observation and information. We found the little square full of people, fuller even than the road outside the Mansions, and, as there, a number of police were keeping the crowd in motion. A cord, guarded at each end, had been drawn across the entrance to that part of the square which had been the actual scene of the discovery.

We looked instinctively, before considering anything else, at the group of plane-trees which had shadowed the bodies, and beyond them at the dummy façades; which I certainly should not have recognised as dummies, if the fact had not been first pointed out to me.

'How very remarkable!' Branders exclaimed; and then, turning his attention to the crowd, he asked, 'Isn't it curious, Quiggle, that so many people in London have so little to do?'

'Get so little excitement in their lives, you mean, Noble. I believe we are all of us secretly longing for a murder to happen, just to liven things up a bit. Has it occurred to you, Noble, that this kind of thing might be done purely from a love of sensation? Or by an ingenious man who just wanted to set the police—or yourself—a problem, and to see what would be made of it?'

'That would be the act of a lunatic.'

'Not at all, Noble. It might be purely intellectual. There has been a religious cult of murder—the Assassins. So why not a

scientific cult, now that the age of science has replaced the age of faith ? '

'In my opinion,' Branders said decisively, 'a man who acts from purely intellectual motives is a lunatic. But go on with your exposition, Quiggle.'

'Well, you notice how the road suddenly narrows just beyond the gardens into a sort of canyon between the tall houses ? That is the passage I spoke of, which leads to the next terrace. The constable on the beat last night came down that terrace and turned into the square through the passage. It was just striking one. He was walking towards where we stand now ; but when he had come part of the way he turned round to look at one particular house in the cul-de-sac. He must have peered very earnestly at that house to see the figures in the shadow at all ; for there was no moon last night, and you see where the next lamp is. There would, of course, be no light coming from the windows of the dummy houses, and as likely as not everyone was asleep in the others. It is my great discovery that the policeman *must* have turned to look at that house, the second from the end, the one between the dummy houses and that where the girl lived. I have found by trying, that if the constable turned just half-way through the square, the figures would stand out against the blank wall behind ; and that is precisely the one point from which you can get a clear view unobstructed by the trees, of the house

in which the policeman was interested. The policeman's interest in the house was very natural, because a man lives there who is "known to the police"—a very respectable sort of criminal, a middle-aged gentleman of private means who calls himself a doctor, and whom they pinched a few years ago for being in illegal possession of drugs. . . . . Dr. Muggeh is what he calls himself; but of course you know about him, Noble. Naturally the local police keep a pretty watchful eye on Dr. Muggeh ever since that little accident. It's a nice friendly habit they have; and it makes one think well of human nature to see people so constant and so kind. So that is how the policeman came to see the bodies; otherwise they might easily have remained there till morning.'

Branders laughed softly, showing a formidable set of teeth.

'Am I to understand that this is a romance, Quiggle?'

'It's every word of it true, Noble.'

'That there's a dope fiend living in that house opposite to where the bodies were found, and that the police have not been after him yet?'

'That would seem the obvious thing to do. Perhaps too obvious. I understand there's nobody in the house at present.'

'How did you learn all this, Quiggle?'

'When I went round to the mews. I got into talk with a chap called Nogens who lives

there over the Cassiodore garage. He told me that he spoke to the chauffeur as he was putting away the car last night. Half-past eleven, he said it was. This chap Nogens has some kind of a night job as stoker and watchman, and going out later on to report for work at two was one of the first people on the spot after the discovery. He walked right into the middle of it all before they had removed the bodies. He came round here with me and pointed everything out. He seems to know the district very well and all the gossip of the local pub. While we were talking here a young chap came by, and Nogens assured me that it was the constable who had made the discovery, only in plain clothes. So I just cut along and followed him —straight to Surreyview Mansions. He was inside for about ten minutes, and came out looking very red in the face, but stepping along in style as if they had put new energy into him. Commended for his action, I suppose. And you must have been inside at the time. You didn't see anything of him, I suppose ? '

' No.'

' Well, you were certainly inside at the time. That's my mystery : why the constable came in plain clothes to visit the detectives ? I suppose, as he is on night duty, that they had to get him out of bed, or he had to get himself out. Don't you agree with me that it's a curious little dramatic occurrence with great possibilities ? '

' Yes, it has possibilities,' Branders agreed.

'But I am amazed that you have not explored them. I would have been prepared to bet a five-pound note that you stopped that policeman.'

'So I did, and heard all about last night. It cost me the five pounds you mention; but I couldn't get a word out of him about this morning's business. He's a young man who understands his interests and should go far in the force.'

'You have a most wonderful faculty, Quiggle, for picking up facts,' Branders said airily. 'I envy you the ease with which you work. I am only sorry that I have no news to offer you in return; but as soon as I have anything to impart to the great public, I'll let you have the first cut at it in your rag. As it is, Quiggle, I believe that you know more about this crime already than MacBee or myself or anyone.'

'I believe I do, Noble,' the little man replied, smiling with obvious vanity.

Branders excused our going off at once on the ground of the many things we had to do, and refused Quiggle's offer of a lift in his car. We went straight to an eating-house in the neighbourhood, where Branders said we could get a decent meal. Nothing could have been more welcome to me, who had had scarcely anything to eat since the preceding evening. The rush to town, and the mental concentration on the strange story which we had heard unfolded, had tired me out very thoroughly.

In a quiet corner of the restaurant, as soon as

the first edge had been taken off our appetites, Branders began to talk about the case. Although I knew him and his mental habits too well to expect any full disclosure of his views at the point we had reached in our inquiries, I was more than glad to have such lights as he chose to give, for my own unassisted efforts were unable to make anything of what I had heard; except—to confess my own foolishness—that a mad drug-taker might live in that apparently unoccupied house, and might have lured Sir Gregory out into the street after midnight, and might have drugged him to death under the trees and left his body to be discovered by the second person who came by, having already murdered the first person—the girl Muriel Hatterleigh. That, even at the moment of formulating the theory in the privacy of my own mind, did not strike me as a particularly convincing explanation, and was stamped as unsound by the complete absence of motive and by failing to account for many of the attendant circumstances. Of course the essence of insane crime is that it has no motive, none at least which sane minds can appreciate or sympathize with. But in the present case the surrounding circumstances seemed to refuse to fit in with the theory of an insane crime. Why, for instance, had Sir Gregory, on that last evening of his life, behaved in a strange and for him most unusual way? That could hardly be accounted for by assuming a motiveless drug fiend indulging in a mad freak of slaughter.

With his very first words Branders swept all my gropings aside.

'My belief is,' he said, 'that we must assume some very close connection between the visit to Mrs. Fimms and the murder; not necessarily a guilty one on her part, but none the less a vital connection which makes the visit a necessary link in the chain of cause and effect which led to the murder. This is one of those cases in which I don't think we can escape from the cogency of the argument from probability. The mathematical chances, the betting odds if you prefer, against Sir Gregory going into the country on a Sunday evening to see an unknown woman were many thousands to one—it was contrary to all his known habits. And the chances against his being murdered were also, of course, many thousands to one. If you combine those two chances, you will see that the odds against the two improbabilities coinciding in time are at least some hundreds of millions to one. Ask one of your racing friends about it. It is what a bookie would call a "double." Now, of course, an event, the odds against which are hundreds of millions to one, may occur in real life, just as the same number may come up ten times running on a roulette table; but events like that are so very improbable, that we should never admit them into our calculations until we are compelled to by fact. Here we have the simultaneous existence of a number of odd, unexpected, inexplicable and improbable circumstances, and sound logic

compels us to postulate that there is some hidden connection between them all.'

'And what do you say about this chap Savonier?'

In spite of what I had heard Branders saying to Miss Cassiodore at parting, I still felt uneasy for her sake about Savonier's possible part in the mystery.

'Well, if Phrett's suggestion is true, that the trouble between him and Sir Gregory was about some girl, may he not be wherever the girl is?'

'But would he be likely to do that sort of thing?'

'How on earth do I know? Young fellows have done it before.'

'And what about your own doctrine of probabilities and coincidences in time? If you combine the extremely improbable event of Savonier's elopement with the other improbabilities you have considered, wouldn't you get in the result odds of billions to one against the chance joint occurrence of all these events?'

'I wasn't assuming that there was no connection. But don't you see that mere association with a set of circumstances surrounding a crime is a very different thing from guilt? Suspicion must always be guided by general principles of probability, by positive clues, and by considerations of motive. Look at Savonier's position from all three of those points of view. Could anything be less probable on the face of it than that a young man of

Savonier's education, social habits, position and prospects should murder his uncle, adoptive father and chief? On general principles, I say that the supposition of his guilt is almost unbelievably improbable. And so far we—you and I—have not a shred of positive evidence against him; for his unfortunate disappearance may be accounted for in many ways to everyone's complete satisfaction. At present the mere fact is not positive evidence of anything. I believe, however, that MacBee thinks he has something concrete against Savonier, and I am ready to hazard a guess that MacBee is mistaken. Even if Savonier had committed a crime, he would have been sure to bungle it as an amateur; and this criminal is one of the cleverest and longest-headed that I have ever come across. And one of the most callously unscrupulous. Can you see Savonier, even if he had killed Sir Gregory, drugging that girl to death? And what are the supposed motives which might have influenced Savonier? Gain? He seems to have had plenty of money as it was, and the removal of Sir Gregory would militate against any ambitions Savonier may have cherished. His connexion with Sir Gregory was clearly the easiest, if not the only, ladder by which this pleasure-loving young man could hope to climb to political or financial consequence. And you will agree, from what we have heard of him, that Savonier was hardly the type to murder his uncle for the sake of a girl he had met at a night club. As MacBee

would say, we can dismiss Savonier from the case.'

'And this drug-taker, Dr. Muggeh?'

Branders laughed.

'Your imagination embroiders, Vernon. Quiggle did not say he was a drug-taker. He said he was "in illegal possession."'

'But you called him a drug fiend yourself?'

'Drug fiend, yes—but not drug victim. But I want to go back to Surreyview Mansions before we talk of him. And we are pressed for time.'

Branders would not say what it was he wanted at the Mansions, and we walked back together in silence. To my surprise, instead of coming round to the front entrance, Branders turned into the back street and came to a stop outside a high spiked railing which shut in a deep area from the street. A flight of steep stone steps led down into this from an iron gate which was fastened with a snap lock. At the bottom of the steps yapped fretfully a little dog tied by the neck to a kennel made from a plain wooden box. Branders stood for quite five minutes, I believe, staring down at this wretched animal and making various coaxing noises in a vain attempt to attract its attention.

'A most important witness, Vernon,' he said as he turned away.

It must have been the blankness of my face which provoked his chuckle.

'The dog, I mean,' he explained.

'Where are we going now?' I asked sulkily, determined not to satisfy his instinct for teasing by asking questions which I knew he would not answer.

'Round to the front. I want to put a few questions to that porter. But you had better stay out here—it might make him nervous if anything like a deputation were to wait on him. I shan't keep you a minute.'

So I was left outside among the gazers, wondering what on earth it could be that made Branders so interested in a puppy, and so mysterious in his examination of the porter. I don't think I am less acute than the rest of men where matters of this sort are concerned, but turn the problem over as I could, the puppy remained wholly irrelevant—unless, indeed, Branders were merely amusing himself at my expense and using the dog as a blind?

As Branders came down the steps after an absence so brief that I wondered how he had time to put even 'two questions,' he came face to face with a man whom I had already recognized as a plain clothes officer. The two stopped and held out their hands.

'Ah, so you're on this job, Mr. Noble?'

'Yes. And you, Keames?'

'As you see. But I expect you know something about the case, have seen MacBee, and all that. They have only just sent for me.'

'Yes, I saw MacBee some time ago. But I'd like you to take a message to him. Tell him to look down the area at the back. It's

my last will and testament, and the legacy, if properly used, is worth the step to Superintendent. I mean that. Good-bye, Keames, and I hope some glory accrues to yourself out of all this.'

I had been standing close enough to them to hear the whole conversation, and once we were out of the crowd I asked Branders what his intention was in sending that message to MacBee. Was he just pulling the inspector's leg ?

' I was never more serious in my life,' Branders protested hotly. ' I have given him a straight tip ; it's up to him to use it. But my belief is that MacBee is so thoroughly committed to a false theory of the crime, that even the plainest fact— and still more my harmless little enigma —would fail to open his eyes to the truth. However, we shall see when we get back from Paris.'

' Get back from Paris ? ' I exclaimed.

' Yes, we are going over there by this afternoon's train. We have just about time to fetch our things from the cloakroom and secure seats. Have you any objection ? '

' None,' I said. ' But you hadn't mentioned it before.'

' Why should I ? ' Branders asked and gave my arm a friendly squeeze. I knew then that he would explain in his own good time.

CHAPTER VI

PARIS

'WE are going to Paris,' Branders said, when we were once comfortably settled in our reserved compartment of the boat train, 'We are going to Paris because, some years ago, my friend Sir Meeker Monkways, of the Society for the Suppression of the Illegal Drug Traffic, asked me to look into a little matter for his society, which at the time completely baffled me.

'As you know, Sir Meeker and I are very old friends; and to that extent I was not surprised when, being in need of an investigator, he came to me. But I told him frankly that it was not my job. I am an amateur and student of crime, who attempts to see every criminal act as the logical consequence of the reaction between an environment and an organism. If I have succeeded in unmasking some criminals and in finding the word which solved some enigmas, it has been by the liberal use of creative imagination, directed into regions in which it is not commonly employed. I do not profess to be a sleuth, either after the fashion of the regular police or after that of the more popular free-lance. I am just a thinker and specialist, whose subject is the behaviour of criminal humanity. That is more or less what I told Sir Meeker, and that what he wanted would be

better done either by Scotland Yard or by one of the ordinary inquiry agencies.

'But Sir Meeker put my objections aside. He said that he was prepared to take the risk of failure rather than call in a stranger in whose discretion he could not impose absolute confidence, or than go to the police before he had convincing facts to lay before the Commissioner in person. It appeared that the S.S.I.D.T. were in possession of certain information which led them to believe that great quantities of illegal drugs were coming into the West End through one channel, which had hitherto been unsuspected by the police; and they were particularly anxious to obtain the fullest proofs of this traffic, in order to have a lever wherewith to influence the Government of the day to adopt a bill, drafted by the society, for dealing with the trade in narcotics.

'Sir Meeker placed such "proofs" as the society had in my hands, and they did not come to much. It all amounted to little more than the most suspect kind of gossip.

'I am not going to tell you the story of the inquiries I set on foot. I didn't do much myself; but I directed the inquiries of other people, whom I employed to do the actual shadowing, spying, eavesdropping, loitering, scraping acquaintance and questioning, which are the methods employed in a case like that. And I got invaluable help from that wonderful man Quiggle, who knows the underworld of London like the palm of his own hand. I had

not been on the case for many days before I became convinced that the society had not drawn a blank this time. The stuff was coming in right under the noses of the police, through channels we couldn't at first be sure of, though we had our suspicions. I worked at the inquiry off and on for six months, until in the end, mainly thanks to Quiggle with his remarkable nose for a scandal, I made a discovery which is not to be talked about. That Quiggle refrained from exposing it in the columns of his paper is almost unbelievable. It may have been his editor. What we learned was that the stuff was being carried past the Customs by people furnished with diplomatic passports. I made a written statement to the authorities to that effect, giving my proofs; and as far as I know, to the present day no action has been taken on that statement. But it was a few weeks after I had retired from this investigation into the drug traffic, that this Dr. Muggeh, of whom you heard to-day, was arrested. I had all along suspected him of being one of the minor agents of the traffickers. But his arrest, both in its manner and having regard to the moment at which it was carried out, was an unheard-of imbecility on the part of the police, if it was not a deliberate shelving of the whole body of evidence laid before the Government by the S.S.I.D.T., together with my report on the case. Dr. Muggeh, a secondary personage of no importance, was sent to prison; and the clue by the following up of which the principals

might have been tracked, was wantonly broken. For it was only by shadowing Muggeh day and night, as far as I could see, that the real organizers of the traffic could be run to earth.

'Muggeh was sent to prison, and as you heard from Quiggle the police have been watching him ever since—with the result to be expected, that they have discovered absolutely nothing. Since what Quiggle called his "accident" he has led the most blameless life. What would you expect him to do? Or is it likely that his employers would use a suspect tool? The police deliberately put the whole inquiry back into the impasse from which I had rescued it.

'So that is how I know about this man Muggeh, and we are going now to see if we can find him.'

'Do you expect to find him in Paris?'

'He used to spend his time pretty equally between the two cities. He wasn't carrying any drugs, you understand. I believe he crossed the water for instructions. His principal work was organizing the distribution of large consignments of contraband, stuff which he seldom even saw. I believe it was pure bad luck which caused him to have a parcel of the stuff on his person when the police carried out their foolish raid. Unless, indeed,' and Branders' face was distorted with his least lovely leer. 'Unless, indeed, the raid was arranged in more senses than one.'

'But surely, Branders, our police . . .'

'Are above reproach? I daresay they are. Above putting stuff in a man's pocket that they may find it there five minutes afterwards. But as stupidity is one of the vilest forms of wickedness, and as they have proved themselves crassly stupid over this drug question, I am not really whitewashing their character by acquitting them of thimblerigging Muggeh's case. Besides, too, I am morally certain that someone in authority—I don't say it was the police—did not want this drug affair cleared up. Anything like a solution of the questions proposed by the S.S.I.D.T. was effectively ruled out by the untimely removal of Muggeh. And Chief-Inspector MacBee, or Inspector Keames, or Sergeant Jinn, or any other C.I.D. man I know, has brains enough to see that. They gerrymandered the Muggeh case, as they seem inclined to do the Cassiodore case—and perhaps for the same reason: there's some queer use being made of diplomatic passports somewhere. Kantsellory's our enemy.'

'So you think that the question of drugs enters into the Cassiodore case?'

'Well, his body was found outside Muggeh's house.'

'But what connexion was Cassiodore likely to have with the drug traffic?'

'Not much, I daresay. But his murderer might.'

'It is a fortunate coincidence for you,' I said, 'that you happened to know all about this man Muggeh.'

I did not realize what a foolish thing I had said till I caught Branders' blank stare.

'What would there have been to prevent me from finding out? At the most it has saved us twenty-four hours.'

I had not been to Paris with Branders before, and it was with some surprise that I discovered how much at home he appeared to be there. We drove from the Gare du Nord to a small and rather old-fashioned, but extremely comfortable, hotel not far from the Place de l'Etoile. I learned quite casually that during the years when I had been out of touch with Branders he had spent several winters in Paris. He had gone there to study crime. Not that deductions from the actions of French criminals were any use in England; but the study of a foreign psychology gave an enlarged imaginative horizon. To allow for the limitless possibilities of human conduct was the keystone of all Branders' speculation. But for me, who do not know my Paris over-well, the practical fruit of Branders' Parisian sojournings was that he proved an excellent cicerone, and knew how to obtain the best of food and service and politeness with the minimum of friction and at a moderate charge.

But my time for enjoyment was short. We were up early in the morning and took a taxi to police headquarters—a Parisian taxi which rattled and bumped as no taxi in London has ever done, and which plunged me into serious reflections as to what my fate would be if the

flimsy flooring were to give way and precipitate me into the roadway among the rapidly moving traffic. At police headquarters Branders told the driver to wait, and sent up his card to a certain officer of his acquaintance.

We were not kept waiting in the vestibule for many minutes before Branders' friend, a tall, moustached, military-looking man, came in and greeted us in voluble English.

'Ah, *chère ami* . . . . It is so many years that we have not met now that I am charmed. . . . And Monsieur? . . . Honoured, Monsieur. Shall we come to my room where everything will be comfortable?'

We were accordingly led into a private office, arm-chairs were placed for us on one side of a table, and the smiling Frenchman sat down in a severely business-like chair on the other. But he was barely seated before he jumped up again and, turning to a cupboard, produced three glasses and a bottle.

'You will allow me? . . . It is a vintage. . . .'

While we sipped the wine Branders asked for 'Madame,' and the Frenchman inquired again after both our healths and if there was still fog in London. When we assured him that there had been beautiful weather in London when we left, it was clear from his manner that it was only politeness which kept him from voicing his incredulity.

These preliminary skirmishes once over, and there appeared to be some kind of ritual in their observance which was equally familiar to

both performers, Branders came to the point which had brought us there.

'I have come, *chère ami*,' he said, 'to see if you could help me to trace a man whom I believe to be in Paris.'

'*Parfaitement.*'

Our host had become all attention, every vestige of a smile having vanished from his iron features.

'He is a man you are almost certain to have a dossier about here. He has been in the hands of our police. . . .'

'*Hein!* A criminal?'

The Frenchman pulled vigorously at his long moustaches, rolling his eyes at the same time. Evidently what Branders had said had greatly astonished him, though whom we should have come to consult him about other than criminals I could not imagine.

'Not exactly a criminal. An offender against our drug regulations.'

The Frenchman winked violently in an attempt to digest the distinction.

'But, my dear Monsieur Noble, you have an authorization from your own police chiefs, asking me to let you see our records, is it not so?'

'Oh, no. Nothing of the sort, *chère monsieur*. I am not an official person at all. I am carrying out a private investigation in connection with a case. I have been called in to supplement an official inquiry.'

'But my dear Monsieur Noble, how can you

expect me? If you were to go to Scotland Yard and say, "I believe that your officers have made a big blunder; show me the finger-prints of such and such a man that I may correct them," what would your own police say? I have this very morning had the London police making inquiries about people known to be in the drug-traffic ring, and scarcely are they—the official inquirers—gone, before you—my very, very good friend, but quite unofficial—come on the same errand. You say in effect, "Show me your records." And suppose I show them . . . but, no, I will not suggest that there might be any nasty scandal. But you see my position, *chère ami*, and you can suppose what my superiors would have to say to me for even the least, the most pardonable indiscretion? I am obliged by the interests of my family.'

'I see,' Branders grunted, 'I understand. Official forms and the correct ways of doing things cannot be waived over here in my brusque English fashion, and consequently all we have to do is to consider that nothing has been said. But if I might ask quite a different favour of you, could you change a cheque for me? I want ten thousand francs.'

'But certainly.'

Branders wrote a cheque, which was accepted as if it were gold, and in a few minutes we were leaving the Prefecture, and Branders was buttoning a roll of crisp new notes into an inner pocket.

'You see, we have to buy knowledge in

Paris; but we get a little experience thrown in,' he said, after we had resumed our perilous drive to a new destination which he had given the chauffeur.

I do not know Paris well, and I would not venture to assert positively that I could find my way again to the ill-favoured district, somewhere north of the outer boulevards, I believe, to which we were taken after leaving the Prefecture. We came to a stop near one end of a long, narrow street of tall, rickety, suspect-looking houses—a street full of smells wholly un-English, smells which I believe contain the essence of Paris, and indeed of all Latin civilization. No one would have needed to open his eyes to know that he was abroad.

The street was almost deserted except for two or three figures which shuffled away down side courts on catching sight of our taxi. 'I am going in here,' Branders said, indicating the house opposite which we had stopped. 'If I am not back again inside a quarter of an hour, fetch the gendarmes and break down the door.'

I should not care to have again to live through the ten minutes of my wait outside that house in the Paris slum. I could not imagine to what dangers Branders was exposing himself, or to serve what purpose. A cosmopolitan financier is struck down in an eminently respectable district in London, and Branders Noble, called in to penetrate the mystery of his killing, risks his life in a Parisian rookery. The logical

connexion between the two occurrences was as hard to perceive as that between the murder and the events immediately preceding it. I found myself growing moist with anxiety, and then suddenly chill with fear as an evil-looking person of semi-oriental appearance let himself in with a latchkey to the house Branders had entered a few minutes previously. In the doorway he turned and looked at me, and I fancied that I had seen him somewhere before, and that he recognized me. I daresay Branders wondered, when he returned to the taxi, smiling and imperturbable as ever, at the condition of nervous strain in which he found me.

'Well,' he said, evidently pleased with himself, 'I got what I wanted, and for a mere trifle of two thousand five hundred francs. We are on our way to call on Dr. Muggeh, unless that interesting gentleman has flown.'

I noticed that our course was south and west, and we soon got into a district which was not altogether unfamiliar to me. Indeed, I believe we were not more than about a mile from the hotel where we were staying, and about the same distance from the Bois. But my knowledge of Parisian landmarks is treacherous, and I failed on a subsequent visit to Paris to identify the house before which we then stopped. It was one of those quiet, reserved old houses so common in Paris, a house with its back turned to the street and its *porte-cochère* guarded by the lodge of the *concierge*.

'I think you had better wait, if you don't

mind, Vernon,' Branders said as he alighted from the taxi and turned towards the bell.

But Branders' hand remained arrested in mid-air. I followed the direction of his eyes and saw a broad, rubicund face, wreathed in smiles, under a bowler hat of undoubted British origin. The face and the tall, broad-shouldered figure to which it belonged were familiar and surprising, as having been met under very similar circumstances less than twenty hours previously in London.

'Good-morning, Mr. Noble. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I believe I got here first.'

'I shan't pretend that you haven't hurt me, Keames,' Branders replied with a great show of mock grief, which convinced the taxi driver that his fare was indeed mad. 'But what have you come to do here? To arrest this bird?'

'There has been no arresting here. I came prepared, and M. Grève here of the *Sûreté*'—he indicated a picturesque-looking personage who stood waiting at a distance—'accompanied me. But Muggeh has an absolutely watertight proof that he has not been out of Paris since the beginning of last week. We have checked his statements with those of the *concierge*, of half a dozen other tenants of this building, and of a local tradesman or two. He knows nothing of what happened in London. . . . Says he didn't know of the murder till we told him. That would seem a suspicious statement from another man, but this chap has so many other queer

sides to him, that one can quite easily believe that he never sees a newspaper.'

Branders shrugged his shoulders.

'So we waste our time and money, official and unofficial alike! The vultures have gathered where the carcass is not. Ah, well, I suppose there is nothing left for me to do but go back to my hotel and pay my bill. But thanks awfully all the same, Keames, for being so frank with me and letting me have the straight tip.'

Branders rejoined me in the taxi, and we started for yet another destination.

'I suppose that practically ends our business in Paris?' I asked.

'Yes, practically.'

The terrifying taxi jolted and swung round a corner, jerking me violently against the door, and then took another corner, still at its top speed, and another, and yet another, in quick succession, and finally drew up again with a sudden grating of the brakes. I looked out and was filled with a vague sense of familiarity and puzzlement by what I saw. But Branders was already on the pavement and was ringing the *concierge's* bell before I realized that we were back again at the house where the mysterious Dr. Muggeh lived. Both the English and the French police-officers had disappeared, and we had done no more than drive round a block to give them time to get away. It was clear that the account of Muggeh given by Keames had not wholly satisfied Branders.

Branders was away for not more than ten minutes after the door had closed behind him. He came back frowning, and preserved a morose silence in the taxi until we had almost reached our hotel.

'So far, nothing but blanks,' he said when he spoke.

'I expect the solution is on the spot in London,' I ventured.

I fully expected to be snubbed, as indeed I deserved to be, having at the moment no fragment of tenable hypothesis. But Branders seemed to have recovered his good temper, for all he said was:

'That's about the wisest thing you have said for six months, Vernon. We shall travel by the night train.'

But at the hotel we found a telegram waiting for us, short, urgent and not to be disregarded.

'*Gerald arrested. Return by air. Helen Cassiodore.*'

That, with the address, was all.

'MacBee is a damned fool,' Branders said, and then added, smiling, 'But I suppose absolute obedience to a lady's commands is essential. I wonder how one gets to Le Bourget?'

CHAPTER VII

AT SCOTLAND YARD

EARLY next morning Miss Cassiodore, Branders and myself arrived at Scotland Yard to keep an appointment with the Chief-Inspector. We had little to say to one another on the way, each of us being taken up with inner reflections of a not very pleasant character. Miss Cassiodore, I could see, was racked with anxieties and apprehensions, to the least of which she dared not give utterance. Branders was morose and gloomy, raging inwardly, as I conjectured, at his failure to make anything of what the papers called in flaring headlines, "The Great Cassiodore Mystery." For my part, I was sorry for the lady, sorry for Branders, and disgusted with the world in general as a place where great efforts are rewarded with small results.

We were kept waiting for half an hour or more before a messenger came to bring us up to the Chief-Inspector's room. As it was, even then, it was not MacBee whom we found waiting for us. After our encounters of the last few days, it was with no feeling of surprise that I saw the by now familiar smile of Inspector Keames. Having placed chairs for the three of us, he took a seat himself at the corner of a large office table which occupied the greater part of the room.

'You didn't waste much time in getting back to London, Mr. Noble?'

'Nor did you, Inspector.'

'No; I came straight home after saying good-bye to you. You, I fancy, paid another little call before you left.'

Branders laughed pleasantly.

'How do you come to know that, Keames?'

'Well, you see, I made arrangements to have our friend in Paris watched. Didn't you think of that?'

'I confess that for the moment I didn't. I'm not much used to official methods of routine.'

Keames shook his head.

'You can't expect me to believe that, Mr. Noble. I know too much of what you have actually accomplished ever to take you for a simpleton.'

'Yes, no doubt; but don't you see that whatever I have done has been done by disregarding official routine?'

But the smile Keames gave was one of incredulity.

'Well, Mr. Noble,' he said, 'I don't suppose you'll return the compliment I paid you in Paris, by laying all your cards on the table? I should like very much—just as a matter of interest—to know what it was you wanted to see . . . our friend in Paris for.'

'I'm afraid that must be a secret for the present, Keames.'

'I thought so. Else why the little ruse to shake me off? Well, I wish you the best of

luck, Mr. Noble; which is more than someone else does.'

I followed the direction of the inspector's eyes as he spoke, and saw a bulky shadow on the ground-glass panel of the door, which opened at once to admit MacBee.

'Good-morning, Miss Cassiodore. Good-morning, Mr. Noble. Good-morning, Mr. Campling.' The words were accompanied by a stiff bow to each in turn. 'I am sorry to have kept you waiting. But Mr. Moonroyd wishes to be present at this statement, and I had to wait till he was free from a conference. We shall go at once to Mr. Moonroyd's room, if you will be so good as to follow me?'

The room occupied by Mr. Moonroyd had about it little of official severity. Light and airy, and near the top of the building, its windows looked down on a section of embankment with gliding trams and a ceaseless stream of swift-moving traffic, and across the river to the new County Hall. Mr. Moonroyd himself, a spruce, white-haired gentleman of military bearing, received us courteously, and indicated comfortable chairs to the left of—that is to say, behind—the door by which we had entered. Once seated, I observed the occupant of the room and his surroundings with considerable curiosity; for Mr. Moonroyd was reputed to know more of the secrets of the underworld, and more especially of the underworld of international espionage than any other man in England, or perhaps in Europe. Bearing that

in mind, I found the comfort of his private room extremely suggestive. It was not here that such a man would work; it was a mere place for interviews. A safe let into the wall between the two windows was the only detail my examination revealed which betrayed the fact that the room was ever used for business purposes. Otherwise it might have been a reception room in any well-to-do house in London.

Mr. Moonroyd and MacBee were still engaged in an animated and whispered conversation when the door opened to admit a tall young man, who was immediately followed by Keames and another plain-clothes officer. The young man I had not seen before; but even if I had not come to Scotland Yard that morning to be present at his examination, I think some instinct would have told me that it was Gerald Savonier, from the curious silent message, a thing which I at least, and I daresay everyone else in the room, could feel, which passed between him and Miss Cassiodore, without either looking at the other.

Savonier's face, as was not surprising, was pale and drawn, his expression careworn and haggard, as if from want of sleep. Under that, there was very much more than a suggestion of cold pride and defiance in his bearing. The clothes he wore seemed to have been thrown on in haste, or to be creased as if from being slept in. That may have been fancy, but it was how his appearance struck me. Savonier

was very dark, with black eyes and hair, and delicately chiselled features of a distinctly Latin type. He might easily have been taken for a Spaniard.

'Be seated, Mr. Savonier.' It was Mr. Moonroyd who spoke. 'I understand you have a statement you wish to make, quite informally, and in the presence of your friends?'

Savonier, who was seated with Keames and the other officer to the right of the door, had not lifted his eyes in our direction once.

'That is so,' he said, speaking with the voice of a thoroughly tired man. For a moment an expression of nervous strain passed over his face and he pressed a long, thin hand to his forehead. 'Shall I start from the time when I last saw Sir Gregory?'

Mr. Moonroyd consulted MacBee with a questioning look.

'Yes, that would be best,' MacBee agreed. 'But before you begin, Mr. Savonier, I hope you realize what very grave suspicions your movements have given rise to. And I think it right to warn you that positive evidence of a very damaging character, of which your friends as yet know nothing, has come into my possession. I invite you now to make a statement—an entirely voluntary statement, since you have come here with that intention—beginning from the time when you last saw Sir Gregory. After that a number of questions will be put to you, which you can refuse to answer if you wish. You are quite free to

take that line. But I hope, for your own sake, you won't refuse to answer. For you must understand, Mr. Savonier, that as far as I am concerned, you are still on your defence.'

'Excuse me,' Branders interrupted. 'But may I ask exactly what is Mr. Savonier's status here?'

'Mr. Savonier has returned to London voluntarily,' Mr. Moonroyd explained, 'with the expressed desire to make a statement. He was met accidentally in Paris yesterday by two of our officers, who were there on another mission. When questioned he informed them that he was on his way home, having read about Sir Gregory's death in a newspaper. Mr. Savonier expressed his willingness to the officers to return and submit himself to the fullest investigation. Inspector Keames, the senior officer in question, readily agreed to that course, which saved all troublesome formalities and delays. Mr. Savonier gave the inspector an account of his movements, which appears to be quite satisfactory. I am sure that it is in Mr. Savonier's own interest to be quite open and frank with us. This interview is not a trap.'

'It is my own desire to make the fullest possible statement,' Savonier said quietly.

'Very well,' Branders said, 'I believe it is the wisest course.'

'It was early on Saturday afternoon when I last saw Sir Gregory. I had reached the flat that morning at my usual time, nine-

thirty, and remained there working till one o'clock. Sir Gregory asked me to stop on for lunch, and I left at two-thirty. Sir Gregory was then in good health, even-tempered and friendly in his manner towards me—as he always was. I went straight to my club, changed, and went out with a fellow-member, Mr. Tringle, with whom I played several sets of tennis on covered courts, and with whom I afterwards dined. I got back to Sloane Street about nine, changed again, and spent the rest of the evening at a dance club—you probably know the place, the " It " Club, off Piccadilly. I got in that night a little before two, and went straight to bed.

' I had breakfast in my room on Sunday morning, and did not come down till after twelve. I lunched at the club in Sloane Street, and then went out with Mr. Cusack, another of our members. We visited a lady, a Mrs. Travers, at whose place we met a number of friends. I returned to my club for dinner, bringing one of those friends, a Mr. Hare, with me, having arranged to go with him to a private theatrical performance in the evening. But before I had finished dinner I was called to the telephone to speak with Sir Gregory. He wanted me to go by air to Paris that night, and on to a certain little hotel in a village in one of the French departments adjoining Switzerland. I have already given particulars of that place in writing. I had performed similar journeys for Sir Gregory before, and the route was

consequently familiar. I also knew exactly what I had to do. I was to wait there till a certain man arrived, and to receive a packet from him, with which I was to return to London. Needless to say, the documents which were to be brought over in this way were of the utmost secrecy and importance. I had a special diplomatic passport, which had been supplied to me to use on such occasions. It was made out in the name of John Osbaldistone, and I was known by sight under that name to several of the officials both at Croydon and Le Bourget. That is why, if your agents sought information about me at those places, they failed to get it.'

Savonier placed a passport on the table, which MacBee examined curiously and passed to Mr. Moonroyd, who barely glanced at it.

'Of course I had to excuse myself to Hare. I had to change, too, before I left; for though I never disguise myself when I travel as Osbaldistone, I always wear things of a certain style. Osbaldistone is a sporting man and always carries a gun, fishing-tackle, or ski-ing outfit, according to the place to which he is going and the season. Having made arrangements by telephone, I got down to Croydon by ten-thirty and crossed to Paris by private 'plane. I caught a night train on to my destination in the south, and reached the hotel on Monday afternoon where I was to meet Sir Gregory's correspondent. I did not see any papers, and, of course, did not know what had happened in London till I heard it late on

Monday evening from the person I had gone to meet. I returned to Paris at once and was on my way to Le Bourget when I was met by Inspector Keames and a French police-officer. When I understood the position in which I was, I at once consented to accompany Inspector Keames to London.'

'That story may be checked at every point,' Branders leant forward to remark, 'And it supplies a perfect alibi.'

'We have not been able to check every point yet,' Mr. Moonroyd said, 'But so far as we have gone, every word of Mr. Savonier's story has been confirmed.'

'That he left Croydon by private aeroplane at ten-thirty on Sunday evening?'

'Yes, that has been checked.'

'Well, in that case, Mr. Savonier is clear of all suspicion, whatever the result of your further investigations may be.'

'Things are not nearly as simple as you imagine, Mr. Noble,' MacBee said aggressively. 'What we have learned so far is, that a person using a passport—this passport probably—made out in the name of John Osbaldistone, travelled from Croydon to Le Bourget on Sunday evening, and that on Tuesday afternoon Mr. Savonier was met in Paris carrying this passport and professing to be the person who had flown to Paris. But so far no one has been able actually to identify Mr. Savonier as the person who travelled, or to swear to his movements between the time when he left his club on

Sunday evening and when Keames met him yesterday. The question I want to put to Mr. Savonier now is this: If your movements on Sunday evening were as you describe them, how did your cigarette-case come to be found at one o'clock that night in Rutland Square, within fifty yards of the place where Sir Gregory's body was found?'

In a sense we should have been prepared for that question; for had not MacBee let us know clearly enough that he held some trump card up his sleeve? Still, the question did take us by surprise, Miss Cassiodore and myself at least, for Branders smiled in a way he has when something he has been expecting has at last happened. But Savonier, if he also was surprised, did not wince visibly as he replied in quiet, matter-of-fact tones:

'I haven't any idea. As far as I know I have never been near the place.'

MacBee looked at Mr. Moonroyd significantly, and after a moment's hesitation the latter rose and turned to the safe in the wall. Opening it he took out a small paper packet which he unfolded on his desk. Inside was a gold cigarette-case marked with a monogram in jewels, and a short length of broken gold chain. We all leant forward curiously over the object.

'Is it yours?' Mr. Moonroyd asked.

Savonier picked the cigarette-case up and turned it over.

'It is,' he said.

'Well, in that case, Mr. Savonier,' MacBee interposed with his usual brusqueness, 'there are a lot things which need explaining. The constable who found the bodies found that case about thirty or forty yards away. The glint of metal in the darkness caught his eye as he passed. He put it in his pocket, arguing that, as he had never found a gold cigarette-case before, or two dead bodies, and as he had now found both at the same time and place, there might easily be some connection between the two finds. He said nothing about the case to anyone until he brought it to me privately on Monday morning. I at once saw the importance of the find when I recognised your monogram. It was very smart of the constable to see the possibilities in a case like this; though I had to speak to him rather sharply for taking too much on himself without proper supervision from his superiors. And now how do you, Mr. Savonier, propose to explain the presence of this case where it was found?'

A wave of hot colour swept over Savonier's face. It was the first indication of emotion he had given since the interview started.

'I lost it some time ago,' he said.

MacBee looked openly incredulous; but Mr. Moonroyd said quietly in his passionless and rather bored voice:

'Tell us about that, please.'

'It was some weeks ago. At the "It" Club—that dance club I mentioned to you. I am

afraid I behaved very badly and got into a scrap with another man. I had been drinking and was rather excited. It was a few days later when I missed the case. I had been ill for a couple of days, and it was not till I was better that I noticed its absence. I set a certain sentimental value on it—it was a twenty-first birthday present from Sir Gregory. There has been a reward offered for its recovery ever since on the notice-board at the club. I suspected one of the waiters, but there were various reasons why I did not care to make too big a song about what had happened.'

Mr. Moonroyd considered. 'What you say is very important,' he said. 'It seems almost certain that the person who committed the murder was the person who dropped the cigarette-case—the person who stole the cigarette-case. Do I understand you to say that you suspect one particular waiter of having taken the case?'

'No, I did not mean that. I meant that some one or other of the waiters might have taken it.'

'Rather than one of the members?'

'It is not the sort of club whose members are likely to be thieves.'

'In that case,' said MacBee, 'I don't see why you didn't take more energetic measures to recover your property.'

Savonier shrugged his shoulders.

'I told you how I behaved. The club very nearly had a nasty row which might have led to some sort of public scandal. It seems to

have been almost entirely my fault, for I was very drunk. And I was particularly anxious to shelter a lady from being associated with a rather unpleasant incident. If the matter had been brought before the club committee several people might have been asked to resign. As it was, I placed everything in the hands of the secretary of the club, who is a personal friend of mine. In the circumstances I had resigned myself to the loss of the cigarette-case.'

'Well, Mr. Savonier,' MacBee said in more friendly tones than he had used up to this, 'You will have to let me keep it now for the time being. It will be safer with me. And now there is another matter on which you can throw some light for us. You had a dispute with Sir Gregory last Friday evening?'

'That is a matter I must decline to discuss.'

'It was a dispute about a lady?'

'I have said that I will not discuss that subject.'

'The same lady who figured in the incident at the club?'

'I have nothing to say.'

'The lady in question is a Miss Mellisont—Phœbe Mellisont, a friend of Mrs. Fimms's?'

Savonier stared at the inspector, but said nothing.

'I insist on an answer,' MacBee cried with rising temper.

'Need we go into this matter now?' Mr. Moonroyd asked wearily.

'Yes, sir, in my judgment we must. The last known action of Sir Gregory's life was to pay a visit to a lady whom he had not met previously to make inquiries about this Mellisont girl. Sir Gregory's death followed immediately on that visit; and from that moment to this, as far as we can trace, no one knows where the young woman is.'

'She has disappeared?'

'Absolutely, sir.'

'You are not suggesting, MacBee, that she may be—er, the person we are looking for?'

'Her movements need a lot of looking into,' MacBee said with characteristic doggedness.

Mr. Moonroyd played with his paper-knife.

'I think you would really do better, Mr. Savonier,' he said, 'to make a statement.'

Savonier laughed.

'I do not know anything about Miss Mellisont's recent movements,' he said. 'She is free and in every way entitled to go where she pleases. To anyone who knows her the suggestion that she could have even the remotest connexion with what has happened is laughably absurd.'

'We want to know why Sir Gregory took the view of her he did? We have heard from Mrs. Fimms what that view was.'

'I must still decline to discuss what passed between my uncle and myself.'

'Then let me tell you, Mr. Savonier, that you are taking a very grave responsibility,' MacBee snapped. 'You don't seem to realize

that Sir Gregory has been foully murdered, and that we are still practically without a clue. You don't seem to perceive the obligation that rests on you to help us with your knowledge.'

'I assure you, Inspector, I am willing to give you every assistance.'

'But you won't discuss Miss Mellisont?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Because she has nothing to do with this case, and I should be only wasting your time.'

'Surely the inspector is the best judge of that?' Mr. Moonroyd suggested mildly.

'I am sorry, Mr. Moonroyd, but I can't have this lady's name dragged into a matter of this sort, in which she is not concerned.'

MacBee shrugged.

'You will have to answer questions in open court, then,' he said.

'That remains to be seen.'

'You will be committed for contempt, then. But perhaps you will tell us a little more of the nature of the business on which Sir Gregory so suddenly decided to send you to France?'

'I am afraid I can't do that. You of course know the Official Secrets Act? If you need any confirmation of my bona fides as a courier carrying secret despatches, you have only to apply to Mr. Kantsellory. He will stand sponsor for me in all that.'

'And what have you done with the packet you have brought over from France?'

'That I shall place in the hands of Mr. Kantsellory at the first opportunity.'

'And you can't say whether Sir Gregory had any special cause of anxiety on Sunday?'

'None that I know of.'

'You are not a very helpful witness,' said MacBee. 'Have you ever before this heard of this Mrs. Fimms who lives near Reigate?'

'Yes, I have heard of her.'

'How?'

'As a woman in society. She is very wealthy, I believe, a widow. People go to see her a lot. She keeps open house. Many people I have met have been down there at one time or another.'

'Is it correct that Sir Gregory did not know her?'

'They had not met to my knowledge. But Mr. Kantsellory may be able to tell you more of that.'

'You seem very certain about Mr. Kantsellory's willingness to endorse everything you say. But you must understand the situation as it exists. It is quite clear that Sir Gregory was engaged in certain very secret intrigues of an international character, and that some extremely able and determined person has seen fit to remove him, and in choosing the opportunity to strike showed an intimate acquaintance with Sir Gregory's movements. This unknown person was also directly or indirectly in touch with yourself, as is proved by the cigarette-case. From your relations

with Sir Gregory· it is also clear that there is no one more likely than yourself to be able to throw light on the circumstances which may have concealed the danger during the last few days of Sir Gregory's life.'

'That sounds very reasonable, MacBee.' Savonier spoke with slow insolence. 'But with the best will in the world I am afraid I don't see how I can help you.'

'We must leave it at that, then, I suppose. But I can tell you, Mr. Savonier, that I have often met better wills.'

That was MacBee's parting shot; and I don't think I was mistaken in reading a threat into the intonation of the voice which uttered it.

For my own part, I believe the general effect of this interview on me, in spite of my interest in Miss Cassiodore, was not at the time very favourable to Savonier. The young man appeared to be cold, proud and mulishly sulky; not the most agreeable combination of qualities.

But the cogency of Branders' argument appeared to admit of no answer; Savonier could not have been in the air flying to Paris and at the same time murdering Sir Gregory in Rutland Square. He, more convincingly than anyone else, was 'eliminated from the case.'

CHAPTER VIII

A CONFERENCE

AFTER that Savonier broke down and was in bed in a critical condition for a fortnight. His fine features and long, delicate hands were the outward signs of a high-strung, nervous temperament, and the double strain of the murder of Sir Gregory and of his own ordeal—and who can say if there was not also a third strain superadded? —proved too much for his strength. But for the devotion with which Miss Cassiodore threw everything else aside to nurse him, his condition might have had the gravest consequences. As it was, he had four days' fever and delirium, followed by ten days' convalescence in bed, before he could begin to creep about his room, haggard and emaciated.

In the meanwhile the adjourned inquest, the preliminaries of which had been held on the Tuesday while we were in Paris, had been resumed, and had added sensation to sensation.

The famous Government expert who had carried out the autopsy and the analysis of the contents of the bodies, went into the witness-box and stated that he was unable to suggest any cause of death.

'There was no evidence of poison?' asked the coroner.

'None whatever. Every known test has

been applied, and in every case with negative results.'

'But tests apart, Sir Otto,' said the coroner, 'surely as a medical expert you could form some opinion from the examination of the two bodies as to what had been the cause of death?'

'I was unable to do so. Both bodies were in a healthy and normal condition—except that they were dead. Death might have been caused by shock, but I was unable to find any indications in the heart or brain that that was so. Besides, in the case of death from shock, I should expect to find indications in the expression of the face of the strong emotions which had accompanied or caused death. But there was nothing of the sort. In spite of the indications on the young woman's wrists that there had been in her case some kind of a struggle, the expression of both faces was remarkably peaceful, distinctly like that of normal sleep.'

'And death might not be due to the action of some volatile poison, which would evaporate and leave no trace behind?'

'It might be due to that. But I am acquainted with no such poison.'

'Death from any of the known asphyxiating gases would be indicated by the presence of symptoms which are absent from this case?'

'That is so.'

'And in your opinion the administration of drugs through the mouth must also be ruled out?'

'In the light of our analysis, yes.'

'But might not some unknown poison have been administered by means of a hypodermic needle?'

'I made the most careful search for needle marks on both bodies, but found none.'

'So, Sir Otto, you are asking us to believe that here are the dead bodies of two apparently healthy people, and yet absolutely nothing to show in what way they come to be dead?'

'I am afraid that is so. There is absolutely nothing.'

'You have never heard of any poison which defies post-mortem detection?'

'I have heard vague talk about such poisons, but I have no practical experience of any such. I do not know that the existence of such a poison has ever been scientifically proved.'

When the great analyst had stepped down, the coroner recalled the doctor who carried out the first examination of the bodies after their discovery.

'When you first saw the bodies,' the coroner asked, 'what opinion as to the cause of death did you form?'

'From a superficial examination I concluded that they had died from some sort of poisoning.'

'What was it that made you suspect poison?'

'Partly the absence of any indications of any other cause of death; and partly two circumstances which were necessarily transitory, and which would not present themselves to Sir Otto in his examination. I seemed to

detect a very faint odour, intermediate, as it appeared to me, between that of ether and that of rather poor grade whisky. It was so faint that I could not be certain, but it was sufficient to make me suspect drugging. The other circumstance was the unaccountable degree of stiffness in the bodies. From what I had learned from the police I knew that sufficient time had not elapsed for normal rigor mortis to have developed. I had, then, to find some adequate cause for the marked muscular stiffening; and it occurred to me that that might possibly be found in the action of some drug which affected certain nervous centres, immediately before or at the moment of death.'

That was the gist of the medical evidence, which no cross-questioning succeeded in shaking. The evidence of the experts, purely negative in content, started a controversy which was joined in, not only by medical men, jurists and journalists, but by members of the general public, and of all the publics. Gentlemen who had been in the tropics wrote to explain to Sir Otto through the newspapers how the bushmen kill. Ladies who had been to the Far East and had studied life at first hand in the streets of Chinese cities, contributed hearsay horrors about subtle oriental essences and distillates. But nothing was brought to light likely to enable the coroner's jury to come to any definite decision, when the adjourned inquest should be resumed again after a month's interval.

The broad effect of the medical and expert evidence was, in Branders' opinion, to leave five principal questions for answer:

(1) What obscure causal relation existed between what was odd and unaccountable in Sir Gregory's actions and behaviour on the last day of his life, and his death?

(2) How was Sir Gregory, whether alive or dead, brought to Rutland Square?

(3) What connexion existed between the strange, if not unique, locality in which the bodies were discoverd and either (a) the commission of the crime, or (b) the disposal of the bodies?

(4) How—with what instrument, weapon, apparatus or substance—was the crime committed? and

(5) Who committed it, and for what motive?

'I have an idea,' Branders said, as he expounded the five points to me, 'that if we could answer any one of these five questions fully, we could also answer all the others—that, in fact, they are not five questions at all, but in reality only one. If, for example, we could lay our hands on the murderer, the mere knowledge of his identity might enable us to deduce the answers to the other four questions. Or if we knew what poison or other means of death was used, then that knowledge might point to the one person who could employ such mysterious weapons of destruction. There was a brief period when I thought I knew the answer to the fifth question, and everything

else began to look simple in consequence; but my inquiries in Paris blew the last shred of my belief in that theory to the winds. We shall have to wait now until Savonier is well enough to stand a gruelling from me.'

It was not as many days as we had at first feared before that was possible. Miss Cassiodore, knowing what was in Branders' mind, asked us to meet her nephew at her flat in Chelsea.

But before that meeting I had gone on a mission for Branders to the 'It' Club, and had established my status with its secretary as an accredited agent of the Cassiodore family. It was one of the class of services which I, in the capacity of idle man about town which Branders absurdly forced on me in season and out, was best able to render him in his work. I understood the sort of people who frequent clubs of that type, and could assign its proper importance to whatever I heard.

I learned that, on the evening about which I was inquiring, Savonier and Miss Mellisont had joined with some other members in a somewhat noisy and boisterous celebration of someone's birthday, in the course of which considerable calls had been made on the club cellar. The secretary was certain (but then what secretary would not have been?) that drinking had not been extended beyond the legal hours; but even so, long before the drinking had stopped, several members, Savonier among them, had begun to show signs of having had rather more than was good for

them. One of these, a man called Tambardine, about whose membership of the club a good many people, including the secretary, were uneasy, had made some rude or insulting remark to Miss Mellisont, which Savonier had resented hotly. Both men had had too much to drink, and before the bystanders could intervene a table had been overturned and the men were exchanging blows amid the crash of glass and the cries of women. Savonier, who was the younger and lighter man, as well as possibly the more drunk, had been knocked down and had given his head a rather nasty knock against the leg of the overturned table. One group of members had then hustled Tambardine out of the way, while another surrounded the prostrate Savonier, whose drunkenness the blow had apparently increased, and who kept protesting his desire to continue the fight. Miss Mellisont had drawn Savonier aside as soon as he had recovered a little from the dazed condition resulting from his fall, and had attempted to exercise some kind of moral control over him, which he seemed to resent. Later in the evening Savonier had fainted, and had had to be revived with a glass of brandy. The secretary did not know what it was that Tambardine had said to Miss Mellisont, and he had not been seen again at the club since that evening.

That had happened on a Tuesday evening, and on the following Friday Savonier had come to the secretary with the story of the lost

cigarette-case. The secretary had, of course, seen the serious consequences that all this might have on the reputation of the club, one whose members mostly played for safety, and had consequently been relieved to hear Savonier's determination that the episode must not be given any wider publicity than it had already obtained. It seemed probable that the chain by which the case was secured had been broken in the scuffle, and the case itself had fallen to the ground unobserved in the general excitement. If so, one of the club servants might have picked it up and been tempted by its value.

'But not Tambardine, for example?' I asked.

'I should say not,' was the slightly hesitating reply of the secretary. 'It is hard to say what there is against Tambardine—it is the man's atmosphere, perhaps, more than anything else. He is the wrong sort of person. But he is not a man likely to prove a thief. It is true that we never had a complaint about any of our present staff; but they would certainly be more open to temptation from the money value of the cigarette-case than any of our members, all of whom are well-to-do people and have been introduced on excellent references.'

When I reported this conversation to Branders —and beyond supplying Tambardine's name and describing the scene at the club which had been followed by Savonier's illness, it really

added very little to the surmises of Phrett—he made no comment of any kind, and it was not until the evening when we met Savonier at Miss Cassiodore's flat that I knew what was in his mind.

Miss Cassiodore, as was to be expected from her type, was an excellent hostess and put us at our ease at once. There was none of the formal stiffness of a conference or consultation. It was, in fact, the first time that Branders and Savonier had met and had an opportunity to measure one another's personalities; for the meeting in Mr. Moonroyd's room had been held under conditions of too great constraint to count. The first part of the evening, then, passed in general conversation, in which the subject which had brought us together was studiously avoided; the general result of which was to remove certain prejudices from Savonier's mind, by convincing him that Branders and myself were not merely the spies and amateur policemen he was obviously at first inclined to believe us, but men of his own world and safely to be treated as equals.

It was Savonier himself who first introduced the topic which was in everyone's mind.

'I am very curious to hear your general opinion, Mr. Noble,' he said, 'about what happened to Uncle Gregory. Strictly in confidence, of course. What, for example—I don't say *who*—was the murderer? I mean, was he a political fanatic, or a madman, or a private person with a grudge, or the cold-blooded agent

of a hostile government? All of those seem to be possibilities. Do you think there is any indication in the facts as to which it was?'

'There are two possible views of this murder,' said Branders, ticking them off on his fingers as he developed his analysis. 'Either it was (A) the irresponsible act of a maniac, or (B) the deeply laid and cleverly executed plot of an extremely able and far-seeing man. The first, which is apparently the popular view—expounded, for example, with such eloquence by our friend A.S.Q. in *The Daily Flare*—that the crime was the work of some motiveless assassin, I decline to consider until some positive evidence is adduced in its support. To take a single point which tells against the maniac theory, how are we, in that case, to account for Sir Gregory's going out at so late an hour? Before I can accept that *theory*, I must have some kind of adequate and probable explanation of that *fact*.'

'So that it rests between the private and the political murderer?'

'Yes; I assume that it was premeditated murder by a mind which was not, at least intellectually, insane. And I assert the following seven points about the murderer:—

'(1) He had some reason for being an enemy of Sir Gregory.

'(2) Sir Gregory knew him, and in some way he was able to persuade Sir Gregory to go out to him, or in his company, alone, in secret, and at midnight.

'(3) He knew the district intimately where the crime was committed—the cul-de-sac and the dummy houses.

'(4) He was a person of great foresight and resourcefulness (signs of intellectual power), since so far we have not detected a single error made by him, beyond his leaving a difficult clue in the cigarette-case. And, indeed, that may have been a deliberate blind—it put MacBee completely off the track.

'(5) He was a desperate and ruthless man (as is proved by his killing the girl who probably interrupted him in the commission of the first murder), and I should guess a person of exceptional violence of temper and boldness to attempt such a crime at all in the open street.

'(6) He was an expert in strange drugs and chemicals, or had at least access to such.

'(7) He was anxious to get well away before the discovery of the bodies—a well-planned flight, probably to create an apparently watertight alibi, was part of his scheme. Hence the propping of the bodies.

'Now I only know of one person who answers to all or most of those particulars.'

Branders paused to glance at Savonier who was lolling back in his chair with eyes half closed and long, thin legs stretched out straight in front of him.

'The only possible person I know of,' Branders resumed, 'is a man called Joseph Tambardine, a highly-skilled chemist, who is a member of the "It" Club, who only a few

weeks ago engaged there in a public quarrel with Sir Gregory's nephew, who was present when the gold cigarette-case was lost, and who has disappeared and has not been heard of since.'

'But, I assure you, Mr. Noble, there is not the least reason . . .' Savonier spoke with a certain shade of resentment in his voice. 'Tambardine is a cad, but . . .'

'Let Mr. Noble finish first,' Miss Cassiodore suggested soothingly.

'Then let me repeat the seven points in the same order as they apply to Tambardine.

'(1) *Enmity.* Tambardine had recently quarrelled publicly—I don't yet know why, of course—with Sir Gregory's nephew, who was also well known as Sir Gregory's confidential secretary. A lady was also concerned in this quarrel—the same lady, as we know, about whose association with his nephew Sir Gregory was perturbed for reasons I needn't enter into.

'(2) *Knowledge.* We have no evidence that Sir Gregory knew Tambardine; but we have evidence that Sir Gregory had sources of information about the club of which Tambardine was a member, and was specially interested in certain things which took place there. Mr. Savonier has not told us how Sir Gregory came to know about the lady I mentioned just now; but I am assuming that he didn't learn what he learned from Mr. Savonier. It is not impossible, then, that Sir Gregory knew Tambardine; and it is certain that, if he knew about a certain

incident at the club in which both Tambardine and the lady were concerned, Sir Gregory would have had an adequate motive for going to Tambardine for various reasons, possibly to learn more facts.

'(3) *Locality.* Tambardine has lived for over two years in a boarding-house in that part of Bayswater, not ten minutes' walk from Rutland Square.

'(4) *Ability.* Tambardine was a Bachelor of Science and an original research worker. According to his fellow-guests at the boarding-house whom I have questioned, he was a very clever man and an inventor. He was also one of the small group of people open to suspicion with regard to the cigarette-case.

'(5) *Character.* That he was a desperate and violent man may perhaps be deduced from his conduct at the "It" Club on the night of the quarrel. If ruthlessness and cruelty were among his characteristics, that would account for his general unpopularity, the vague distaste which most people seem to have felt for his society.

'(6) *Drugs.* His science degree—an honour one—was in chemistry.

'(7) *Escape.* He has actually disappeared.

'In all these seven points Tabardine is either known or may be reasonably surmised to correspond with our idea of the criminal. I am, of course, far from saying that our case is complete, or that it amounts to positive proof. There are, in especial, two links missing from

the chain of proof, which I feel sure, Mr. Savonier, that you will decide on reflection to supply, if it is within your power to do so. I want to know—if you know—why it was that Sir Gregory took up the attitude he did with regard to Miss Mellisont, and what it was that Tambardine said to Miss Mellisont which you so resented? You will see, I am sure, that if we could once clear up the relations between those three people, it would throw a great deal of light on everything else.'

'I find your ingenuity truly astonishing, Mr. Noble,' Savonier drawled in a tone which reminded me most unpleasantly of that which he had adopted during the latter part of his duel with MacBee. Savonier certainly could be very insolent when he wished. 'You will probably understand,' he continued, 'what I mean by saying that, to be altogether mad, a man or an argument must be altogether logical; for starting from fantastic premises, the more rigid the logic, the more absurd will the conclusion be.'

'You mean, of course, that there is a fundamental absurdity in my assuming that Tambardine has anything at all to do with the case.'

'I do.'

'Why, may I ask?'

'Because I know Tambardine—as I said, he simply isn't that sort of man.'

'No? But consider this, Mr. Savonier: Every murderer has a mother (we assume her alive)—he may have a wife, a sister, a daughter,

it may be only a mistress, but some woman who is attached to him, who believes in him, it may be to whom he is the best and most lovable, as well as loved, person in the world. When he is accused of murder,—even when his guilt is, as the newspapers phrase it, brought home to him,—these women will in most cases still persist in thinking him innocent and incapable of the cruelty imputed to him. And surely they have had better opportunities of knowing the true man than you have ever had in the case of Tambardine ?'

'They are deceived by their affection. There is no love lost between me and Tambardine. On the contrary.'

'Well, at least let me put my theory to the test.'

'Your theory leaves me unconvinced. However, I have no objection of any kind to answering one of your questions. I do not know why it was that Sir Gregory objected so strongly to Miss Mellisont. As you correctly assumed, I was not the first to speak to him about her. I have been knocking about town for a good many years now, and of course Miss Mellisont is not the first girl in whom I have taken an interest. But Sir Gregory never expected me to tell him much about how I spent my spare time—he did not appear to be interested in things like that. It comes natural to me to chat and gossip with my Aunt Helen about the various ways in which I amuse myself, but it wasn't so with Sir Gregory. I was naturally

very much surprised, then, when my uncle asked me about Miss Mellisont. That was, perhaps, three months ago now. I don't know that before that I had ever thought of Miss Mellisont as in any way different from the other girls I had danced and flirted with; but Sir Gregory's attitude made me feel that she somehow was different. She had more character, more personality, and the kind of interest she excited in me was more serious. I admired her immensely. I daresay I spoke about her to Sir Gregory more warmly than I felt at the time. I suppose that kind of reaction to unreasonable opposition is quite natural. And Sir Gregory's opposition was unreasonable—he became extraordinarily and unaccountably excited. When I asked him for the grounds of his demand that I should drop Miss Mellisont's acquaintance immediately, he refused to give me any explanation. That was very unlike him. I don't mind saying, too, that it hurt me. After all, quite apart from our personal relation, I was entitled to be treated by him in this matter as a man of the world. I told him that Miss Mellisont was a well-educated girl and what is vulgarly called a "lady"; a young woman of artistic talent, as well as plenty of practical ability, who runs a business of her own; to say nothing of her being good-looking and popular. No one could have any reasonable objection to our friendship. But Sir Gregory would have none of it, and I have no idea why he regarded the matter as he did.

'Your other question, about Tambardine's remark, I decline to answer. It has no possible connexion with any of this. It was the sort of thing that only the lowest cad would say to a woman, a wanton and deliberate insult; but I realize now that it was only the fellow's loathsome personality showing itself in all its filthy nakedness when he was drunk. I have sworn off wine ever since that night, for fear I should ever sink to the level I saw him sink to then. I suppose that to onlookers I must have appeared almost as bad in my subsequent behaviour. But how does any one of us behave if someone spits in his face?'

'But why, in view of this revelation of character, are you so certain that Tambardine could not be the murderer?'

'He's not that sort, neither insane nor a murderer.'

'But surely, Savonier,' Branders protested, dropping the 'Mr.' for the first time in his eagerness to persuade, 'Surely you don't suppose that murderers are any different from the rest of us? They are the same flesh and blood, with the same instincts and spirit as their neighbours. Anyone, given the circumstances and the motive, the temptation and the opportunity, might commit a murder. A number of most excellent people have done so, religious men, charitable men, kind men, men whose lives were remarkable for the depth of their domestic affections. That is why we have the death penalty—because the fear of death

is strong enough to counterbalance most motives; and finding ways and means and a suitable opportunity to commit a murder is immensely complicated by the necessity of including in the scheme good expedients for concealment and escape. That seems to me to be plain common sense.'

'I don't agree,' Savonier said coldly. 'There are moral restraints—principles to which men adhere for idealistic reasons, and not out of fear.'

'I agree,' Branders cried. 'Certainly there are moral restraints; but they *are* restraints. If there was no instinctive, innate tendency in human nature to murder, we should need no restraints of any kind, material or moral. Consider what is implied as to the possibilities of crime in the fact, that for some days so experienced an officer as Chief-Inspector MacBee was morally convinced that you yourself were the criminal.'

'What does that prove, beyond that MacBee is an ass?'

'He is very far from that. I have felt all along since I started investigations in this case that MacBee and I are running a race, neck and neck, and that the mere spin of a coin may determine which of us reaches the goal first.'

'Well, if MacBee's no nearer the truth than you are——'

'But what do you call the truth, Gerald?' Miss Cassiodore interpolated.

'Oh, something very different from the suggestion that Tambardine is the murderer.'

'In a case like this,' Branders remarked dryly, 'it is often necessary to find the murderer by the progressive elimination of a number of suspects. When you have eliminated them all but one, you have your man. Nothing could be simpler. So for the present I am going to concentrate on Mr. Joseph Tambardine. There is really no fear of hanging him prematurely. I am only in the opening stages of compiling a case against him, and when I proceed to add to the structure of my conjecture, the discovery of one awkward fact may cause its total collapse. I have first to find where Tambardine is now, and where he has been ever since that Tuesday evening of the quarrel. And I am inclined to think that it will be very unpleasant for him if he cannot give as satisfactory an account of his absence as you did of yours.'

CHAPTER IX

AT THE 'IT' CLUB

DURING the week which followed that discussion at Miss Cassiodore's Chelsea flat my life was hardly a pleasant or an easy one. Branders kept supplying me with long lists of the names and addresses of people who lived in the most out-of-the-way

parts of London and of the Home Counties. All of these I had to visit in rotation, making discreet and tactful inquiries about Tambardine, with whose description I had been armed for the purpose. I went on these expeditions in the assumed character of a solicitor looking for an heir-at-law under an intestacy, and they kept me occupied for at least twelve hours out of the twenty-four for a week. What made the monotony of these journeyings backwards and forwards peculiarly galling, was that Branders did not see fit to take me into his confidence as to his general plan of campaign. I understood, of course, in a general sort of way, that Tambardine must be found; but such an academically held conviction was scarcely strong enough to make a visit to, say, a tanner at Ipswich the less irksome and futile in appearance. For why on earth should a tanner at Ipswich be selected for such a domiciliary visit, rather than another man? That was very often Branders' method of working with me.

It was, then, with a deep sigh of relief that I heard his voice on the telephone telling me that he had run our prey to earth at last. Tambardine had put in an appearance at the club again. Branders had decided to go there himself and wanted me to introduce him to the secretary.

I was not, of course, a member of the club; but a ring at an inconspicuous side door and the presentation of my card led to our being intro-

duced into the secretary's private office without delay.

Mr. Grymes, the secretary, was a cheerful, florid man, who held out his hand to greet me with expansive warmth.

'And what can I do for you this time, Mr. Campling?'

I introduced Branders as my principal, and explained that he would now take over the conduct of the inquiries we had come to make.

'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Noble,' Grymes said warmly. 'I have heard of you many times and of the wonderful things you have done.'

'I am not doing anything very wonderful now. All I want is to be able to watch a man who is a member of your club, and to see him without his being able to see me. His name is Tambardine.'

Mr. Grymes nodded.

'Yes, I know—Mr. Campling has spoken to me about him.'

'I have learned that he has been here recently.'

'Yes, he was here yesterday and the day before. But he hadn't been here for a long time before that.'

'Well, I want to keep him under observation this evening.'

'But we can't be sure that he will come, Mr. Noble.'

'Why does he ever come at all?' Branders asked irrelevantly.

'Why do any of our members?' Grymes

smiled tolerantly. 'He likes dancing, I suppose; or he likes the girls he dances with—which really comes to the same thing. I suppose that is why everyone does that sort of thing. It is all a matter of siren voices and the seductiveness of sex.'

'But his partners? I have heard that he is very unpopular.'

'But he is also an excellent dancer. There is always an excess of women present. Any man who can dance well can get a partner.'

'He doesn't bring his own?'

'I have seldom known him do so.'

'Usually he arrives and leaves by himself?'

'I think he usually comes by himself, but I can't be so sure about his going.'

'You understand, of course, Mr. Grymes, that I am not in any way connected with the official police? Nothing that is said to me in confidence is in any danger of being repeated either in a court of law—unless that is absolutely necessary—or in the Press. I say that because I want to ask you some questions——in the interests of justice. But you have my promise in advance of absolute discretion in any use that may be made of the information. You understand that?'

Mr. Grymes nodded.

'You know, of course, that I am working on the Cassiodore case?'

'I gathered that from Mr. Campling.'

'And I believe that the solution to that enigma is to be found in your club.'

'In the club! You astonish me, Mr. Noble. How . . . ?'

'Well, then, tell me, what *is* your club? You have members of all sorts, haven't you? Very good people—I mean socially—like Savonier; and people who keep very good society, like Miss Mellisont; and people who are more than a little doubtful, like Tambardine. It is a mixed lot, isn't it?'

'I suppose there are very few places nowadays which are really exclusive in the old sense of the word.'

'Exactly. This is the age of democracy. And manners and morals have changed, too,—in all circles?'

'That's what people keep telling us, at any rate.'

'But what's your own impression, Mr. Grymes, of your women members?'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean this. There are stories about places like this club. I daresay most of it is gossip. But there have been some scandals. I don't mean breaches of the law about drink regulations, but more serious things. Drugs, for example, have been mentioned. I know very little personally about places like this—I am entirely in your hands and Vernon's for my facts—but I feel fairly confident that drugs can't be kept out merely by social exclusiveness. Have you ever suspected that anyone has been doing a trade in illegal drugs among your members here?'

Mr. Grymes opened the door and looked out into the passage.

'What makes you ask that?' he said, once he was satisfied that there were no eavesdroppers.

'Just an idea I had,' Branders said with deceptive nonchalance, apparently prepared to drop the subject of drugs.

'I did once hear a rumour about this very chap Tambardine,' Grymes said after a pause. 'Nothing to go on, of course; and I doubt if anything of the sort has ever reached the ears of the committee.'

'Your committee is very strict?'

'They have to be. Any serious scandal would ruin the business of a club like this. You have no idea how timid our members are.'

'But you didn't report the incident between Tambardine and Savonier to the committee?'

'That was at Savonier's request. Otherwise I should have felt bound to. But I stretched a point for him.'

'He is a friend of yours?'

'That is so. But quite apart from that, Savonier is from the point of view of the club a very desirable type of member.'

'But to return to drugs for a moment, if you don't mind, Mr. Grymes. I always understood that when anything of the nature of drug-peddling was going on, it was in the hands of women at places like clubs?'

'But what I heard about Tambardine was that he *took* drugs; and I should certainly have

done something very drastic if I had heard any rumour like what you suggest.'

'Well, Mr. Grymes, I have heard from two sources that the handing about of illegal drugs is not unknown among the members of this club. I don't know what members, but I certainly supposed it was women members.'

'I don't like the sound of what you say at all,' Grymes protested. 'I hardly think it can be true.'

'I am not exactly sure of anything, of course. I came here to-night to satisfy myself about several points. But you are naturally unwilling to discuss your members?'

'I really don't see why I should be—in confidence between ourselves. I am sure our members are free enough in discussing one another. But you must understand that everything which goes on at this club is always perfectly decorous on the surface. I have never had reason to suspect any of our members of any but the most commonplace sins. The world is all of one piece and, manners apart—and they are not always so far apart—there is not very much difference between the behaviour of one set of people and another, whether they're duchesses or costermongers. Our crowd is somewhere in between, nearer the duchesses perhaps; but that's hardly worth talking about. Some women come here to dance with their husbands, and some to dance with other women's husbands, and still others to dance with men who are nobody's husbands—or

everybody's, which is often very much the same thing. That sort of thing goes on everywhere and with the same inevitable reactions. It is amusing to watch, but it doesn't amount to anything. We have never had any sort of unpleasant scandal. As places go, I should say that there are remarkably few of our members who could be described by even the most strait-laced as "fast." I can certainly think of no one, least of all a woman, who is likely to be a drug fiend. I find it a most disturbing idea.'

'My dear Mr. Grymes, I said nothing about drug fiends. Drug fiend is a very difficult expression to find a satisfactory definition for. And in any case, you could not be held responsible, even if such unpleasant people were about.'

'I am not so sure of that. The committee has entrusted me with very full powers to run and manage this place; and so long as nothing goes wrong—well and good. But if anything of the kind you suggest were brought to light, it might easily cost me my billet. And frankly, Mr. Noble, I can't afford that. I have nothing else but a small disablement pension from the Army.'

'In that case I had better tell you the worst at once—in strict confidence. I am here in an attempt to prove that one of your members, this man Tambardine, was at least the instigator of Sir Gregory Cassiodore's murder, if not the actual murderer himself. I can think of no likely motive for the crime—unless, indeed,

Tambardine was mixed up with the illegal drug traffic, and as a chemist he easily might be, and Sir Gregory had in some way or other found him out. That would seem motive enough. And Tambardine is the sort of man who might have had the means of death ready to hand, in this unknown drug which has puzzled the experts. My present business is to track Tambardine to his lair, and to discover his associates if possible.'

'I hope nothing is going to happen here.'

'My dear Mr. Grymes, I am not a Wild West show. Nothing will happen as far as I am concerned. I don't go about with six-shooters in my hip-pockets. But in view of what you said about your own position, I thought it only fair to warn you that I suspect Tambardine of being a dangerous criminal.'

'Good God! And I am afraid the man is fairly widely known as a member of this club. The reporters will all get hold of that fact if there is an arrest. What do you want to do now, Mr. Noble?'

'I want you to place me where I can see Tambardine if he comes. I want to watch him and the people he speaks to and dances with. I should like to know who they are. And I don't want to be too conspicuous myself.'

'You could watch from here.' Grymes drew back a curtain covering a sort of service window let into the wall. Through the window an unobstructed view of the entire length of the long dance hall could be obtained. At the far

end was an estrade on which four musicians were just taking their places behind a row of potted plants. To the left a sort of bar or buffet was half hidden in a recess, and in the corner nearest the window through which we were looking a few small tables with chairs, partly screened by other tall plants in glazed earthenware tubs, invited to confidential privacy. It was a very commonplace room with nothing at all stylish about it; neither a very large nor a very imposing place.

'What is your subscription?' Branders asked absently.

'Twelve guineas, and twenty-four guineas entrance fee. Half that for women. The membership is small and most of the money is swallowed up in rent and heavy charges on loans.'

'I can probably see well enough from here for my purpose; but how am I to know who the people are?'

'I can let you know,' Grymes said. 'I can tell you the names of people as they come in in groups from time to time. I shall have to be in and out of this room during the evening. In the meantime, there is a register of our members with their addresses,' and he handed the book to Branders.

Our vigil at the little window in the wall was a slow affair. It is never very amusing to watch other people dancing, and I found the effort of memorizing so many new names and faces distinctly fatiguing.

The man we were watching for came in fairly early and sat down by himself at one of the little tables where the palms were. He was well placed to give us an easy opportunity of studying him.

I am not yet used to murderers, not even with my years of experience as Branders' colleague. I still have a thrill, a cold sensation down my back, when I first set eyes on a proved or suspected slayer. I suppose I must be temperamentally incapable of profiting by Branders' instructions, for I have had it dinned into my ears ever since I have been associated with his investigations, that murderers are as the rest of us "but for the grace of God." But I still remain primitively naïve and instinctive in these matters, shudder and crane my neck like the silliest reader of the yellow press, with an emotion which I daresay is only a disguised form of fear.

That was how my first sight of Tambardine made me feel—thrilled and almost awed. He was a square-built man of medium height, dark haired and blue jawed, with rugged, strongly marked features and overhanging eyebrows. But as I studied him more closely I experienced a certain feeling of anti-climax and disappointment, for his appearance refused to harmonize with any of my preconceptions of the man. There were no visible signs of habitual intemperance on his sullen, virile features; and it was impossible to take him for the type of degenerate drug-taker and vicious lounger of the

underworld that I had expected. That he was unpleasant and repulsive went without saying; but it was hardly the repulsiveness of vice, and certainly not that of crime. Looking at him, I could quite easily understand Savonier's refusal to entertain the idea of his being the murderer. He sat at his table with shoulders humped and scowling at the dancing couples, without making any sign of recognition to any of those present. Branders apparently fancied that people were avoiding him, for he took an opportunity of asking Grymes if that were so.

'I believe they are. He has only been here twice before to-night since the night of the quarrel, and on that occasion everyone was on Savonier's side. He was unpardonably rude to Miss Mellisont, who has not been here since. She is very popular. No one seems to know exactly what it was he said to her. He was very drunk, and I believe his language was very objectionable. People have been talking about asking him to resign, but Savonier's wish expressed to me rather stands in the way of that.'

'Who is that nice-looking girl who has stopped and is speaking to him now?'

'A Mrs. Knockwinnock. Her husband died a few years ago. She is not more than twenty-three or twenty-four, I believe. She is one of the best dancers in the club. So is Tambardine, and they have often danced together. I believe she is attracted by his repulsiveness—beauty

and the beast giving an exhibition on the ball-room floor.'

Tambardine was now moving away from us with his shingled, short-skirted partner to the blare of the jazz music. Branders watched him through that and the succeeding dances with unflagging interest.

'Mrs. Knockwinnock is all right, I suppose?' he asked when Grymes came into the office for a few minutes.

'She is certainly not a drug taker.'

'Well, you know the maxim: *cherchez la femme.* There is nothing else but dancing between those two?'

'No, Mrs. Knockwinnock is engaged to be married, to a very rich man. Her fiancé is not here this evening. She is just amusing herself. But there is Tambardine preparing to go.'

'Then we must go, too. I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Grymes, for the facilities you have given us. And I am interested in what you say about Mrs. Knockwinnock. But I should keep my eye on her for your own sake, if I were you; for it is my belief that Tambardine's sole reason for coming here to-night was to see her. He had something to give her—it may have been a message merely. I couldn't see anything pass, but I think I observed a moment when it did pass, whatever it was, whether word or thing. Remember that the fact of her being engaged to a rich man doesn't exclude the possibility

of her being vicious. Good-night and thank you.'

We slipped out into the side street in Tambardine's wake, and followed him to the brightly lighted pavement of Piccadilly. There we separated, Branders keeping close to our quarry, and I following after an interval. It seemed to Branders, I suppose, that two men together would be more conspicuous.

Tambardine walked at a steady, plodding pace down the whole length of Piccadilly to the corner of Park Lane, where he turned to the right and walked on towards Marble Arch. It was evident from the way he was walking that he had no suspicion that he was being followed. If I were to hazard a guess as to the state of his mind from the way he held himself and behaved on the still crowded pavements, I should say that he was a preoccupied and worried man. So at least it seemed to me at the time. And that, of course, made for the truth of Branders' theory.

At Marble Arch he turned down the Bayswater Road, crossing to the north side near the site of the old Tyburn scaffold. He was leading us straight towards Lancaster Gate and the centre of the mystery which occupied our thoughts.

CHAPTER X

THE COTTAGE IN THE MEWS

I WENT home with Branders to his place in Kensington after that midnight chase. It was nearer and more convenient for me to get to than my own rooms, and Branders said that he wanted to talk—about many things—and also that as we were to follow up, the first thing in the morning, the steps which we had taken that night, it would be better that I should be on the spot. He would have need of my services. Now that we knew where Tambardine was to be found, we must not let him slip through our fingers again.

It was already very late when we got in, and I noticed that the long and unaccustomed walk had tired Branders out. I was afraid that he was overdoing things seriously. For days past now he had been hardly himself, succumbing at unexpected moments under the strain of prolonged concentration over an amazing card index which he had built up, almost single handed, to illustrate the relations of persons known to be in the drug ring. Again and again he would repeat during those days when we met, 'I can't see it, Vernon, though I know it's there somewhere close at hand all the time—the fact, the one significant fact which would supply the solution. The indications are too many to be set aside as coincidence. There's the fact of

our coming across not only Muggeh, but also Tambardine.' And Branders would press his hand to his forehead or catch hold of the back of a chair, as though he felt giddy and were afraid of falling.

That was the sort of thing he had said to me many times, but not that night. For in spite of his declared desire to talk, he sat moodily in front of the empty grate, smoking and nursing his chin, without uttering a word, while I watched the hands of the clock make the complete revolution of the dial before he suggested our going to bed.

I really felt alarmed about Branders' condition. For more than an hour I lay awake wondering why at this juncture, when we seemed to be on the brink, if not of a complete solution, at least of some new and important revelation, his usually serene self-confidence had deserted him so completely. I could see that he was clearly balancing alternative plans and unable to decide between them. He seemed, too, as though he were oppressed by some horrible thought which he did not care to put into words. As I turned these thoughts over in the darkness I could hear Branders' short cough in the adjoining room. Thoughts were keeping him awake, too.

After such a night it was not surprising that we were not as early as we had intended; but breakfast once over, we hurried away to put into immediate action whatever decision it was that Branders had at length come to over-

night. Before we left he handed me a small revolver.

'I have got one, too,' he said. 'Don't hesitate to use it. Remember the ferocity of the man who killed Muriel Hatterleigh.'

The place to which we hurried from the Queen's Road tube station was not more than a few hundred yards from the scene of the murders. A short terrace of red brick houses ended in an archway of the same material, which admitted to a cobbled mews, flanked on one side by a high stone wall and on the other by stables and a number of pretty little two-storied cottages, built of the same red brick as the archway and the terrace. The cottages were probably occupied now, as I surmised from a careful examination of their exterior, by people of a different social class from those for whom they had been originally built. An air of reserve and culture seemed to emanate from the discreetly curtained windows; and the absence of clothes, children, or any other form of litter, spoke of the orderliness of the inhabitants. It was in a way almost a self-contained village at the heart of London.

The mews or the lane—it was not easy to decide by which name it should be called—was closed at the far end by a house of very different appearance from the others. It was as ugly and unimaginative in design as the others were unexpectedly pretty and rural. A narrow door, beside which was a narrow window, was surmounted on the first floor by two other windows

in the plain whitened wall, and the grey slate roof was pierced by one dormer window. The house, seen in the bright summer sunshine, had an appearance of disuse and neglect, which contrasted sharply with everything else within sight. Coming there with the expectations I had, it seemed to me that the house proclaimed of itself that it was a place of evil, sinister and abnormal.

To our surprise we found the door slightly ajar. That, in view of our intentions in coming there, caused us some misgiving; and for a moment Branders seemed to hesitate as to whether he would be justified in entering without further ceremony. But the reflection that we were hardly entitled to arrogate to ourselves the privileges of the police, and that even a police officer could not enter without a warrant, decided him to knock.

As his first knock received no answer, Branders knocked again. Then, after a decent interval, as we still received no answer, Branders pushed the door open cautiously, and we entered, closing the door to behind us. We found ourselves standing in a narrow, unfurnished hall, with a rickety wooden stair on the right, leading to the upper floor. Judging from the colour of the bare boards, those stairs could not have been washed down for years. Facing us was another door, leading to the room or rooms on the ground floor of this mysterious and apparently derelict dwelling.

Branders turned the handle of the door and

entered, I keeping close at his heels. The room in which we found ourselves was certainly not what I had expected—some sort of kitchen or living-room—; but I believe it did not come altogether as a surprise to Branders. It appeared to be half engineer's workshop, half chemical laboratory. Along the whole of one side there ran a bench, properly fitted for chemical work, with water taps, gas burners, a furnace, retorts, racks, test tubes, glass jars, and bottles containing chemicals of every colour. In the centre was a large table with various tools and pieces of machinery—things of which I understood nothing, even less than I did of the chemical outfit. But what I could assess, was the appearance of disorder and neglect visible in almost every detail. It was almost like a room in the house of those who have been long dead. It was, as I could see, Tambardine's experimental workshop, and the place which might supply the one missing link in Branders' carefully forged chain of proof.

Branders scarcely gave a glance at the objects on the centre table, but he moved down along the chemistry bench examining every jar and bottle. I saw him suddenly stiffen as his eye came to rest on a large colourless glass bottle. It was a bottle of unusual make, with a wide neck fitted with a glass stopper and cork band. Its original purpose may have been to contain pickles, or of course it may be a type of bottle known in the drug business; of that I cannot speak with certainty. When it attracted

Branders' attention it was standing a little out of line with the other bottles, as though it might have been moved since the place had last been tidied—and though there was much litter on the floor, and a heap of what could only be called dirt in one corner by the window, the bench itself and the table were comparatively tidy, as though someone at a not too remote period had made an effort of sorts to put things straight. It was as though the person who had used the room was concerned with the bench and table alone, and provided that they came up to his not too exacting standards, cared nothing for anything else.

But all that came to me on after reflection. At the time all my attention was concentrated on the bottle and on the effect it produced on Branders. It was apparently completely empty, and had stuck on it crookedly a printed label with the one word POISON in red. Branders lifted the bottle and holding it at different angles examined it against the light.

'Look at it,' he said to me. 'But for God's sake be careful. Don't touch the stopper.'

I took the bottle from his hand and peered through it, not knowing what to expect.

'It is empty,' I said, 'Absolutely empty.'

'What kind of liquid do you think it contained?'

It was in scarcely more than a whisper that Branders spoke, and instinctively I imitated his bated tones.

'There is no trace of colour,' I said. 'Or

of deposit. Pure water couldn't leave less signs of its presence behind.'

Branders had taken up a small pair of tongs from the bench—tongs like a rather large pair of scissors, with bent, flattened ends for grasping—and crossing to the corner near the window, where the rubbish was, came back with an object grasped in the tongs. It was a large spider, which his quick eye had observed, held gingerly by one leg. The creature worked and struggled in a vain endeavour to escape. I could see the silhouette of its long legs, opening and closing like a hand against the light, in the brief moment of Branders' transit across the window. Branders took the bottle in his left hand and carried it to the ledge by the window. Opening the catch of the casement he held the bottle just outside and cautiously lifted the stopper for the fraction of a second—it was almost like the click of a photographic shutter, so deft and swift was his manipulation—while he held the struggling insect within an inch of the rim of the neck.

Then he turned to me, his face pale with horror.

'See,' he said.

I felt my own face blanched with the sudden realisation of the full truth. *The spider was dead.*

'It is a gas?' I asked.

'*The* gas,' Branders replied. 'Let us come upstairs—but see that your revolver is ready. Else the fate of the spider may be yours. There

is no playing with the man whose brain devised and produced that.'

But as he spoke Branders' eye strayed out of the window and for the first time rested on what was outside. The surprise depicted in his face drew my own attention to the fact that the lane at the back, visible from this window, was part of the mews where the Cassiodore garage was situated. In other words, that mews and what may be called the red brick village, though entered from points far apart, really adjoined one another, separated only by this whitewashed house, which had not only windows on both sides but a door as well. The door on this side, as I had already observed, was heavily barred and bolted, and looked as though it were not often, if ever, used. But, however that might be, here was presented accidentally one more link between Tambardine the chemist and drug-dealer and Sir Gregory; if any were now needed, after Branders' terrible demonstration with the spider.

As we stood, lost in silent wonder at the strange new possibilities that were beginning to emerge from the fresh combinations of facts suggested by this discovery of contiguity between places hitherto regarded as remote, a noise behind us made us both start—my own sensation, I do not mind confessing, was a feeling of sick dread, impossible to describe—and before either of us had time to turn or to draw the revolver for which he instinctively felt, a harsh

voice, with something of amusement in it, allayed our fears.

'So you got here first, Mr. Noble? You are a man to make the official force ashamed of itself.'

We both stared in amazement at the stalwart, raw-boned figure of MacBee, whose features wore an unaccustomed expression of geniality and amusement.

'One of my men picked up Tambardine at the club and saw you follow him here last night,' he explained. 'I had an idea, Mr. Noble, that you wouldn't be very long about paying a daylight visit to this extremely interesting locality.'

'And I suppose you will insist on taking everything out of my hands now, MacBee?' There was more than a shade of regret in Brander's tone. 'I'm merely Miss Cassiodore's agent, I know, and you are the LAW; but I think you might let me be in at the death. I have never in my life been closer to a complete triumph. Another quarter of an hour, and I should have beaten you hollow.'

'There's going to be no death here, Mr. Noble—unless, maybe, it's the death of a theory. But what do you make of all this?'

He indicated the apparatus of all kinds crowded on bench and table.

'Tambardine's laboratory,' Branders replied curtly. I could see that he had not yet quite made out MacBee's intentions.

'But what did he *do* here, Mr. Noble?'

There seemed to be genuine perplexity in the question.

'He made the stuff that killed Sir Gregory.'

'God Almighty, no?'

'You hadn't guessed that it was Tambardine who killed him?'

'I *know* that it wasn't Tambardine, Mr. Noble.'

For a minute the three of us stood looking at one another in bewilderment. If we had heard aright, the ground appeared to have been cut away from under our feet, and the whole case plunged back into obscurity once more. And suddenly I became conscious of the stark, unlovely dead body of the spider lying on the corner of the table between us, a symbol of the horror which had overshadowed our minds five minutes earlier.

'I know that absolutely, Mr. Noble,' MacBee repeated with emphasis. 'It is impossible; for he was in France. He had been there for weeks. I don't mind telling you that our people have had their eyes on Tambardine for some considerable time past. You know quite a good bit about the drug ring yourself and will understand. These educated and respectable chaps are always the most difficult type to deal with. We heard about that row, when it occurred, between Tambardine, Savonier and a girl; and the question of drugs was somehow mixed up in that. I have never been able to get a satisfactory account of what did happen, except in a general way. But it got

the wind up Tambardine. He hopped across to France and lay low. I have had all his movements checked by the French police; and he has been staying continuously in France from the day after that row until four days ago, when he ventured back to London. I paid him a visit myself last week at his French hiding place—for I thought he might have some interesting information for me—and I believe it was that which emboldened him to return; for he saw that we had nothing really definite against him. But when he was followed to this place last night, like yourself I thought it was just as well to have a look round. But you went rather beyond your rights, Mr. Noble, in breaking the lock to get in. It's technically a very serious offence.'

'I break the lock, MacBee? I found the door open.'

The inspector looked from one to the other of us with an expression of aroused suspicion, which gradually changed to sullen anger and finally to something very like alarm. With a muttered curse he turned and went bounding up the rickety stairs, followed close at heel by Branders and myself, who had quickly grasped the disturbing significance of the forced entry—the fact that someone unknown had been there before us.

There were two doors on the first landing, both of them closed. MacBee opened that on the left and gave a brief look round inside. Looking over his shoulder I could see that it

was a bedroom, thick with dust, and evidently unoccupied for months. And there was a scurry of mice across the uncarpeted floor, seeking safety from our intrusion.

The door to the right was locked. MacBee tried it with his shoulder and then, stepping back a pace, hurled his whole weight against the lock, tearing the screws which secured it from their hold in the wood. Inside there was semi-darkness, and MacBee crossed to the window and flung the shutters open, letting in a flood of daylight.

It was a scantily furnished sitting room. In the centre was a small round table with a shabby cloth. A bookcase faced the window, and a writing bureau stood against one of the walls. Near the door a chair had been overturned; but what held our gaze was a huddled figure sunk in the depths of an old horsehair-covered armchair in the corner by the fireplace. The set, ghastly features and open, viewless eyes left no room for doubt as to the truth. We had come too late.

'By God, he's dead!' MacBee shouted. 'What in the . . . ?'

'Suicide,' Branders said quietly, 'He must have known that he was followed.'

'But why, man? Damn it all, it doesn't make any sense, does it? Why should he commit suicide?'

MacBee stood stooping over the body in the chair, slowly and systematically moving the brilliant spot of light from a pocket torch over

the distorted features and disordered clothing of the corpse. At length he clicked off the light and straightened himself.

'The hell of a queer suicide this, Noble,' he snarled, 'It's murder—deliberate murder.'

'Murder?'

'Yes, man. Look at his wrists. Look at his face all round his mouth. You'd say that wild cats had been at him. And look at his tie; it has been pulled so tight, that that alone would almost be enough to account for his death. But that corpse never died of asphyxiation—I *know*. It's murder, Noble; and with the same stuff that doped Sir Gregory.'

'I have a bottle of it downstairs.'

'You?'

Once again MacBee's eyes were narrowed to peering slits, with a suspicion which at another time I should have found priceless. For a moment he really did look as though he suspected Branders Noble of being the murderer.

'Yes, I believe so.'

Branders briefly told of his experiment with the spider.

'It has no colour and apparently no smell, but just one whiff and you are dead. Tambardine has died by his own invention, if not by his own hand.'

But MacBee was already half-way to the top of the stairs, and we were obliged to follow him, guessing his impatience.

'Where is it?' he asked, glaring round the laboratory.

I am sure that our faces, Branders' and mine, must have been a strange study at that moment; for the casement window stood open and the bottle which we had left on the ledge was no longer there.

. . . . . .

We found that the door which opened into the mews was not only barred and bolted, as I had already observed, but also locked. Branders and I had, then, to go round through the red brick village and the adjoining streets to get out into the Cassiodore mews. MacBee remained behind to complete his investigations with the assistance of two other plain-clothes officers, whom he had called in from where they had been lurking outside the door which had been broken in.

I have never at any time during my professional association with him seen Branders suffering from such agitation as he was at that moment. At every second step he took I was afraid that his emotions would overpower him and that he would fall down dead before me, or at least in a fit. I was filled with a horrible anxiety, although I did not dare to say anything.

In those circumstances it was almost an agreeable chance—because it broke the strained and artificial silence in which we were hurrying along—when, just as we were emerging from the red brick archway, we ran into Quiggle face to face. He was swinging along jauntily, flourishing a cane with a very warlike gesture.

'Hullo, Noble,' he shouted before we had quite got up to him, 'Have you run Tambardine to earth at last?'

Branders did not answer, but he stopped and stared at Quiggle with a vacant expression, almost as if he could not see him. It was a look as unlike Branders' usual penetrating glance as possible.

'What brought you here if it wasn't Tambardine?' Quiggle persisted.

'How long have you known that Tambardine had a place here?' Branders asked.

'Oh, for a long time. Eighteen months, say. Practically since he first came here'

'And why didn't you tell me?'

'You never asked me. How was I to know that you wanted to know? I don't believe you ever so much as mentioned the man to me, did you?'

'Well, there's ghoul-food for you down there now,' Branders said with a shudder of disgust. 'He's dead—murdered.'

'Tambardine? Tambardine murdered?'

The beady, rat-like eyes seemed to start out of the little man's head with sudden excitement.

'Yes. Poisoned like the other two. Mac Bee's there.'

'And where are you going?'

'To put my hand on the murderer—if I can.'

Quiggle hesitated a moment.

'May I come, too?' he asked. 'I can get the other details later.'

So Quiggle came round to the mews in our

company. I could see that this new sensation was causing him wild and characteristic excitement, an emotion bordering on jubilation; though he appeared to be trying to put some kind of check on its expression for Branders' sake, who was now seriously ill in appearance even to the most casual observation.

We entered the mews down a cobbled sloping causeway through an arch piercing a terrace of tall, rather shabby houses. We were walking slowly, Branders leaning on Quiggle's arm, who was nearer his height than myself.

We had only just come through the archway, when Gerald Savonier walked out of the Cassiodore garage and met us face to face.

Branders became suddenly alert.

'I thought you were still in the country, Savonier?'

Savonier raised his eyebrows at the tone in Branders' voice.

'I have just driven up,' he said curtly.

'How long ago?' Branders persisted.

'Why this catechism, Mr. Noble?'

'Never mind why. How long ago did you get here?'

Savonier looked at Quiggle and myself in wonder; but something in our expressions must have convinced him that there was some real justification for Branders' questioning.

'Rather more than two hours ago, I suppose.'

'That is to say a little after nine. Where have you been and what have you been doing ever since?'

'Really, Mr. Noble . . .'

'Mr. Savonier,' Branders interrupted him, 'there has been murder within a hundred paces of this spot within the last few hours, and I must insist upon having answers to my questions.'

Savonier paled and looked from one to the other of us.

'Certainly,' he said. 'In that case . . .'

'Well, where have you been?'

'We got here a little after nine o'clock . . .'

'We?'

'James Phrett, who was driving, and myself. We put the car in the garage, and I sent Phrett down to my club to pack a couple of suit cases for me and to bring them back here. I went down by the Central London to Bond Street to do some shopping. But I found that I had forgotten the shutter of my lens, which I was bringing to be repaired at a camera shop there, and came back here to fetch it. That is how I come to be here now.'

'And has Phrett been back?'

'Evidently not. The suitcases are not here.'

'Have you seen anyone in the mews since you came back?'

'Two ladies, and that old man down there with his dog.'

'And when did you last hear of Tambardine?'

'Of Tambardine, Mr. Noble? I have not seen or heard of that fellow for—for a long time now, I am glad to say.'

Watching him as he spoke, I could not doubt that he was telling the truth.

'I am glad to hear you say that, Savonier,' Branders said gravely. 'Tambardine has just been murdered—and in the same way as Sir Gregory.'

Savonier did not speak, but his face became ashen.

'You understand,' Branders continued, 'why I had to question you? The most dangerous man in Europe is somewhere here quite close to us—a man who carries death with him in the breath of his presence.'

As he spoke Branders became suddenly paler, and would have fallen had not Quiggle caught him. Savonier, putting everything else aside, made us the offer of his car, and drove us back himself to Branders' flat. Quiggle, too, came with us; and at the time, in spite of my dislike for the man, I was not sorry, as he was apparently a much more efficient nurse than myself. Savonier parted from us at the door, driving away in the car, and Quiggle came upstairs at my invitation.

CHAPTER XI

THE THEORY OF ALGERNON SEPTIMUS QUIGGLE

AFTER a rather stiff glass of brandy and some light lunch, Branders so far recovered his strength as to be with difficulty restrained from going out to renew his investigations on the spot. Fortunately Quiggle's presence acted as a brake, or as a counter-attraction, for the little rat-like man was in the mood to talk, and kept raising fresh points and drawing Branders into the most controversial topics.

'Look here, Noble,' he said, after the two had been fencing for a considerable time, 'if you will lay all your cards on the table, I will lay all mine. We are the two men in London who know most about this crime—you the greatest investigator, and I the greatest reporter. Neither has as yet solved the problem single-handed, but who knows if we might not succeed if we clubbed resources?'

As he spoke Quiggle ruled parallel lines across a pile of ashes in the ash-tray with the long, tapering point of his finger-nail. The action suggested the image of literal rooting in garbage, and was very horrible to watch; not so much because of its uncleanness, as on account of the subhuman quality of Quiggle's nails. It was perplexing to find a man so

intelligent with so much of the animal about him.

'But I have had no secrets, whatever you may have had,' Branders said rather disingenuously.

'No secrets, Noble? Then tell me who it is that you suspect now—now that Tambardine is out of it?'

Branders remained sunk in thought for a long time.

'I daresay you will think me an ass, Quiggle,' he said at last, 'but I suspect James Phrett. I have suspected him from the beginning, but I have never been able to get the bits to fit.'

'You surprise me, Noble.'

'Yes, I knew I should. There is no apparent motive. Why should Phrett—a singularly quiet, respectable, sober man—suddenly run amuck and do this sort of thing?'

'Now you surprise me more than ever. What I meant was that I was surprised that you had any difficulty at all in making out a case against Phrett. I have made up my mind long ago that he is our man. The events of this morning confirm our surmise. The only difficulty is to catch him red-handed.'

'You are a wonderful fellow, Quiggle. Seriously, you know—I knew that you can write up a case in the most approved style of popular sensationalism, and all that—but I shouldn't before this have given you credit for being able to penetrate to the heart of a mystery like this. And yet you appear to

have been on the spot all along in this case. You knew more about what had happened on the first morning than anyone else did, and you appear to know more still. Let me hear your idea of how this man Phrett could have gone to work to produce the results we know.'

'Then I shall have to bring you back to more than two years ago,' Quiggle began, 'to the time when you were after the drug ring, and made the startling discovery that the stuff was coming in disguised as diplomacy. You made a statement to the authorities and dropped out of the affair at that point; and the authorities, after taking some time to think about it, arrested Dr. Muggeh and made a mess of the whole business. Your work appeared to have been thrown away.

'But I didn't drop out when you did. I made friends among some of the "poppy-heads," and got one or two old gaol-birds to do a little investigating for me—strictly between ourselves, by stealing certain papers which contained some very curious information—and in the end I learned the following unexpected facts, among others.

'That one of the larger powers in the Middle East—I am not out to violate the Official Secrets Act, so I shan't say which power, though I daresay you can guess—was so perturbed by certain of the activities of our mystery man, Sir Gregory, that it kept a special secret agent in England, whose sole object was to watch him and counteract his policies. That

agent was an American lady called Mrs. Roberta Fimms. Both Sir Gregory and the Government knew of the reason for her being in England; but as they believed that she did not know that they knew, they judged it best to leave her unmolested. It did not seem very difficult to keep an adequate watch on her. It is convenient to know who the other fellow's spies are. But they did not suspect—and I believe I was the first to discover—that James Phrett, Sir Gregory's chauffeur and valet, was one of Mrs. Fimms's agents.'

'Can you prove that?' Branders asked.

'Not in a court of law. But I know it. Mrs. Fimms had also placed several agents to watch Savonier. She thought he would be easy to get information out of when he was in wine. Of course, she, in her turn, was very carefully watched by the other side, though I don't think she knew that.

'But you must bear in mind that these secret agents were all the crookedest of the crooked—political spies are the worst type of crooks, in my experience of them. Half of this crowd I am telling you about spent the greater part of their time in peddling drugs. The stuff was actually brought into the country in many instances in official despatch-boxes under the diplomatic seal. After your brilliant investigation the Government were fully aware of that, but for reasons of high policy they apparently did not wish to risk a breach with the offending power.

'Phrett wasn't particularly involved in any of that, except that he had opportunities of finding out about other people; and among the rest he came to know all about both Muggeh and Tambardine. Both men were absolutely in his power; for he knew about their illegal activities without their knowing about his real position; and he levied blackmail on them, bleeding them at his pleasure. But you mustn't suppose that Phrett was laying up riches. On the contrary, he himself was being bled, by the charming specimen of humanity who told me about him, among others. It must have been in that way that Phrett extracted this appalling poison gas from Tambardine. I fancy Tambardine, driven beyond endurance, turning on Phrett and threatening to wipe him out as a vermin unworthy of existence. That would be how Phrett would learn Tambardine's dreadful secret. For in Tambardine's eyes it would be a dreadful secret. Tambardine was a man of liberal and humane sentiment. He was neither a lunatic nor a criminal. He was a genius of dissipated habits. He had a private income, and only worked in his laboratory to please himself. He was a man with many inventions to his credit. But he never did anything really big, because, once out of his workshop, he was for ever running after women. I don't mean just that he was susceptible, or an ordinary loose liver. The man was insatiable, a net which gathered fish of every kind, and he was prepared to spend his last penny and every

moment of his time to gratify a whim when the mood took him. And when women palled, as they would at times, he would seek new sensations by experimenting with strange narcotic drugs. Tambardine was the centre of the strangest drug group in the country; he was more—he was their man of genius, who could compel exotic plants to give up their secrets. Tambardine was all that and more; but he wasn't a criminal. He was, if anything, a humanitarian; and I know from a conversation I once had with him about poison gas in general, that his most probable reason for keeping this fearful invention secret must have been the fear that it might come to be used in warfare. You can judge, then, how strong must have been Phrett's hold on him to compel him to hand over this stuff.'

'Unless Phrett stole it?' Branders suggested.

'I don't think he did that. But I shall return to that point later. That, as I conceive it, was the state of affairs when Miss Mellisont came on the scene. Miss Mellisont began to appear at certain clubs and to be a frequent visitor at Mrs. Fimms's house. To the world at large Miss Mellisont was just a young woman who was running, and making a success of, a West-End decorating business. She also designed furniture. I have looked into all that, and I have no doubt about the genuineness of those businesses. It was quite enough, with plenty of dancing and other social diversions, to fill one young woman's life. But for some

reason or other, half the poppy-heads and peddlers in the circles I have been describing believed that Miss Mellisont was also a secret agent, a spy like themselves, but in the employ of the police and the Government, intent on hunting down the illegal traffickers. I don't know what she could have done to create that impression, but you know how hopelessly panicky and illogical that kind of people are. She terrified them to such an extent that even a man of some breeding and education like Tambardine insulted her in public. But some other member of the crowd did a much smarter thing than that; for he wrote to Sir Gregory to tell him that a girl spy of Mrs. Fimms's was trying to vamp Savonier. That false information led to the trouble between Sir Gregory and Savonier, and finally to Sir Gregory's visit to Mrs. Fimms.

'It was the first time that those two had ever met. I expect that Sir Gregory told the lady that he had known all along who she was, and that if she did not call the Mellisont girl away from Savonier her own period of toleration in this country would be ended. I also judge that Mrs. Fimms gave way and in some way or other persuaded Miss Mellisont to go away, for no one seems to have heard of her since. She has disappeared since the day after Sir Gregory's death. Mrs. Fimms may have sent the order or request that she was to go before she heard of Sir Gregory's death—or it may just possibly have been the letter Sir Gregory himself posted

on his way back from seeing Mrs. Fimms, may it not ? '

Quiggle paused and looked from one to the other of us to see the effect his tale was producing ; but Branders sat impassive, with sphinx-like features, and I was still too much in the dark to 'register' any emotion other than surprise.

'We are now in a position to consider Phrett,' he resumed. 'Phrett had no desire to kill Sir Gregory. Sir Gregory was a source of double income to him, that which he received as wages, and the money he received for spying. But Phrett already had the poison and had been experimenting with it. I have talked to several expert chemists and doctors who are of opinion that this poison is one which acts upon the heart—simply paralyses its motion. If that is so, the effect of a very weak dose indeed would be merely to bring on a heart attack. And I believe that Phrett had invented an apparatus for doing that.

'He had obtained one of those ghastly looking contrivances for administering anæsthetics. You know the thing, a sort of reservoir, an inflatable bag, a foot pump, a tube and a mask. The mask he took off, leaving a plain nozzle at the end of the tube. He carried the tube back under the rugs of the car till the nozzle was just under one of the seats, and the main apparatus was placed under his own driver's seat. You must remember that a contrivance of that kind was possible in that

car owing to its peculiar construction. I have taken an opportunity to examine the car, and it is singularly airtight. So that any person riding in it would, in fact, be in a most effective lethal chamber, if poison were to be pumped in in the way I suggest. But Phrett's desire was simply to make his passenger faint, in order that he might search his pockets for papers. One volume of poison gas to many volumes of air, would be the sort of mixture he would use.

'I believe that Phrett had already tried his poison gas successfully on Savonier, on that night when Savonier quarrelled with Tambardine at the club. It was not wine or the blow on his head which made Savonier faint, but the deadly gas pumped in on him by Phrett. I don't know whether Phrett took any papers on that occasion; but I do know that he took the gold cigarette-case, though I can't say why —unless his plans are much longer-headed than I give him credit for.

'That is how things stood before the fatal Sunday evening. Phrett, who of course knew who Mrs. Fimms was—seeing that she was his real employer—, did not know what it could be which was bringing Sir Gregory to see her. Curiosity overcame discretion, and to solve the mystery he tried the apparatus on Sir Gregory with fatal results—though, of course, his action may have been prompted by self-interest rather than curiosity; for he may have feared that this unwonted visit might in some way jeopar-

dize his own position with Sir Gregory. At any rate, somewhere between Reigate and the fringe of London, on that Sunday evening, Phrett found himself with a corpse he had killed and the necessity of disposing of it.

'James Phrett, we must admit, is a great and remarkable man, even if a criminal; if to have resource, courage and invention in the highest degree constitutes greatness, as I think it does. Where an ordinary man would have been paralysed with fear, Phrett had all the alert powers of his mind braced to make an extraordinary effort to save his neck.

'At that moment there were, I suppose, three courses open to him. He could get rid in some apparently safe way of the incriminating apparatus and drive straight home, to discover his employer sitting dead in the car when he opened the door for him to alight. That method would be ruled out by the risk of someone stumbling on the apparatus, however it were hid, and by the uncertainty Phrett must have felt as to the disclosures which might be made by a post-mortem examination.

'The second possible course would be the act of a silly fool—to hide the body somewhere in the country, where it would not easily be found, and to flee the country before the alarm had been raised.

'The third course was a master-stroke of a great chess player, as far-sighted as it was daring in conception and consummate in execution. I am unable to withold my admiration

for the quality of mind displayed in what I believe is the most finished crime in history. Faced with so grave and so unexpected a crisis, Phrett remembered that curious corner of Rutland Square, and drove straight there with the body still sitting in its place in the car. Phrett had a key of Dr. Muggeh's house . . .'

'You *know* that?' Branders interrupted.

'Yes, there was proof of it in the blackmailer's papers I spoke of, which came into my possession. Phrett had a hold on Muggeh and could do what he liked with him.'

'You knew all this of course on the morning after the murder?'

'That is so.'

'And when you were talking to me about Muggeh, you realized that he had a very intimate connection with Phrett?'

'I suppose I did; but I hadn't thought the case out then."

'No; but you haven't made any statement to the police since?'

'I didn't see why I should.'

'Very well. Continue, please,' Branders sighed.

'Phrett got the body out of the car and up the steps unobserved—it was then after eleven, and as you know, hardly anyone lives in that corner of the square—and got it into the house. He then brought the car round to Surreyview Mansions, and then back to the garage; and returning to the Mansions on foot he proceeded to build up a body of evidence that Sir Gregory

had returned from his visit. He opened and filed certain telegrams, using Sir Gregory's keys which he afterwards replaced on the body. He rang up Mr. Mixon, imitating Sir Gregory's voice well enough to deceive the porter. I believe that Phrett must have known that Mr. Mixon would not be in. He arranged the coat in the bedroom. He went into his own room and made various noises to let Mrs. Braid know that he was there, if she was awake—as in fact she was. Then he slipped out again, using the back exit, and brought Sir Gregory's body out of Dr .Muggeh's house, and down the steps, and began to prop it up against the railings. It was just then that Muriel Hatterleigh came round the corner, and thinking that someone was ill walked straight up to offer help like the fearless girl she was. Phrett must have had a handkerchief or something with him impregnated with the poison. He held it to her mouth. Then he placed her body beside the other, and went home and to bed.'

'That is an extraordinary, an amazing, a terrifying story, Quiggle,—if it can be proved.'

'But did you not say that you yourself suspected Phrett?'

'I did—materially, but hardly morally. What I mean is, that many circumstances tended to bring him under suspicion; and yet he had not the atmosphere of a murderer when I examined him.'

'Has a murderer an atmosphere?' Quiggle

smirked with superiority as he asked the question.

'I believe a murderer has.'

'But I thought that, according to you, Noble, we were all potential murderers?'

'So we are, and as such have no special atmosphere; but once the murder has been committed, we grow one.'

'One which can be recognized?'

'I think, provided I suspect a man, that I can be morally certain about that sort of thing.'

'Well, I think you are wrong,' Quiggle asserted dogmatically. 'I am sure it is not so easy to recognize a murderer when one meets him—else what are we doing here groping for a solution of this mystery? But what, apart from his "atmosphere" and the apparent lack of motive, was it which put you off suspecting Phrett?'

'It was the nice completeness of his explanations. I could not catch him out in one detail. Take the overcoat, for example. I suspected that there might have been a trick of some sort about that; but the porter at the Mansions bore out Phrett's statement. Sir Gregory certainly had worn that light overcoat.'

'You are convinced of Phrett's guilt now?'

'In view of what happened this morning it looks as though I shall have to be. Tambardine, you say, was no criminal; but his poison gas had either been stolen or extorted from him by Phrett. Why extorted?'

'I said that I'd come to that. Consider

Tambardine's position after the murder. He would read all about it in the papers where he was, over in France; and would of course understand all about it—what the weapon was and whose hand it was that wielded it. I believe from what I know of the man that, if the stuff had been stolen, he would have gone straight to the police and given them all the information he possessed. But he did not take that course, because he was restrained by his fear of Phrett. You cannot tell what secrets Phrett possessed. Some of the people Tambardine associated with were very influential and rich, but you can fancy their morals. Tambardine may have been concerned in sheltering other people. But in any case Phrett could have made England an impossible place for Tambardine, even if Tambardine were to send Phrett to the gallows. Tambardine hesitated and temporized, and at length returned to England. But as soon as Phrett learned that he was back—and that may have been only this morning; for how could he know about it if he has been stopping in the country with Savonier?—he determined to remove him as, so far as Phrett knew, the only person who might suspect his guilt.'

'And he has now got possession of another bottle of the stuff!' said Branders. 'Let's hope the recipe has perished with its inventor.'

'Branders,' I said, suddenly remembering something. 'Will you tell me about that dog now?"

'The dog was a fretful, sharp-voiced little beast, tied up at the back entrance to the Mansions. Could anyone get by that dog without being certain to disturb someone? In other words, could Phrett get in and out that way? I noticed that the box in which the dog slept had been used for packing motor accessories. I went round and asked the porter, and learned that the dog had been presented to him by Phrett after the death of his previous dog from poison. That is, Phrett may have arranged, by removing the former dog and presenting this one, that he could go in and out at any time he wished. It would account for no one having seen him if he did go in and out about one o'clock that night.'

'I spotted the dog, too,' Quiggle cried. 'How nice to be so entirely in agreement!'

The man was positively sniggering, loathsome in his levity.

'Well,' said Branders, leering back at Quiggle, 'what do you propose to do about the reconstruction of the crime? Place it in the hands of MacBee? You are the person, Quiggle, who holds the essential proofs of this—the papers you mention—if on examination they prove sound. The rest is merely extremely ingenious manipulation of circumstantial detail. Yes, and imaginative construction of a high order. The responsibility is yours to decide what should be done.'

'I hadn't thought of that.'

'But, man, this fellow has got more of the poison. He will be killing someone else.'

'I don't see any motive for that.'

'I daresay that in advance you might not have seen the motive in the case of Tambardine either. And you must clearly have entertained practical moral certainty about Phrett before this last murder. I don't see why you didn't speak. If the papers you hold are what you say, they contain adequate proof of character and motive, to lend weight to circumstantial evidence largely of a conjectural kind. To be quite frank with you, I shouldn't care to be in your position.'

'I don't suppose I can have a social conscience, Noble. I am interested in the matter from a purely æsthetic point of view, in the development of the most amazing murder case I have ever heard of. I should have thought that you of all men would have understood the feelings of the specialist. But, of course, you think of social vengeance first—I of the news value of a particular series of events. Oh, I confess that I am quite non-moral in these matters. I am a Nietzschean, and look to the superman—even to the super-criminal. It is a creed as well as another. And are we not supermen ourselves, super-detective and super-gossip?'

His face was distorted in a horrible rictus of vanity and cynicism.

'It seems to me,' Branders said caustically, 'that your pose of looking at crime from a

purely intellectual or æsthetic point of view and without emotional reaction . . .'

'Is wholly scientific?' Quiggle suggested with impudent aplomb.

'I think I told you the first time we talked about this case what I thought of that sort of attitude. In the meanwhile, will you leave everything in my hands now?'

But the only answer Quiggle vouchsafed to that was a sulky:

'I object very strongly to your attempting anything precipitate, Noble.'

Chapter XII

ALARMS AND EXCURSIONS

I CANNOT conjecture how events would have shaped had Branders been in normal health. I am sure that the final act of the Cassiodore drama would not have been, as it was, postponed for yet another three weeks; and it would, too, in all probability have had a different, and perhaps a less sensational, termination. The last scene of all might have been played out with wigs and scarlet in the stern atmosphere of the Old Bailey. But it was to be otherwise.

Branders lay in bed, tossing and fevered and unable to concentrate. Jonson, his devoted

valet and occasional clerk, and myself did what we could for him in the way of tendance, for we were the only nurses he would tolerate. It was characteristic of Branders' misogyny that women were even less to his taste as sick-room attendants than in any other capacity.

For days, then, the Cassiodore case was not mentioned by that bedside, where perhaps the only brain in England capable of unravelling all its complexities lay racked by pain, from which the most potent drugs known to medical science gave but partial and temporary relief. It is, I have observed, very often the purgatory of temperaments such as Branders', that they are delivered over by nature, bound hand and foot as it were, to the twin scourges of insomnia and neuralgia.

Outside Branders' room, of course, it was very different. I could not anywhere escape from the topic with which all England and the world was ringing, and I was, of course, as Branders' next representative, pestered by the inquisitive. The 'revelations,' as Quiggle called them in his highly coloured descriptive writing, which were made at the inquest on Tambardine —the maker of the terrible gas whose secret seemed to have perished with him, and himself its victim at the hands of an unknown assassin —were in themselves enough to provide a sensation of no ordinary magnitude. But as a sequel to the Cassiodore case their effect was overwhelming. In those days I believe that people literally went mad with fear. Stories

were circulated—and what is more, were believed— that a band of scientific thugs were at large in London, slaying with an invisible form of death—themselves almost invisible, so skilful and so diabolically cunning were they. And people who died quietly in their beds, of well established heart disease of long standing, were popularly supposed to be fresh victims of the Invisible Slayers. While the panic lasted it was in vain to argue or to point to facts which entirely negatived the popular hypothesis.

The true facts, however, were never for one moment in doubt. Some person—Phrett, as I was now fully convinced—had killed Sir Gregory for what, doubtless, seemed to him good and sufficient reasons; and had then killed, first Muriel Hatterleigh to remove a witness, and secondly Joseph Tambardine, the inventor of the gas and the only person in the secret of the murderer's identity. However horrible, the murderer's choice of victims was entirely logical and utilitarian,—the exact antithesis of everything thuggish and merely bloodthirsty after the fashion of Jack the Ripper, to whom the Unknown was compared in many quarters. But what astonished me above everything, was that the chief instigator and choregus of this demoralization of the public mind was A.S.Q. of *The Flare*, the very man whose astonishing insight and cogent logic had forced Branders, against his previous decision, to see in Phrett the murderer of Sir Gregory. That men of Quiggle's type will write what takes the public

fancy rather than what they themselves believe, was already known to me. But, in the circumstances, I found Quiggle's lack of social conscience more than surprising; it was indecent to a degree far beyond anything of which I had had previous experience. It was almost incomprehensible how a man of education, intelligence and ability, as Quiggle undoubtedly was, could regard a series of crimes, which had already involved three human lives, as merely artistic material, and that of the lowest kind—just matter for sensationalism pure and simple. In those days I found A.S.Q. and his journalistic methods horribly ghoulish.

One step I took myself on my own initiative, with unexpected results. Branders was much too ill to be consulted; but in view of Quiggle's revelations I could not see my way to accepting the responsibility of allowing Savonier and Miss Cassiodore to go on employing Phrett in ignorance of the suspicions, to use no stronger term, which had accumulated round him. I accordingly wrote to Savonier, putting him in possession of the bare facts which had led Quiggle to the conclusion of Phrett's guilt. I stated at the end of my letter that, as one of the two people who had solved the riddle, and the one who alone was in possession of most of the proofs, was unwilling to take public action against Phrett, and as Branders was too unwell to be taken into counsel, I did not intend at present to communicate with the police. That,

though I did not say so to Savonier, was largely because I doubted MacBee's willingness to accept so many inferences and so conjectural a reconstruction on the authority of his rival, Branders Noble.

Savonier rang me up next morning.

'What fool has been getting at you chaps?' he asked indignantly.

'Eh?' I said, taken aback.

'I say, what fool has been getting at you? You don't expect me to believe this fairy-tale about Phrett, do you?'

'Branders Noble believes it, and so does Algernon Quiggle, the A.S.Q. of *The Daily Flare*. I'm very much afraid it's something much more substantial than a fairy-tale.'

'Look here, Campling', Savonier said, 'which do you or I know Phrett best? And besides, too, the surrounding circumstances, as sketched, are positively fantastic. I know this world of intrigue—the real world of secret agents, not the melodramatic one of Mr. Quiggle's fancyings—and I know that what is suggested in this fairy-tale about the relations of the principal people concerned is just sheer nonsense. Besides, too, this fellow doesn't believe his own ravings. I have just been reading his last article in *The Flare*, and there he is developing a totally different and, as far as I can see, equally silly theory.'

'Branders has suspected Phrett all along,' I said, wishing to impress him.

'What! Suspected Phrett? Why, man

alive, he tried to force down my throat that Tambardine was the murderer ! '

' That was only because Phrett appeared to have a watertight alibi. Tambardine was a sort of second favourite. And remember, too, that much of the suspicion of Tambardine was justified—it was Tambardine who made the gas.'

' Well, I don't believe one word of what is suggested about Phrett.'

' You will at least do well, for your own sake and Miss Cassiodore's, to be careful and on your guard.'

What else could I have said to him ? Savonier insisted on being guided by his own perceptions—I can't say if he dignified them with the name of intuitions. But, however little worthy of regard I considered Quiggle's character, I felt that his experience, knowledge and acuteness—even if these had not been backed by the reluctant consent of Branders—were safer guides than Savonier's impetuous refusal to believe anything other than what he wished.

So things stood when Branders began to show signs of amendment. As soon as he felt strong enough to dress and to sit up in his room in a chair drawn up to the window, whence he could watch the comings and goings in the street and exercise his gift of analysis in the interpretation of many a little comedy of the pavements, he began to talk about the case.

' What are we to do about Phrett ? ' I asked. ' I thought it my duty while you were ill to

warn Savonier. I gave him the main outlines. But he only laughed at me. He is absolutely confident that Phrett is innocent.'

'Well,' asked Branders unexpectedly, 'What, after all, is the evidence against Phrett? *Evidence,* I say. Quiggle has worked out a marvellously ingenious possibility. So far, so good. But Phrett doesn't seem to me the least bit like a murderer.'

'Quiggle doesn't seem to believe his own theory,' I said, and showed Branders some numbers of *The Flare.* 'The man is a riddle.'

Branders read the articles and flung the papers on the floor. Then for a time he was sunk in gloomy thought, frowning horribly.

'What did Savonier say?' he asked suddenly.

I repeated, as I have set it down here, the conversation I had had with Savonier over the phone.

'He was quite in earnest,' I added.

For a long time Branders sat silent, apparently weighing rival theories.

'You are a man who understands women, aren't you?' he asked suddenly.

Now to a man with any natural modesty or diffidence that is always an embarrassing question.

'Well,' I said, evading the point, 'I have met a great many different sorts.'

'It is not the ones you have met, but those you have parted from, who count for knowledge,' he said cynically.

'There have been partings, too,' I said.

'Excellent man! Well, in that case I want you to run over to Holland for me—to see Mrs. Fimms. And what was it Ulysses employed as a counter-charm to the sirens?'

'I believe it was ropes.'

'You had better take a rope with you, then. But don't do anything rash, old man. We have never had a felo de se in this family.'

It was a delicate mission, as Branders explained it to me; but as the result clearly involved questions of justice of the highest importance—and the fate, it might be, of James Phrett, one way or the other—I felt that I must at least attempt what Branders desired, however incompetent I admitted myself for the sort of diplomacy needed.

Accordingly, two days later, Branders being by then considerably advanced on the road towards convalescence, I left for Holland via Harwich and the Hook, to hunt up Mrs. Fimms, now, like another even more notorious person, an exile in the neighbourhood of Doorn. But there were difficulties I had not foreseen. The lady was away, and having first consulted Branders by telegram, I had to set out across Europe to follow her to Warsaw.

I returned home six days after I had left, to find Branders almost completely recovered and full of new energy and new enthusiasm for the case.

'Before you tell me about the adorable Mrs. Fimms,' he said, 'I must tell you that I tackled Quiggle a few days ago about those articles of

his, with the result that he has just made a statement to MacBee.'

'Phew!' I said. 'So that everything may be taken out of our hands now?'

'Not only may, but certainly will be, if MacBee believes that there is one word of truth in Quiggle's proposed reconstruction of the crime. But is there?'

'How on earth could I say, Branders?'

'Well, what's your alternative? Someone killed these three people.'

I shook my head, having nothing to suggest.

'What did your fair charmer in Poland say?'

'She *is* a most charming person,' I began enthusiastically, but Branders stopped me by catching hold of my elbow and beginning to turn me round slowly.

'There are no rope marks,' he said in a tone of relief; 'at any rate not on the neck.'

'You ass!' I said, 'The woman's sixty if she is a day.'

'What did she say, then?'

'Yes and no.'

'How very distressing for your feelings!'

'Branders,' I said, 'Do you want to hear what I have learned, or do you not?'

'Of course I do. Go straight ahead, old man.'

'She wasn't a bit offended when I told her why I had come to her. She admitted quite frankly, now that it was a thing of the past, what had been the true nature of her position in England. She *was* posted there to watch Sir Gregory, and she *did* employ agents of the

sort described by Quiggle. So far, yes. But she denies that Phrett was an agent of hers, or as far as she knows an agent of anybody's; she simply laughs at the idea. She also denies that Phœbe Mellisont was acting as secret agent for anyone. Phœbe was just a social acquaintance. But it is correct that Sir Gregory mistakenly thought that Phœbe was a spy. He went down to see Mrs. Fimms on that last evening of his life and delivered a sort of ultimatum, that he would have Mrs. Fimms expelled from England unless she saw that Phœbe ceased to frequent the circles in which she met Savonier. Mrs. Fimms found herself in a horrible dilemma; for she knew that what Sir Gregory fancied was a pure delusion, and that she herself had no authority to compel Miss Mellisont to do anything; and at the same time she knew equally well that Sir Gregory's was no idle threat—he could and would have her expelled; and from her point of view that would be disastrous every way. Mrs. Fimms, then, decided to gain time if she could, promising to call Miss Mellisont off, and hoping against hope that she would be able to find some expedient to persuade the girl to keep out of the way. As it was, luck favoured the lady, and Mrs. Fimms had no difficulty in persuading Phœbe to take the course desired. As soon as Sir Gregory had left her on that Sunday evening, Mrs. Fimms got into telephonic communication with Miss Mellisont at Hampstead, and asked her if she would be prepared to go over to Paris at once

and place herself for a time wholly at the disposal of some wealthy American friends of Mrs. Fimms's, who were taking and furnishing a house near Paris. Miss Mellisont could name her own terms for the contract. Phœbe, apparently an adventurous girl, had agreed; and luck favoured Mrs. Fimms a second time, in that her American friends, whom she had not previously consulted, willingly accepted her suggestion to have their decorations and furnishing carried out by a "well-known West-End expert." So, when there was no longer any need of it, Phœbe has been eliminated as Sir Gregory wished. She is still buried up to her eyes in work in Paris. Mrs. Fimms hinted that some little misunderstanding with Savonier, as a result of the row at the club, partly accounted for Miss Mellisont's willingness to disappear so completely from her usual haunts.'

'And you believed Mrs. Fimms when she denied that Phrett was an agent of hers?'

'I believe she was perfectly frank with me.'

'Yes. She didn't deny that she had employed spies. That is in her favour as a person worthy of credit. But she denied that Phrett and Phœbe were spies. That might be out of loyalty to them, mightn't it?'

'I suppose it might.'

'But you don't think it was?'

'I thought she was genuinely surprised by Quiggle's version of events.'

'But all women are born actresses—what?'

'I think they *can* be honest.'

'Umph.'

'So you are still in doubt?' I asked, disappointed that my mission had been productive of no more certain result.

'As you said,' Branders drawled sarcastically, showing his long, unpleasant teeth; 'yes—and no.'

CHAPTER XIII

AN ARREST AT LAST

I HAD run down to Scotland Yard the day after my return from abroad to make some inquiries of Inspector Keames in connexion with another case on which Branders was working. I had found Keames in his office, and he had readily consented to supply me with the information I required. After the business was settled I stayed on chatting for a few minutes.

'It is my belief,' Keames said, 'now that Tambardine has been removed, that we shall never know the whole truth about the Cassiodore case. What's your own view, Mr. Campling? Do you suspect anyone?'

'I do and I don't,' I said. 'That man Quiggle of *The Flare* has an astonishing theory. It seems perfectly sound, credible and self-consistent—and yet no one who has heard it

feels any real moral confidence in it. I can't tell you about it because you are police : it would be equivalent to laying an information, if that has not been done already—and I am not sure of the suspect's guilt. I can't take the risk of hanging an innocent man ; and it would be a case of hanging, if MacBee were once convinced of the truth of what Quiggle declares.'

To my surprise Keames indulged in a lengthy whistle.

' Quiggle ! ' he said, ' The *Flare* man. That accounts for it. I saw him closeted here with MacBee yesterday ; and I believe from MacBee's manner that he is contemplating a great coup of some kind. I am afraid, Mr. Campling, that your innocent man is very likely to be hanged.'

' I didn't say he was innocent, Inspector. I said I couldn't take the responsibility of deciding.'

' That will be taken by the judge and jury, Mr. Campling. Our legal system does make mistakes at times, but it makes them in good faith. What you have said has made me very curious, Mr. Campling.'

Inspector Keames had not to nurse his curiosity for long. He came down with me to the door, and we were just shaking hands when a taxi drew up, out of which got, first Chief-Inspector MacBee, and then three other men who hurried into the building in a way which told me that they were two officers and a prisoner, though I didn't otherwise notice them.

'Well, Mr. Campling,' MacBee said amicably, 'I believe our search is at an end at last.'

'Indeed?' I said.

'Yes. I have just executed a warrant. I have the slayer of Sir Gregory and of Tambardine upstairs.'

'You mean . . .?'

'The chauffeur, James Phrett.'

'James Phrett?' It was Keames whose exclamation echoed MacBee's statement. 'But he's not the stuff thugs are made of!'

'Well, come upstairs and hear the evidence,' MacBee said carelessly. 'And you, too, Mr. Campling—if you feel interested.'

I said that I should be greatly interested, and we followed MacBee up to the room where, two months previously, Savonier had made his statement. Mr. Moonroyd recognized me and looked, I thought, rather surprised; but a whispered word from MacBee satisfied him as to the reason of my presence.

We had not been seated for more than a few minutes when Phrett was brought in by the two officers. He was handcuffed and very pale, but otherwise his cool, collected self. Looking at him brought me an immediate and intense conviction of his innocence, and there had been no moment, since I first heard the theory of his guilt, that I had believed it less than when I saw him a prisoner.

Mr. Moonroyd, playing with his paper-knife, examined Phrett with attention; observing, I

have no doubt, that Phrett did not quail under the scrutiny .

'James Phrett,' he began, 'the warrant on which you have been arrested has been read over to you ? '

'Yes, sir.'

'And do you wish to make any statement to me ? Understand that you are under no obligation at all to do so, unless you wish. You are entitled to consult a lawyer first. But if you make any statement, what you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you.'

Mr. Moonroyd spoke wearily as he repeated the formula.

'Yes, sir, I understand. But I wish to make a statement. I am innocent of all the charges mentioned in the warrant.'

Mr. Moonroyd and MacBee had a long whispered conversation at this point, as the result of which Mr. Moonroyd said :

'The inspector wishes to ask you some questions.'

'James Phrett,' MacBee began, 'can you give me an exact account of everything you did on the day of Tambardine's murder ? '

'Certainly, Inspector. I rose at six-thirty, as Mr. Savonier had told me the previous evening that he wanted me to drive him up to town early in the morning . . . . . '

'Where were you, then ? ' Mr. Moonroyd asked.

'At Midhurst, sir. We left in the car immediately after an early breakfast and reached

the garage—Sir Gregory's garage, that is—at a little after nine o'clock. I put the car in, and Mr. Savonier gave me directions to go to his club in Sloane Street and pack a number of things for him in his room there. I was to bring the suitcases to the garage. The rest of the day I could have off. But I was to report again in the evening to drive Mr. Savonier back to Midhurst.'

'And you carried out that programme? MacBee asked.

'Not quite in that order.'

'Oh, which part of it did you alter, then?'

'The earlier part—as to what I was to do before lunch.'

'What did you actually do?'

'Mr. Savonier, after telling me what he wanted, took some things of his from the car and said good-morning. I put things straight and locked up. I can't have been a minute doing it; for when I left the garage I saw Mr. Savonier just disappearing through the archway which led to the street. I followed in the same direction, but just as I was stepping out into Rutland Street I met Inspector Keames here.'

Both Mr. Moonroyd and MacBee started and looked at Keames, who nodded.

'Yes, that is so,' he said.

'Did you also see Mr. Savonier, Keames?' MacBee asked sharply.

'I did. We nodded good-morning to one another.'

'Well, go on, Phrett,' MacBee said, turning to

the prisoner again. 'What did you do after you left Inspector Keames?'

'The inspector stopped me and we got into conversation. He explained to me that he was on the track of a gang which might be responsible for Sir Gregory's death—drug-dealers, I believe they were. He had got hold of the idea, he said, from one of Mr. Quiggle's articles in *The Flare*. I was surprised that a police officer would pay any attention to that kind of sensational matter; but the inspector said that I might be able to help him, if I could spare a few hours. He asked me what I was doing then, and I told him that I was at his disposal—for I could, of course, pack Mr. Savonier's things quite as well in the afternoon. So I went with the inspector into Kensington Gardens.'

'Went with the inspector into Kensington Gardens?' MacBee repeated, and looked across at Keames.

'That is so,' Keames confirmed.

'And what did you do there, Phrett?'

'We sat down and talked.'

'For how long?'

'Till after it struck twelve.'

MacBee's jaw dropped with astonishment, and he looked to Keames for the last time.

'Yes,' Keames said, 'he stayed with me till after twelve, and gave me a great amount of very useful and interesting information.'

'Did you see Phrett leave the Cassiodore garage, Keames?' Mr. Moonroyd asked.

'I did, sir. I was interested in that mews and I was standing under the archway and looking down it. Mr. Savonier passed me first, and then I saw Phrett come out of the garage, lock the door and walk slowly towards me.'

Mr. Moonroyd and MacBee had another long whispered consultation, into which Keames was also called after a time. When they had whispered together for quite ten minutes, Mr. Moonroyd turned and addressed Phrett.

'What you have said just now, and what Inspector Keames has been able to say in your support, has very great importance indeed, and fundamentally alters the bearing of the facts which led to the issue of a warrant against you. I should advise you to consult a lawyer at once. Chief-Inspector MacBee will see that you are comfortable while you remain here. For the present we don't wish to ask you any more questions.'

Keames, who was detained by his superiors, nodded good-bye to me and I had to make my way out of the building unaccompanied. And I can assure those who have not experienced it that the sensation of finding one's own way to the door at Scotland Yard is, for a novice at least, remarkably like what one fancies must be the sensation of escaping from prison. And I had just seen an innocent man, with the noose about his neck, escape as it were by a miracle.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHASE

I HURRIED back to Kensington to let Branders know of what I had learned and witnessed. He listened to my recital with his features puckered up into a scowl, which I knew was his way of expressing wonder, and which was gradually replaced by a series of deeply scored transverse lines across his forehead, which were the expression of extreme perplexity.

'This is extraordinary,' he said.

'Not much of a case against Phrett?'

'There is absolutely no case against Phrett now. He has given a perfect alibi, perhaps the most perfect a man could ever plead: "I spent the time mentioned in the charge in the company of a Detective-Inspector of the C.I.D." He was, in fact, either at Midhurst, or driving Savonier, or with Inspector Keames when Tambardine was murdered—which, depends upon the time of the murder; but that cannot have been very early, as the body, though quite stiff through the working of this accursed drug, was still warm; and Phrett was certainly with Keames when the bottle was taken from the window. Therefore Phrett cannot be Tambardine's murderer. But if he did not murder Tambardine, he did not murder Sir Gregory either—he has what I may call a circumstantial

alibi in the case of Sir Gregory, with the strongest moral presumptions in his favour; which have really now become certainties, in view of the perfect alibi with which he has met this second charge.'

'So that Quiggle's whole case collapses?'

'It has been blown to shreds.'

'And where are we now, then?' I asked eagerly.

'Ah—!' said Branders, 'it might look as though we were where we were before—at the very beginning, mightn't it?'

'But how can so many false clues point to one man?' I persisted.

'That is what I have been asking myself for some weeks now,' he said. 'Only, of course, I wasn't absolutely certain that they were false.'

'But now that you are?'

'Certain very curious things seem to follow. Perhaps in a day or two . . . . .'

But our discussion was interrupted at that point by a long ringing at the bell, and Jonson opened the snuggery door to announce that Inspector Keames was outside.

'Come in, Keames, come in,' Branders shouted. 'I suppose you are as excited as Campling?'

'I am puzzled, Mr. Noble,' the inspector replied, 'frankly puzzled. This case made out by Quiggle had some very queer features about it. It seemed absolutely watertight. Absolutely. And yet . . . . .'

'Yes, Inspector?'

'And yet, somehow, it was like . . . . . I don't know what it was like, except it was the stuff he puts in his paper; though, of course, it was quite a different tale from that.'

'Exactly, Keames; that is what I have been thinking myself for some days past. And his "tale"—I like that word—now?'

'Has had the bottom knocked out of it.'

'But supposing you had not been in a position, Keames, to supply Phrett with a perfect alibi, doesn't it seem highly probable that he would have been hanged for three murders he did not commit, if a jury could have been persuaded to accept Mr. Quiggle's imaginative reconstruction of the case?'

'That seems a dead cert, Mr. Noble.'

'So that you have been the instrument, under Providence as they say, of saving Mr. Quiggle from the distressing experience of sending an innocent man to the scaffold, through his over-ingenuity in finding answers to the Cassiodore riddle?'

'I suppose you might put it that way.'

'Well, I shan't, Keames—because I'm a thundering ass.'

'Eh?' said Keames, puzzled by Branders' air of suppressed excitement.

'How does MacBee take it?' Branders asked with a sudden change of tone.

'Oh, very badly. He can't reconcile himself to having been let down at all. He is still holding Phrett. Of course Phrett must go

before a magistrate, as there's a warrant. But MacBee will be very slow to admit defeat. Mr. Moonroyd will see that Phrett is treated fairly. Not that MacBee would do anything in any way illegal, but he's prejudiced.'

'Is he at the Yard now?' Branders asked, taking up the phone.

'No. He has gone off. I believe it is to see Quiggle.'

'Where?'

'Not at Fleet Street, but wherever it is that Quiggle lives.'

'Barnes,' Branders said curtly. 'Can you come with me at once, Keames? It is important that I should get in touch with MacBee as quickly as possible. And you, Vernon?'

'To Barnes?' Keames asked, impressed by Branders' manner.

'Exactly,' said Branders. 'And I want a large swift car,' he added to me.

'I think I can get what you want,' I said, 'if I may use the phone'; and I took the instrument from his hand.

Branders had infected me with his excitement, though even then, I am ashamed to say, I did not realise the full truth. In less than ten minutes, then, Branders, Keames and myself, and a young police officer in plain clothes, whom Keames had conjured up from somewhere—and whom I afterwards learned to be the very young constable who had found the bodies in Rutland Square—were being speeded along to an address in Barnes.

But there we were met with disappointment, though our quarry did not seem to be far ahead. Yes, a gentleman had called a short time ago to see Mr. Quiggle. Yes, it was a tall, grey-haired gentleman, smartly dressed. Mr. Quiggle had gone out with him about ten *minutes* ago. Mr. Quiggle had driven away with him in his (Mr. Quiggle's) car, in the direction of the Portsmouth Road. The car was a small olive-green saloon. So much we learned from a pretty and intelligent housemaid.

'What can we do now?' Keames asked in perplexity.

'To Midhurst,' Branders ordered the driver. 'And keep to the main road—do you know the way?'

'I think so, sir. You mean me to follow the road through Guildford and Haslemere?'

'Exactly. And keep a smart look-out for a small olive-green saloon. There's five pounds for you, beyond your fare, if you catch that car up this side of Midhurst.'

'I suppose you know what you are doing, Mr. Noble?' Keames asked as our driver got the highest speed he could out of our big limousine. '*I'm quite at sea, you know.*'

'I am putting a theory to the test,' Branders replied. 'If I am wrong, I shall meddle with crimes no more. I shall be exposed to all the world as a duffer, and seem in my own eyes a self-confessed failure. But if my theory is right, I am the greatest man in our line, yours

and mine, in the whole world ; for I shall have foiled the greatest criminal.'

'And how are you so certain that Quiggle is taking MacBee to Midhurst? I think MacBee has burnt his fingers enough already over Phrett.'

'Wait,' said Branders.

'I suppose we shall learn when we get to Midhurst,' Keames said good-humouredly.

It was what we all had to do—wait. I was unable to trust the strangeness of my own thoughts ; and watching Branders I fancied that he was being tortured by something very like doubt. We seemed to be embarked on a fantastic expedition.

Twice we were stopped by the local police for exceeding all permissible speeds, and each time Keames thrust his head out of the window and exhibited his badge, and was saluted by the duly impressed traffic officer, and we were allowed to drive on.

In that way we reached Haslemere without incident, and I began to think that Branders must have been mistaken as to the route or destination, or both, of the green car. Our own car was so powerful, and we had so consistently disregarded all regulations as to speed, that it was scarcely credible that, it the other car was on the same road, we should not have overtaken it by this.

The road from Haslemere to Midhurst, once the suburbs of Haslemere are passed, is a lonely one, and is for the greater part of its length

overshadowed by trees of considerable size. As we flashed along its smooth and shining surface, these trees were literally almost all that we could see ; for the landscape on both sides was shrouded in dense trailing mist, through which the immense black bulks of the hills loomed dimly as shadows. Overhead the low-lying, drizzling cloud was yellow and dense almost as a London fog, shutting out the sun and shortening the afternoon by two hours. Water streamed down the windows of the car, obstructing what view might otherwise have been obtained.

'We have missed them, Mr. Noble,' Keames said, straining his eyes to see ahead.

But almost as he spoke our driver put on the brakes suddenly, causing the car to skid unpleasantly on the slippery surface, and half turning in his seat pointed ahead.

Branders opened the door on the near side and leant out. His body lurched forward as though he were falling, but before any of us had time to stretch out a hand to steady him, he sprang to the ground and started to race down the road, bare-headed in the teeming rain.

Keames and I sprang after him and followed. I cannot say what the constable and the driver did ; for at the time I was conscious of nothing but Keames and myself racing after Branders down that lonely, tree-lined country road in the soaking rain.

All that was the sensation of a few seconds

merely ; for scarcely a hundred yards ahead lay our goal. An olive-green car stood by the roadside, near an ancient covered well, and Quiggle stood beside it, looking very strange with his small person enveloped in a huge overcoat which reached almost to his feet, and with horn-rimmed glasses on his pointed, prominent nose. He was hatless, and the rain had sleeked down his long mane of hair into more of the likeness of a rat's coat than ever. He was peering through the window into the interior of the car. His attitude was somehow reminiscent of that of a person boiling an egg, and standing over it, watch in hand.

That was the impression of a moment, for he turned and saw us. It was easier to see in the open than from the car, in spite of the unnatural gloom of the weather and the shade of the great trees. I saw a red mouth open with an expression of terror and the gleam of long, rat-like, white teeth, and then the grotesque figure turned and ran frantically away from us down the road. Just for a second he tripped and almost fell over the long coat, but he recovered and sped on, holding it up. If I had not been filled with a great presentiment of horror, I should have thought it laughable to watch the strange antics of the dwarfed and shrunken wretch, vainly endeavouring to outdistance two tall and swift men like Keames and myself.

Then Quiggle turned in the road. It was the characteristic gesture of the rat driven into a

corner. The creature will turn and bite. I saw the momentary glint of metal, and ducked as something whizzed past my head. That was the bullet which struck Branders. Then I heard a second shot from just behind me, where I knew Keames was running, and I saw Quiggle spin round, crumple and collapse. He lay quite still, a huddled heap of clothes, just by the spurs of an immense beech tree.

I slackened my pace and looked back. Everyone seemed to be clustered round the green car. Our driver was there, and the young constable, and Keames, who had run back after firing that shot, and Branders holding a red-stained handkerchief to his neck. And between them there was a fifth figure, which they were supporting towards the out-jutting roots of a big tree which formed a kind of natural seat.

I joined them, filled with fresh dismay by the ashen features and apparently lifeless form of MacBee.

'He will do well enough there,' Branders was saying. 'Have you a flask, Keames?'

'I have,' I said, coming forward and offering it.

'Give him as much as you can make him swallow,' Branders directed

'And yourself?' I said, looking anxiously at his bleeding neck.

'A mere scratch,' he replied, and walked away up the road to where Quiggle's body lay, a darker patch in the dark shadow of the trees.

CHAPTER XV

BRANDERS NOBLE EXPLAINS

IT was ten days before Chief-Inspector MacBee recovered fully from his touch-and-go with death. From his bed he had written to thank Branders.

'We have been running one another close all through this case,' he wrote, 'and it ended in a literal Marathon, in which you bore away the palm and the title of the best detective in England. I am your debtor for a life, and trust that the future will afford me opportunities of showing my gratitude in ways more substantial than words. Mrs. MacBee joins in thanking you.'

Branders said it was very handsome of MacBee to be so flowery about it; because, if the truth had to be told, MacBee had made rather an ass of himself in that final episode of the Cassiodore case, the hectic rush to Midhurst.

But that was an aspect of the truth on which Branders did not touch when, at Mr. Moonroyd's special invitation, a little party met in that gentleman's room at Scotland Yard on the first day on which MacBee was well enough to be present.

There were Miss Cassiodore and Gerald Savonier, the latter accompanied by Phoebe Mellisont, whom I then met for the first time, Mr. Moonroyd, MacBee, Keames, Phrett, Branders and myself.

After we had all shaken hands with MacBee and congratulated him on his escape, Mr. Moonroyd came directly to the point which had brought us there.

" I think, Mr. Noble," he said, " that what we of the police, and I daresay some others present, would like, is a complete statement by you of your view of this case. There still appears to be very much in it that is obscure.'

' I am sure you will believe me, Mr. Moonroyd,' Branders began, ' when I tell you that I have never touched a more difficult case than this. Even now, with our certain knowledge of the identity of the criminal, were it not for a letter discovered on his body, I do not know that I should feel certain as to the exact methods by which all this was brought about. Of the motive for this fantastic criminal creation I shall speak later.

' There was one feature which impressed me in the very earliest reports published of the murder of Sir Gregory. The place where his body was found was only a few minutes walk from where Sir Gregory lived. That seemed significant. For I could not believe, without very good reasons for doing so, that anyone would be so daring as to plan and carry out a double murder in the open street. That the crime had been committed either in a house or a car seemed certain ; and of the two I inclined to the hypothesis of a car. If the crime had been committed in a house, the body could not have been brought far ; and the locality of

its discovery would fatally point to the house involved. For that reason I discounted the importance of Muggeh's house being so near.

" If, then, the crime was committed in a car, why was this one particular neighbourhood selected for the disposal of the bodies ? Nothing is more mobile than a car, and surely a more secluded place could have been selected for the abandonment of the corpse of a person whom the criminal motorist had murdered ? Obviously, I reasoned, this must have been done in order to create a false impression that Sir Gregory had been at home, and had only just gone out. It was someone's interest to suggest that. Suppose, I asked myself, it were to be his chauffeur's interest ? That, I may say, was before I had heard of our friend James Phrett's existence. It just seemed probable that there might be a chauffeur involved.

' When I got to Surreyview Mansions, before I saw anyone else, I learned from the porter that Phrett had been the last person to see Sir Gregory alive—in fact, that all knowledge of many things which had occurred on the previous evening rested on Phrett's unsupported testimony. That, of course, did not predispose me in Phrett's favour.

' I learned the main outlines of what had happened from Miss Cassiodore. I at once asked to see Phrett, and received from him a clear, detailed, perfectly candid and open account of everything that he knew about Sir Gregory, his movements, habits, friends, family

and all the other things I chose to question him about. At the time I could find no weak point in Phrett's narrative; and I may say that all the points I reserved for further investigation were resolved in Phrett's favour. That, it is true, was merely negative evidence in his favour—points on which suspicion might have been grounded broke down when tested. Also, on general psychological grounds, I had made up my mind before our interview was over that Phrett was not a murderer. That was an intuitional judgement, a thing to which I attach much greater importance than would probably find approval here.

'After that I saw Inspector MacBee. The inspector had been misled by the disappearance of Mr. Savonier and by the discovery of his cigarette-case at the scene of the crime into supposing that, if Mr. Savonier were not the actual murderer, he had at least some guilty connexion with the events of the preceding evening. Basing my decision again on intuition pure and simple, I put that hypothesis aside. Mr. MacBee had, however, arrived at an obviously correct conclusion as to what had happened to Muriel Hatterleigh.

'I came next to the examination of the locality. There, chiefly through the services of Quiggle, I at once learned facts of the utmost significance. The bodies were found just outside Dr. Muggeh's house, which suggested some connexion between the drug ring and the criminal. The district itself—the dummy

houses and the cul-de-sac—was so curious as almost to rule out the possibility of coincidence. Either the district had been specially selected as suitable for the perpetration of crime or the district itself had helped to mould and determine the manner and time of the murder. I decided provisionally for the latter view.

'I accordingly crossed to Paris and saw Dr. Muggeh. But before seeing him I had already learned through the courtesy of Inspector Keames that Muggeh himself could not possibly be the criminal, and that to all appearances he had even been totally unaware that there had been a crime until informed by the police. But from him I learned one fact of great importance: that he did not know James Phrett. I convinced myself fully that Muggeh had never heard Phrett's name.

'I had, of course, already worked out a hypothetical case against Phrett, very much on the same lines as were later developed by Quiggle. In my eyes it had the fatal disadvantage of being psychologically unbelievable. But it was just as well to test it link by link. I imagined that, for some purpose, Phrett had drugged Sir Gregory on the way home from Mrs. Fimms's. Sir Gregory collapsed and died and Phrett was faced with the gallows. He took a bold and original line, disposed of the body temporarily, returned to the flat, created fictitious evidence of Sir Gregory's presence there, and then slipped out and placed the body in the street. That led to the murder of

Miss Hatterleigh. I had already satisfied myself that Phrett might have been able to get in and out of the Mansions the back way and so escape notice. It was he who had given the porter the little watch dog, which was kept at the foot of the area steps.

'But that hypothesis implied some place where the body could be stowed away between the hours of eleven-fifteen and twelve-forty-five. There was no such place except Muggeh's house. Even if the garage had not been too far away for transporting the body any way except in the car, the movements of a man called Nogens who lives over the garage convinced me that the body could never have been there. But if I believed Muggeh, and I did believe him, it was clear that the body was not in his house. There therefore seemed to be no place where the body could have been, and the whole case against Phrett broke down. He was acquitted on material, as well as moral, grounds.

'I was recalled to London after that, and came here to this room to be present at Savonier's examination. I don't think I need repeat what happened then. No new facts of any importance were elicited, but a few misunderstandings were cleared up.

'After that Mr. Savonier was ill for some weeks and it was impossible for me to make any progress in certain directions till I had received answers to a number of questions from him. I did, however, make certain inquiries at the

" It " Club, which put me in fairly full possession of the facts in the Tambardine quarrel.

' During those weeks I built up a case against Tambardine, which justified me in regarding him with great suspicion. I had some years ago carried out an investigation into the illegal drug-traffic, and certain indications made me suspect Tambardine of being involved in that. That was significant, seeing that it was the second time I had come on the suggestion of drug-peddlers, first in connexion with Muggeh, and now with Tambardine. As soon as I had an opportunity I laid the conclusions I was coming to before Mr. Savonier, and rather against his will succeeded in getting a few new facts from him which strengthened my suspicions.

" As soon, then, as I learned that Tambardine had been discovered—back again in his old haunts in London—I took steps to follow him to whatever secret lair he might possess. The sequel to that is now known to everyone. I found Tambardine too late, when he had fallen a victim to the murderer and to his own terrible invention of the gas.

' It was then, immediately after Tambardine's death, that Quiggle expounded to me his brilliant-seeming reconstruction of the crime. He first sketched a background in the underworld of drug fiends, drug dealers and political spies, much of which was, if not familiar to, at least suspected by me already. James Phrett, it seemed, was the worst and most

cunning of these; a spy in the employ of Mrs. Fimms, who was herself a secret agent set to watch Sir Gregory. Phrett had blackmailed Muggeh into parting with his latchkey, and Tambardine with the secret of his gas. Phrett had drugged Mr. Savonier and stolen his cigarette case, to make sinister use of it later on. His killing of Sir Gregory had been accidental; but Phrett had shown himself callous and ruthless in exterminating Muriel Hatterleigh, who surprised him with the body, and Tambardine, who possessed his secret and whose conscience was troubling him.

'I must confess that that story placed me in a great dilemma. And I must apologise to Phrett. Logically, and admitting Quiggle's facts about the underworld—which at the time I could not test—, the story was possible and self-consistent through and through. But psychologically, and from the point of view of my intuitional impressions of people, I found it altogether impossible. It presented me with a different Phrett from the one I knew. I did not find it possible to think of the Phrett I had examined as the cold-blooded, far-seeing blackmailer with the brain of a chess master which Quiggle's story demanded—and at the same time I saw no logical escape, granting the facts.

'Apart from my impression of Phrett's personality, I had, it is true, one small piece of positive, if doubtful, evidence in disproof of Quiggle's story—Muggeh's denial of all knowledge of Phrett. Muggeh might have lied, but

at the time I had believed him. Again I was faced with the dilemma of choosing between intuition and apparent fact.

'I was unfortunately ill for some time; but as soon as I was better I sent Campling to the Continent to see Mrs. Fimms, and he brought back confirmation of part of Quiggle's description of the underworld of spies—but not of the really essential part; for Mrs. Fimms denied, and Campling believed her, everything that related to Phrett in the story.

'I began, then, to ask myself seriously how Quiggle had elaborated this mesh of misleading circumstances and deductions *and incorrect statements*—to use no harsher word—all pointing to the guilt of one man? If Quiggle had not made the story so self-consistent and perfect, I might have been less suspicious. But in real life it seldom happens that things will so go on all fours. We have to be content to leave gaps in our knowledge. I was no longer interested in the case against Phrett, because I no longer believed in it even with a half belief; but I was profoundly interested in the obscure psychological processes by means of which such a bogus case against Phrett ever came into existence at all. I found that it strained my capacity for credulity to believe that this story, so detailed and so seemingly probable, was a mere chance agglomeration of errors. I therefore turned my attention to its author. I became interested in Quiggle as a potential criminal type.

'On the surface Quiggle's personality was repulsive. But in my own dealings with him I always found that to a large measure redeemed by his intelligence and the variety of his information. After all it was not so surprising that a man who avowedly lived by dressing up garbage to suit a depraved public taste, should look like a rat and be intolerably offensive to many people through his cynicism. The man was a *poseur*. He called himself a Nietzschean and a Diabolist. He was absurdly vain—vain with the vanity of the criminal. And yet the man was in his way an artist. His devotion to his job as reporter was absolutely sincere. It was a monomania with him, and it led him into crime.

'When I first began to suspect the truth about Quiggle I was in great doubt, for his crime was unheard of and unprecedented. I accordingly felt my way with great caution. I felt sure that if what I suspected were so, Quiggle would sooner or later make a mistake and give himself away. But I was hampered by the perplexing attitude he adopted towards his own story. In argument he would defend and support it with boundless illustration, indulging freely in the most childish vanity. But as soon as it was suggested to him that he should do the natural thing and lay an information with the police, he appeared positively offended and grieved. There was only one Phrett, he said by implication, and Quiggle had been born to write his chronicles. I had,

then, to work on Quiggle's vanity in order to force him to go to the police. I did that in two ways; first by feigning the most enthusiastic conversion to his theory, and secondly by conveying to him by subtle innuendo that I was contemplating stealing a march on him and annexing the kudos which would accrue from the exposure of Phrett. One of those arguments tickled his vanity and the other alarmed it; and between them they did what no appeal to public duty could effect, they overcame his prudence.

'For, of course, Quiggle made a very serious error in placing his fictitious structure of evidence in the hands of the police. When I urged him, directly and indirectly, to do it, I still had an open mind as to his guilt. But Quiggle, knowing that Phrett was innocent and that he himself was the criminal, should at all costs have avoided having his story sifted by the police. It was Quiggle's interest that those muddy waters should be stirred as little as possible. Further, he should never have told the story to me. His right course, playing his own criminal game, was to create the evidence against Phrett *and to allow someone else to find it.* On the principle that hiders find, it was fatal for him to produce it, when it ran the risk of being exposed as faked.

'However, he did what he did—with the result we know. Phrett was arrested and charged with, among other things, having, between the hours of nine and ten-thirty, murdered Joseph

Tambardine ; and to that Phrett replied, " Between the hours of nine and ten-thirty I was chatting with Detective-Inspector Keames of the C.I.D. in Kensington Gardens." . . . the most perfect alibi, I am sure, that any man has ever given. It blew Quiggle's theory sky high. And it settled all doubts about Quiggle's guilt for me. For Quiggle was one of the small group of people actually on the spot and in a position to steal the bottle at the time of Tambardine's death.

' That raised an interesting question in a new form : why had Quiggle told me of his theory at all ? It was clear to me that doing so was against all his interests and the dictates of common prudence. At first I had been inclined to put the impulse down to his characteristic vanity ; he must have some competent person to admire with him the ingeniousness of his construction. But it suddenly occurred to me, when I asked myself what his next move would be, now that Phrett's alibi had destroyed his case, that the real motive underlying his confidence may have been fear. I had just met him outside the house of death, a few minutes after he had stolen the bottle, and he must at all costs divert my suspicion. For weeks he had been waiting for either MacBee or myself to pick up the clues he had left about, and have Phrett arrested. Then he could have enjoyed his secret triumph in safety. But regretfully he had to tell me, lest a worse thing should befall. That suggested that sudden panic might be a

characteristic of Quiggle's mind—as we saw it proved by his behaviour when overtaken on the road to Midhurst. That gave me a new vision of Quiggle's personality, and I saw his mind, like his body, shrunken to the likeness of a rat's. This time I trusted my intuitions. I learned that Inspector MacBee, naturally rather sore at having been let down so badly over Phrett's arrest, had gone off to consult with Quiggle. I asked myself what it was that Quiggle would do or say, now that his house of cards had collapsed, and the fit of panic was upon him? Vanity was the mainspring of the man's nature, and I felt that vanity would have its voice in determining the reply. "Nonsense!" he would assure MacBee, "My theory was quite correct—it *was* Phrett who committed the first murders. But Sir Gregory's murder was, as I see now, not accidental, but planned—in conjunction with Savonier. And now it has been Savonier who has committed this last murder—in conjunction with Phrett. Let us hurry down to Midhurst and surprise him before he knows that his accomplice has been arrested." That was what I expected him to say, and it is the gist of what he did say. It was, in fact, the only possible way of maintaining the original story and of turning the obstacle of Phrett's alibi.

'Inspector MacBee was rather too old a hand to swallow a tale like that without blinking. He did not suspect Quiggle, it is true. But he felt that this tangle of accusations must

be disposed of and cleared out of the way with the least delay possible. He therefore accepted Quiggle's offer to drive him down to see Savonier. I have not been able to form any likely guess as to what Quiggle's intentions were when they reached Midhurst. The man was a brilliant improvisator, and probably he was trusting to luck to help him out. I believe, too, that he greatly underestimated the inspector's intelligence. Else why did he leave his poison tube under the rug in the car? MacBee felt it under his feet, and the discovery nearly cost him his life.

'And just a few more words about Quiggle. I think that we can hardly say that the man was sane; and yet he was not mad, either in the common medical or in the legal sense. He was a megalomaniac, blown-up with vanity, and perverted out of all moral percipience by the hypertrophy of a single idea. He was the greatest reporter in the world, and the greatest reporter must have the greatest cases to report. And so the insidious temptation grew in the man's mind: "If the cases do not come of themselves as you would wish them, why not create them first and report them afterwards?"

'The story Quiggle told me of Phrett and his activities was, with a few necessary alterations, true of Quiggle himself. For years Quiggle had been practising an elaborate system of blackmail, and he could move many people in many underworlds like pawns to suit the convenience of his game.

'Since his death I have proved by inquiry that it was Quiggle himself who spread the story that Miss Mellisont was a spy. It was Quiggle who had Sir Gregory informed of that rumour. The letter from Sir Gregory found in Quiggle's pocket proves that it was Quiggle who let Sir Gregory know about what happened at the club of which Miss Mellisont, Savonier and Tambardine were members. It was Quiggle who had Muggeh's key and the secret of Tambardine's gas—he blackmailed both men. It was Quiggle who terrified Tambardine into insulting Miss Mellisont, and it was Quiggle who bought Savonier's dropped cigarette-case from a servant at the club. On that Sunday night Quiggle, having first informed himself of the whereabouts of all the principal actors in his romance, lured Sir Gregory out with the promise of putting him in possession of secrets, the disclosure of which Sir Gregory urges in that letter we have found, and killed him with the poison appartus in the car. The body was placed in Rutland Square, and the cigarette-case was dropped to create a prima facie case against Savonier. But Quiggle knew that Savonier had gone over to Paris. The case, he argued, would be regarded as a blind and would set the police asking, What guilty person is trying to throw suspicion on Savonier? The most probable answer would be—Phrett! That was how Quiggle worked, and the technique is very wonderful. But there was one recalcitrant pawn on the board, the dissolute genius

with a conscience, Tambardine. Tambardine could not stomach his discovery being used by the assassin; and he was not likely to appreciate the point that Quiggle in his own eyes was merely a great artist in sensation producing an æsthetic effect. Tambardine, accordingly, had to be removed. And that was the first step towards putting me on the track of the truth."

'Thank you, Mr. Noble.' It was Mr. Moonroyd who broke the long silence which succeeded Branders' statement. 'It is very wonderful; but I am afraid these methods would hardly square with official ways of working.'

'But to do Mr. Noble justice,' said Savonier, 'He has beaten the official machine.'

'And saved my life,' said MacBee.

'And ridded the world of a pest,' said Miss Cassiodore.

'Mr. Noble,' said Mr. Moonroyd with that suave courtesy of his, 'You were pitted against the most profound criminal intelligence I have ever heard of, and it was you who won, however you did it. It only remains for us of the police to thank you. We thank you, Mr. Noble.'

PRINTED BY WYMAN & SONS, LTD.,
LONDON, FAKENHAM AND READING.