

LOUIS TRACY

THE DE BERCY
AFFAIR

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The de Bercy Affair

CHAPTER I SOME PHASES OF THE PROBLEM

CHIEF INSPECTOR WINTER sat in his private office at New Scotland Yard, while a constable in uniform, bare-headed, stood near the door in the alert attitude of one who awaits the nod of a superior. Nevertheless, Mr. Winter, half-turning from a desk littered with documents, eyed the man as though he had just said something outrageous, something so opposed to the tenets of the Police Manual that the Chief Commissioner alone could deal with the offense.

"Have you been to Mr. Furneaux's residence?" he snapped, nibbling one end of a mustache already clipped or chewed so short that his strong white teeth could barely seize one refractory bristle.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you telephoned to any of the district stations?"

"Oh, yes, sir – to Vine Street, Marlborough Street, Cannon Row, Tottenham Court Road, and half-a-dozen others."

"No news of Mr. Furneaux anywhere? The earth must have opened and swallowed him!"

"The station-sergeant at Finchley Road thought he saw Mr. Furneaux jump on to a 'bus at St. John's Wood about six o'clock yesterday evening, sir; but he could not be sure."

"No, he wouldn't. I know that station-sergeant. He is a fat-head... When did you telegraph to Kenterstone?"

"At 6.30, sir."

Mr. Winter whisked a pink telegraphic slip from off the blotting-pad, and read:

Inspector Furneaux not here to my knowledge.

Police Superintendent, Kenterstone.

"Another legal quibbler – fat, too, I'll be bound," he growled. Then he laughed a little in a vein of irritated perplexity, and said:

"Thank you, Johnson. You, at least, seem to have done everything possible. Try again in the morning. I *must* see Mr. Furneaux at the earliest moment! Kindly bring me the latest editions of the evening papers, and, by the way, help yourself to a cigar."

The gift of a cigar was a sign of the great man's favor, and it was always an extraordinarily good one, of which none but himself knew the exact brand. Left alone for a few minutes, he glanced through a written telephone message which he had thrust under the blotting-pad when Police Constable Johnson had entered. It was from Paris, and announced that two notorious Anarchists were en route to England by the afternoon train, due at Charing Cross at 9.15 p.m.

"Anarchists!" growled the Chief Inspector – "Pooh! Antoine Descartes and Émile Janoc – Soho for them – absinthe and French cigarettes – green and black poison. Poor devils! they will do themselves more harm than his Imperial Majesty. Now, where the deuce *is* Furneaux? This Feldisham Mansions affair is just in his line – Clarke will ruin it."

Johnson came back with a batch of evening papers. Understanding his duties – above all, understanding Mr. Winter – he placed them on the table, saluted, and withdrew without a word. Soon the floor was littered with discarded news-sheets, those quick-moving eyes ever seeking one definite item – "The Murder in the West End – Latest" – or some such headline, and once only was his attention held by a double-ledged paragraph at the top of a column:

A correspondent writes: – "I saw the deceased lady in company with a certain popular American millionaire at the International Horse Show in June, and was struck by her remarkable resemblance to a girl of great beauty resident in Jersey some eight years ago. The then village maid was elected Rose Queen at a rural fête, I photographed her, and comparison of the photograph with the portrait of Mademoiselle de Bercy exhibited in this year's Academy served to confirm me in my opinion that she and the Jersey Rose Queen were one and the same person. I may add that my accidental discovery was made long before the commission of the shocking crime of yesterday."

Under present circumstances, of course, we withhold from publication the name of the Jersey Rose Queen, but the line of inquiry thus indicated may prove illuminative should there be any doubt as to the earlier history of the hapless lady whose lively wit and personal charm have brought London society to her feet since she left the Paris stage last year.

Winter did not hurry. Tucking the cigar comfortably into a corner of his mouth, he read each sentence with a quiet deliberation; then he sought a telephone number among the editorial announcements, and soon was speaking into a transmitter.

"Is that the *Daily Gazette*?.. Put me on to the editorial department, please... That you, Arbuthnot? Well, I'm Winter, of Scotland Yard. Your evening edition, referring to the Feldisham Mansions tragedy, contains an item... Oh, you expected to hear from me, did you? Well, what is the lady's name, and who is your correspondent?.. What? Spell it. A-r-m-a-u-d. All right; if you feel you *must* write to the man first, save time by asking him to send me the photograph. I will pass it on to you exclusively, of course. Thanks. Good-by."

Before the receiver was on its hook, the Chief Inspector was taking a notebook from his breast pocket, and he made the following entry:

Mirabel Arnaud, Rose Queen, village near St. Heliers, summer of 1900.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Oh, if this could only be Furneaux!" groaned Winter. "Come in! Ah! Glad to see you, Mr. Clarke. I was hoping you would turn up. Any news?"

"Nothing much, sir – that is to say, nothing really definite. The maid-servant is still delirious, and keeps on screaming out that Mr. Osborne killed her mistress. I am beginning to believe there is something in it – "

Winter's prominent steel blue eyes dwelt on Clarke musingly.

"But haven't we the clearest testimony as to Osborne's movements?" he asked. "He quitted Miss de Bercy's flat at 6.25, drove in his motor to the Ritz, attended a committee meeting of the International Polo Club at 6.30, occupied the chair, dined with the committee, and they all went to the Empire at nine o'clock. Unless a chauffeur, a hall-porter, a head-waiter, two under-waiters, five polo celebrities, a box-office clerk, and several other persons, are mixed up in an amazing conspiracy to shield Mr. Rupert Osborne, he certainly could not have murdered a woman who was alive in Feldisham Mansions at half-past seven."

Clarke pursed his lips sagely. As a study in opposites, no two men could manifest more contrasts. Clarke might have had the words "Detective Inspector" branded on his forehead: his features sharp, cadaverous, eyes deep-set and suspicious, his nose and chin inquisitive, his lips fixed as a rat-trap. Wide cheek-bones, low-placed ears, and narrow brows gave him a sinister aspect. In his own special department, the hunting out of "confidence men," card-sharpers, and similar hawklike pluckers of the provincial pigeon fluttering through London's streets, he was unrivaled. But Winter more resembled an intellectual prizefighter than the typical detective of fiction. His round head, cropped hair, wide-open eyes, joined to a powerful physique and singular alertness of glance and

movement, suggested that he varied the healthy monotony of a gentleman farmer's life by attendance at the National Sporting Club and other haunts of pugilism. A terror to wrongdoers, he was never disliked by them, whereas Clarke was hated. In a word, Winter was a sharp brain, Clarke a sharp nose, and that is why Winter groaned inwardly at being compelled to intrust the Feldisham Mansions crime to Clarke.

"What is your theory of this affair?" he said, rather by way of making conversation than from any hope of being enlightened.

"It is simple enough," said Clarke, his solemn glance resting for a moment on the box of cigars. Winter nodded in the same direction. His cigars were sometimes burnt offerings as well as rewards.

"Light up," he said, "and tell me what you think."

"Mademoiselle de Bercy was killed by either a disappointed lover or a discarded husband. All these foreign actresses marry early, but grow tired of matrimony within a year. If, then, there is no chance of upsetting Mr. Osborne's alibi, we must get the Paris police to look into Miss de Bercy's history. Her husband will probably turn out to be some third-rate actor or broken-down manager. Let us find *him*, and see if *he* is as sure of his whereabouts last evening as Mr. Rupert Osborne professes to be."

"You seem to harp on Osborne's connection with the affair?"

"And why not, sir? A man like him, with all his money, ought to know better than to go gadding about with actresses."

"But he is interested in the theater – he is quite an authority on French comedy."

"He can tackle French tragedy now – he is up to the neck in this one."

"You still cling to the shrieking housemaid – to her ravings, I mean?"

"Perhaps I should have mentioned it sooner, sir, but I have come across a taxicab driver who picked up a gentleman uncommonly like Mr. Osborne at 7.20 p.m. on Tuesday, and drove him from the corner of Berkeley Street to Knightsbridge, waited there nearly fifteen minutes, and brought him back again to Berkeley Street."

The Chief Inspector came as near being startled as is permissible in Scotland Yard.

"That is a very serious statement," he said quietly, wheeling round in his chair and scrutinizing his subordinate's lean face with eyes more wide-open than ever, if that were possible. "It is tantamount to saying that some person resembling Mr. Osborne hired a cab outside the Ritz Hotel, was taken to Feldisham Mansions at the very hour Miss de Bercy was murdered, and returned to the Ritz in the same vehicle."

"Exactly so," and Clarke pursed his thin lips meaningly.

"So, then, you *have* discovered something?"

Mr. Winter's tone had suddenly become dryly official, and the other man, fearing a reprimand, added:

"I admit, sir, I ought to have told you sooner, but I don't want to make too much of the incident. The taxicab chauffeur does not know Mr. Rupert Osborne by sight, and I took good care not to mention the name. The unknown was dressed like Mr. Osborne, and looked like him – that is all."

"Who is the driver?"

"William Campbell – cab number X L 4001. I have hired him to-morrow morning from ten o'clock, and then he will have an opportunity of seeing Mr. Osborne –"

"Meet me here at 9.30, and I will keep the appointment for you. Until – until I make other arrangements, I intend to take this Feldisham Mansions affair into my own hands. Of course, I should have been delighted to leave it in your charge, but during the past hour something of vastly greater importance has turned up, and I want you to tackle it immediately."

"Something more important than a society murder?" Clarke could not help saying.

"Yes. You know that the Tsar comes to London from Windsor to-morrow? Well, read this," and Winter, with the impressive air of one who communicates a state secret, handed the Paris message.

"Ah!" muttered Clarke, gloating over the word "Anarchists."

"Now you understand," murmured Winter darkly. "Unfortunately these men are far too well acquainted with me to render it advisable that I should shadow them. So I shall accompany you to Charing Cross, point them out, and leave them to you. A live monarch is of more account than a dead actress, so you see now what confidence I have in you, Mr. Clarke."

Clarke's sallow cheeks flushed a little. Winter might be a genial chief, but he seldom praised so openly.

"I quite recognize that, sir," he said. "Of course, I am sorry to drop out of this murder case. It has points, first-rate points. I haven't told you yet about the stone."

"Why – what stone?"

"The stone that did for Miss de Bercy. The flat was not thoroughly searched last night, but this morning I examined every inch of it, and under the piano I found – this."

He produced from a pocket something wrapped in a handkerchief. Unfolding the linen, he rose and placed on the blotting-pad, under the strong light of a shaded lamp, one of those flat stones which the archeologist calls "celts," or "flint ax-heads." Indeed, no expert eye was needed to determine its character. The cutting edge formed a perfect curve; two deep indentations showed how it had been bound on to a handle of bone or wood. At the broadest part it measured fully four inches, its length the same, thickness about three-quarters of an inch. That it was a genuine neolithic flint could not be questioned. A modern lapidary might contrive to chip a flint into the same shape, but could not impart that curious bloom which apparently exudes from the heart of the stone during its thousands of centuries of rest in prehistoric cave or village mound. This specimen showed the gloss of antiquity on each smooth facet.

But it showed more. When used in war or the chase by the fearsome being who first fashioned it to serve his savage needs, it must often have borne a grisly tint, and now *again* each side of the strangely sharp edge was smeared with grewsome daubs, while some black hairs clung to the dried clots which clustered on the irregular surfaces.

Sentiment finds little room in the retreat of a Chief Inspector, so Winter whistled softly when he set eyes on this weird token of a crime.

"By gad!" he cried, "in my time at the Yard I've seen many queer instruments of butchery – ranging from a crusader's mace to the strings of a bass fiddle – but this beats the lot."

"It must have come out of some museum," said the other.

"It suggests a tragedy of the British Association," mused Winter aloud.

"It ought to supply a first-rate clew, anyhow," said Clarke.

"Oh, it does; it must. If only –"

Winter checked himself on the very lip of indiscretion, for Clarke detested Furneaux. He consulted his watch.

"We must be off now," he said briskly. "Leave the stone with me, and while we are walking to Charing Cross I can give you a few pointers about these Anarchist pests. Once they are comfortably boxed up in some café in Old Compton Street you can come away safely for the night, and pick them up again about midday to-morrow. They are absolutely harm – I mean they cannot do any harm until the Tsar arrives. From that moment you must stick to them like a limpet to a rock; I will arrange for a man to relieve you in the evening, nor shall I forget to give your name to the Embassy people when they begin to scatter diamond pins around."

When he meant to act a part, Winter was an excellent comedian, and soon Clarke was prowling at the heels of those redoubtables, Antoine Descartes and Émile Janoc.

Once Clarke was safely shelved, Winter called the first taxicab he met and was driven to Feldisham Mansions. An unerring instinct had warned him at once that the murder of the actress was no ordinary crime; but Clarke had happened to be on duty when the report of it reached the Yard a few minutes after eight o'clock the previous evening, and Winter had bewailed the mischance

which deprived him of the services of Furneaux, the one man to whom he could have left the inquiry with confidence.

The very simplicity of the affair was baffling. Mademoiselle Rose de Bercy was the leading lady in a company of artistes, largely recruited from the Comédie Française, which had played a short season in London during September of the past year. She did not accompany the others when they returned to Paris, but remained, to become a popular figure in London society, and was soon in great demand for her *contes drôles* at private parties. She was now often to be seen in the company of Mr. Rupert Osborne, a young American millionaire, whose tastes ordinarily followed a less frivolous bent than he showed in seeking the society of an undeniably chic and sprightly Frenchwoman. It had been rumored that the two would be married before the close of the summer, and color was lent to the statement by the lady's withdrawal from professional engagements.

So far as Winter's information went, this was the position of affairs until a quarter to eight on the night of the first Tuesday in July. At that hour, Mademoiselle de Bercy's housemaid either entered or peered into her mistress's drawing-room, and saw her lifeless body stretched on the floor. Shrieking, the girl fled out into the lobby and down a flight of stairs to the hall-porter's little office, which adjoined the elevator. By chance, the man had just collected the letters from the boxes on each of the six floors of the block of flats, and had gone to the post; Mademoiselle de Bercy's personal maid and her cook, having obtained permission to visit an open-air exhibition, had, it seemed, been absent since six o'clock; the opposite flat on the same story was closed, the tenants being at the seaside; and the distraught housemaid, pursued by phantoms, forthwith yielded to the strain, so that the hall-porter, on his return, found her lying across the threshold of his den.

He summoned his wife from the basement, and the frenzied girl soon regained a partial consciousness. It was difficult to understand her broken words, but, such as they were, they sent the man in hot haste to the flat on the first floor. The outer and inner doors were wide open, as was the door of the drawing-room, and sufficient daylight streamed in through two lofty windows to reveal something of the horror that had robbed the housemaid of her wits.

The unfortunate Frenchwoman was lying on her back in the center of the room, and the hall-porter's hurried scrutiny found that she had been done to death with a brutal ferocity, her face almost unrecognizable.

Not until the return of the French maid, Pauline, from the exhibition, could it be determined beyond doubt that robbery was not the motive of the crime, for she was able to assure the police that her mistress's jewels were untouched. A gold purse was found on a table close to the body, a bracelet sparkled on a wrist cruelly bruised, and a brooch fastened at the neck the loose wrap worn as a preliminary to dressing for the evening.

Owing to the breakdown of the only servant actually present in the flat at the time of the murder, it was impossible to learn anything intelligible beyond the girl's raving cry that "Mr. Osborne did it." Still, there was apparently little difficulty in realizing what had happened. The housemaid had been startled while at supper, either by a shriek or some noise of moving furniture, had gone to the drawing-room, given one glance at the terrifying spectacle that met her eyes, and was straightway bereft of her wits.

The Chief Inspector was turning over in his mind the puzzling features of the affair when his automobile swept swiftly out of the traffic and glare of Knightsbridge into the quiet street in which stood Feldisham Mansions. A policeman had just strolled along the pavement to disperse a group of curious people gathered near the entrance, so Winter stopped his cab at a little distance and alighted unobserved.

He walked rapidly inside and found the hall-porter at his post. When the man learnt the visitor's identity he seemed surprised.

"Mr. Clarke has bin here all day, sir," he said, "and, as soon as he left, another gentleman kem, though I must say he hasn't bothered *me* much – " this with a touch of resentment, for the hall-porter's self-importance was enhanced by his connection with the tragedy.

"Another gentleman!" – this was incomprehensible, since Clarke would surely place a constable in charge of the flat. "What name did he give?"

"He's up there at this minnit, sir, an' here's his card."

Winter read: "Mr. Charles Furneaux, Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he muttered, and he added fuel to the fire of the hall-porter's annoyance by disregarding the elevator and rushing up the stairs, three steps at a time.

CHAPTER II

DARKNESS

Winter felt at once relieved and displeased. Twice during the hour had his authority been disregarded. He was willing to ignore Clarke's method of doling out important facts because such was the man's secretive nature. But Furneaux! The urgent messages sent to every place where they might reach him, each and all summoned him to Scotland Yard without the slightest reference to the Feldisham Mansions crime. It was with a stiff upper lip, therefore, that the Chief Inspector acknowledged the salute of the constable who admitted him to the ill-fated Frenchwoman's abode. Furneaux was his friend, Furneaux might be admirable, Furneaux was the right man in the right place, but Furneaux must first receive an official reminder of the claims of discipline.

The subdued electric lights in the hall revealed within a vista of Oriental color blended with Western ideals of comfort. Two exquisitely fashioned lamps of hammered iron, rifled from a Peking temple, softened by their dragons and lotus leaves the glare of the high-powered globes within them. Praying carpets, frayed by the deserts of Araby, covered the geometric design of a parquet floor, and bright-hued draperies of Mirzapur hid the rigid outlines of British carpentry. A perfume of joss-sticks still clung to the air: it suggested the apartments of a Sultana rather than the bower of a fashionable lady in the West End of London.

First impressions are powerful, and Winter acknowledged the spell of the unusual here, but his impassive face showed no sign of this when he asked the constable the whereabouts of Mr. Furneaux.

"In there, sir," said the man, pointing to a door.

Winter noted instantly that the floor creaked beneath his light tread. The rugs deadened his footsteps, but the parquetry complained of his weight. It was, he perceived, almost impossible for anyone to traverse an old flooring of that type without revealing the fact to ordinarily acute ears. Once when his heel fell on the bare wood, it rang with a sharp yet hollow note. It seemed, somehow, that the place was empty – that it missed its presiding spirit.

Oddly enough, as he remembered afterwards, he hesitated with outstretched hand in front of the closed door. He was doubtful whether or not to knock. As a matter of fact, he did tap slightly on a panel before turning the handle. Then he received his second vague impression of a new and strange element in the history of a crime. The room was in complete darkness.

Though Winter never admitted the existence of nerves, he did not even try to conceal from his own consciousness that he started distinctly when he looked into a blackness rendered all the more striking by the glimpse of a few feet of floor revealed by the off-shine from the hall-light.

"Are you here, Furneaux?" he forced himself to say quickly.

"Ah, that you, Winter!" came a voice from the interior. "Yes, I was dreaming in the dusk, I think. Let me give you a light."

"Dusk, you call it? Gad, it's like a vault!"

Winter's right hand had found the electric switches, and two clusters of lamps on wall-brackets leaped alight. Furneaux was standing, his hands behind his back, almost in the center, but the Chief Inspector gathered that the room's silent occupant had been seated in a corner farthest removed from the windows, and that his head had been propped on his clenched hands, for the dull red marks of his knuckles were still visible on both cheeks.

Each was aware of a whiff of surprise.

"Queer trick, sitting in the dark," Furneaux remarked, his eyes on the floor. "I – find I collect my wits better that way – sometimes. Sometimes, one cannot have light enough: for instance, the moment I saw fear in Lady Holt's face I knew that her diamonds had been stolen by herself – "

Winter reflected that light was equally unkind to Furneaux as to "Lady Holt," for the dapper little man looked pallid and ill at ease in this flood of electric brilliancy.

There was a silence. Then Furneaux volunteered the remark: "In this instance, thought is needed, not observation. One might gaze at that for twenty years, but it would not reveal the cause of Mademoiselle de Bercy's murder."

"*That*" was a dark stain near the center of the golden-brown carpet. Winter bent a professional eye on it, but his mind was assimilating two new ideas. In the first place, Furneaux was not the cheery colleague whose perky chatterings were his most deadly weapons when lulling a rogue into fancied security. In the second, he himself had not been prepared for the transit from a hall of Eastern gorgeousness to a room fastidiously correct in its reproduction of the period labeled by connoisseurs "after Louis XV."

The moment was not ripe for an inquiry anent Furneaux's object in hastening to Feldisham Mansions without first reporting himself. Winter somehow felt that the question would jar just then and there, and though not forgotten, it was waived; still, there was a hint of it in his next comment.

"I must confess I am glad to find you here," he said. "Clarke has cleared the ground somewhat, but – er – he has a heavy hand, and I have turned him on to a new job – Anarchists."

He half expected an answering gleam of fun in the dark eyes lifted to his, for these two were close friends at all seasons; but Furneaux seemed not even to hear! His lips muttered:

"I – wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"What purpose could be served by this girl's death. Who bore her such a bitter grudge that not even her death would sate their hatred, but they must try also to destroy her beauty?"

Now, the Chief Inspector had learnt that everyone who had seen the dead woman expressed this same sentiment, yet it came unexpectedly from Furneaux's lips; because Furneaux never said the obvious thing.

"Clarke believes," – Winter loathed the necessity for this constant reference to Clarke – "Clarke believes that she was killed by one of two people, either a jealous husband or a dissatisfied lover."

"As usual, Clarke is wrong."

"He may be."

"He is."

In spite of his prior agreement with Furneaux's estimate of their colleague's intelligence, Winter felt nettled at this omniscience. From the outset, his clear brain had been puzzled by this crime, and Furneaux's extraordinary pose was not the least bewildering feature about it.

"Oh, come now," he said, "you cannot have been here many minutes, and it is early days to speak so positively. I have been hunting you the whole afternoon – in fact, ever since I saw what a ticklish business this was likely to prove – and I don't suppose you have managed to gather all the threads of it into your fingers so rapidly."

"There are so few," muttered Furneaux, looking down on the carpet with the morbid eyes of one who saw a terrible vision there.

"Well, it is a good deal to have discovered the instrument with which the crime was committed."

Furneaux's mobile face instantly became alive with excitement.

"It was a long, thin dagger," he cried. "Something in the surgical line, I imagine. Who found it, and where?"

Some men in Winter's shoes might have smiled in a superior way. He did not. He knew Furneaux, profoundly distrusted Clarke.

"There is some mistake," he contented himself with saying. "Miss de Bercy was killed by a piece of flint, shaped like an ax-head – one of those queer objects of the stone age which is ticketed carefully after it is found in an ancient cave, and then put away in a glass case. Clarke searched the room this morning, and found it there – tucked away underneath," and he turned round to point to

the foot of the boudoir grand piano, embellished with Watteaux panels on its rosewood, that stood in the angle between the door and the nearest window.

The animation died out of Furneaux's features as quickly as it had appeared there.

"Useful, of course" he murmured. "Did you bring it?"

"No; it is in my office."

"But Mi – Mademoiselle de Bercy was not killed in that way. She was supple, active, lithe. She would have struggled, screamed, probably overpowered her adversary. No; the doctor admits that after a hasty examination he jumped to conclusions, for not one of the external cuts and bruises could have produced unconsciousness – not all of them death. Miss de Bercy was stabbed through the right eye by something strong and pointed – something with a thin, blunt-edged blade. I urged a thorough examination of the head, and the post mortem proved the correctness of my theory."

Winter, one of the shrewdest officials who had ever won distinction in Scotland Yard, did not fail to notice that curious slip of a syllable before "Mademoiselle," but it was explained a moment later when Furneaux used the English prefix "Miss" before the name. It was more natural for Furneaux to use the French word, however. Winter spoke French fluently – like an educated Englishman – but Furneaux spoke it like a native of Paris. The difference between the two was clearly shown by their pronunciation of "de Bercy." Winter sounded three distinct syllables – Furneaux practically two, with a slurred "r" that Winter could not have uttered to save his life.

Moreover, he was considerably taken aback by the discovery that Furneaux had evidently been working on the case during several hours.

"You have gone into the affair thoroughly, then," he blurted out.

"Oh, yes. I read of the murder this morning, just as I was leaving Kenterstone on my way to report at the Yard."

"Kenterstone!"

He was almost minded to inquire if the local superintendent was a fat man.

"Sir Peter and Lady Holt left town early in the day, so I went to Kenterstone from Brighton late last night... The pawnbroker who held Lady Holt's diamonds was treating himself to a long weekend by the sea, and I thought it advisable to see him in person and explain matters."

A memory of the Finchley Road station-sergeant who thought that he had seen Furneaux get on a 'bus at 6 p.m. in North London the previous evening shot through Winter's mind; but he kept to the main line of their talk.

"Do you know who this Rose de Bercy really is?" he suddenly demanded.

For a second Furneaux seemed to hesitate, but the reply came in an even tone.

"I have reason to believe that she was born in Jersey, and that her maiden name was Mirabel Arnaud," he said.

"The Rose Queen of a village fête eight years ago?"

Perhaps it was Furneaux's turn to be surprised, but he showed no sign.

"May I ask how you ascertained that fact?" he asked quietly.

"It is published in one of the evening papers. A man who happened to photograph her in Jersey recognized the likeness when he saw the Academy portrait of Rose de Bercy. But if you have not seen his statement already, how did *you* come to know that Miss de Bercy was Mirabel Arnaud?"

"I am a Jersey man by birth, and, although I quitted the island early in life, I often go back there. Indeed, I was present at the very fête you mention."

"I suppose the young lady was in a carriage and surrounded by a crowd? It would be an odd thing if you figured in the photograph," laughed Winter.

"There have been more unlikely coincidences, but my early sight of the remarkable woman who was killed in this room last night explains my intense desire to track her murderer before Clarke had time to baffle my efforts. It forms, too, a sort of excuse for my departure from official routine."

Of course, I would have reported myself this evening, but, up to the present, I have been working hard to try and dispel the fog of motive that blocks the way."

"You have heard of Rupert Osborne, then?"

Furieux was certainly not the man whom Winter was accustomed to meet at other times. Usually quick as lightning to grasp or discard a point, to-night he appeared to experience no little difficulty in focusing his attention on the topic of the moment. The mention of Rupert Osborne's name did not evoke the characteristically vigorous repudiation that Winter looked for. Instead, there was a marked pause, and, when the reply came, it was with an effort.

"Yes. I suppose Clarke wants to arrest him?"

"He has thought of it!"

"But Osborne's movements last night are so clearly defined?"

"So one would imagine, but Clarke still doubts."

"Why?"

Winter told of the taxicab driver, and the significant journey taken by his fare. Furieux shook his head.

"Strange, if true," he said; "why should Osborne kill the woman he meant to marry?"

"She may have jilted him."

"No, oh, no. It was – it must have been – the aim of her life to secure a rich husband. She was beautiful, but cold – she had the eye that weighs and measures. Have you ever seen the Monna Lisa in the Louvre?"

Winter did not answer, conscious of a subtle suspicion that Furieux really knew far more of the inner history of this tragedy than had appeared hitherto. Clarke, in his own peculiar way, was absurdly secretive, but that Furieux should want to remain silent was certainly baffling.

"By the way," said Winter with seeming irrelevance, "if you were in Brighton and Kenterstone yesterday afternoon and evening, you had not much time to spare in London?"

"No."

"Then the station-sergeant at Finchley Road was mistaken in thinking that he saw you in that locality about six o'clock – 'jumping on to a 'bus' was his precise description of your movements."

"I was there at that time."

"How did you manage it? St. John's Wood is far away from either Victoria or Charing Cross, and I suppose you reached Kenterstone by way of Charing Cross?"

"I returned from Brighton at three o'clock, and did not visit Sir Peter Holt until half-past nine at Kenterstone. Had I disturbed him before dinner the consequence might have been serious for her ladyship. Besides, I wished to avoid the local police at Kenterstone."

Both men smiled constrainedly. There was a barrier between them, and Furieux, apparently, was not inclined to remove it; as for Winter, he could not conquer the impression that, thus far, their conversation was of a nature that might be looked for between a police official and a reluctant witness – assuredly not between colleagues who were also on the best of terms as comrades. Furieux was obviously on guard, controlling his face, his words, his very gestures. That so outspoken a man should deem it necessary to adopt such a rôle with his close friend was annoying, but long years of forced self-repression had taught Winter the wisdom of throttling back utterances which might be regretted afterwards. Indeed, he tried valiantly to repair the fast-widening breach.

"Have a cigar," he said, proffering a well-filled case. "Suppose we just sit down and go through the affair from A to Z. Much of our alphabet is missing, but we may be able to guess a few additional letters."

Furieux smiled again. This time there was the faintest ripple of amusement in his eyes.

"Now, you know how you hate to see me maltreat a good Havana," he protested.

"This time I forgive you before the offense – anything to jolt you into your usual rut. Why, man alive, here have I been hunting you all day, yet no sooner are you engaged on the very job for which I

wanted you, than I find myself cross-examining you as though – as though you had committed some flagrant error."

The Chief Inspector did not often flounder in his speech as he had done twice that night. He was about to say "as though I suspected you of killing Rose de Bercy yourself"; but his brain generally worked in front of his voice, and he realized that the hypothesis would have sounded absurd, almost insane.

Furieux took the cigar. He did not light it, but deliberately crushed the wrapper between thumb and forefinger, and then smelled it with the air of one who dallies with a full-scented rose, passing it to and fro under his nostrils. Winter, meantime, was darting several small rings of smoke through one wide and slowly dissipating circle, both being now seated, Winter's bulk, genially aggressive, well thrust forward – but Furieux, small, compact, a bundle of nerves under rigid control, was sunk back into the depths of a large and deep-seated chair, and seemed to shirk the new task imposed on his powers of endurance. Winter was so conscious of this singularly unexpected behavior on his friend's part that his conscience smote him.

"I say, old man," he said, "you look thoroughly done up. I hardly realized that you had been hard at work all day. Have you eaten anything?"

"Had all I wanted," said Furieux, thawing a little under this solicitude.

"Perhaps you didn't want enough. Come, own up. Have you dined?"

"No – I was not hungry."

"Where did you lunch?"

"I ate a good breakfast."

Winter sprang to his feet again.

"By Jove!" he cried, "this affair seems to have taken hold of you – I meant to send for the hall-porter and the French maid – Pauline is her name, I think; she ought to be able to throw some light on her mistress's earlier life – but we can leave all that till to-morrow. Come to my club. A cutlet and a glass of wine will make a new man of you."

Furieux rose at once. Anyone might have believed that he was glad to postpone the proposed examination of the servants.

"That will be splendid," he said with an air of relief that compared markedly with his reticent mood of the past few minutes. "The mere mention of food has given me an appetite. I suppose I am fagged out, or as near it as I have ever been. Moreover, I can tell you everything that any person in these Mansions knows of what took place here between six and eight o'clock last night – a good deal more, by the way, than Clarke has found out, though he scored a point over that stone. Where is it? – in the office, you said. I should like to see it – in the morning."

"You will see more than that. Clarke has arranged to meet the taxicab driver at ten o'clock. He meant to confront him with Rupert Osborne, but we must manage things differently. Of course the man's testimony may be important. Alibi or no alibi, it will be awkward for Osborne if a credible witness swears that he was in this locality for nearly a quarter of an hour about the very time that this poor young lady was killed."

Furieux, holding the broken cigar under his nose, offered no comment, but, as they entered the hall, he said, glancing at its quaint decoration:

"If opportunity makes the thief, so, I imagine, does it sometimes inspire the murderer. Given the clear moment, the wish, the fury, can't you picture the effect these bizarre surroundings would exercise on a mind already strung to the madness of crime? For every willful slayer of a fellow human being is mad – mad... Ah, there was the genius of a maniac in the choice of that flint ax to rend Mirabel Arnaud's smooth skin – yet she had the right to live – perhaps –"

He stopped; and Winter anew felt that this musing Furieux of to-day was a different personality from the Furieux of his intimate knowledge.

And how compellingly strange it was that he should choose to describe Rose de Bercy by the name which she had ceased to bear during many years! Winter dispelled the scent of the joss-sticks by a mighty puff of honest tobacco smoke.

"Oh, come along," he growled, "let us eat – we are both in need of it. The flat is untenanted, of course. Very well, lock the door," he added, addressing the policeman. "Leave the key with the hall-porter, and tell him not to admit anybody, on any pretext whatsoever, until Mr. Furneaux and I come here in the morning."

CHAPTER III

A CHANGE OF ADDRESS

On the morning after the inquest on Rose de Bercy, the most miserable young man in London, in his own estimation, was Mr. Rupert Glendinning Osborne. Though utterly downcast and disconsolate, he was in excellent health, and might have eaten well of the good things on his breakfast table had he not thoughtlessly opened a newspaper while stirring his coffee.

Under other circumstances, he might have laughed at the atrocious photograph which depicted "Mr. Rupert Osborne arriving at the coroner's court." The camera had foreshortened an arm, deprived him of his right leg below the knee, discredited his tailor, and given him the hang-dog aspect of a convicted pickpocket, for he had been "snapped" at the moment of descent from his automobile, when a strong wind was blowing, and he had been annoyed by the presence of a gaping crowd.

The camera had lied, of course. In reality, he was a good-looking man of thirty, not tall or muscular, but of well-knit figure, elegant though by no means effeminate. For a millionaire, and a young one, he was by way of being a phenomenon. He cared little for society; drove his own horses, but was hardly ever seen in the Park; rode boldly to hounds, yet refused to patronize a racing stable. He seldom visited a theater, though he wrote well-informed articles on the modern French stage for the *New Review*; he preferred a pleasant dinner with a couple of friends to a banquet with hundreds of acquaintances; in a word, he conducted himself as a staid citizen whether in New York, or London, or Paris. Never had a breath of scandal or notoriety attached itself to his name until he was dragged into lurid prominence by the stupefying event of that fatal Tuesday evening.

Those who knew him best had expressed sheer incredulity when they first heard of his contemplated marriage with the French actress. But a man's friends, as a rule, are the worst judges of his probable choice of a partner for life: and Rupert Osborne was drawn to Rose de Bercy because she possessed in superabundance those lively qualities and volatile charms in which he was himself deficient.

There could be no manner of doubt, however, that some part of his quivering nervous system had been seared by statements made about her during the inquest. It was not soothing for a distraught lover to learn that Mademoiselle de Bercy's reminiscences of her youth were singularly inaccurate. She could not well have been born in a patrician château on the Loire, and yet be the daughter of a Jersey potato-grower. Her father, Jean Arnaud, was stated to be still living on a small farm near St. Heliers, whereas her own version of the family history was that Monsieur le Comte de Bercy did not survive the crash of the family fortunes in the Panama swindle. Other discrepancies were not lacking between official fact and romantic narrative. They gave Osborne the first glimpse of the abyss into which he had almost plunged. A loyal-hearted fellow, he shrank from the hateful consciousness that the hapless girl's tragic end had rescued him in all likelihood from another tragedy, bitter and long drawn out. But because he had been so foolish as to fall in love with a beautiful adventuress there was no reason why he should be blind and deaf when tardy common sense began to assert itself.

To a man who habitually shrank from the public eye, it was bad enough to be dragged into the fierce light that beats on the witness-box in an inquiry such as this, but it was far worse to feel in his inmost heart that he was now looked upon with suspicion by millions of people in England and America.

He could not shirk the meaning of the recorded evidence. The newspapers, it is true, had carefully avoided the ugly word alibi; but ninety per cent. of their readers could not fail to see that Rupert Osborne had escaped arrest solely by reason of the solid phalanx of testimony as to his movements on the Tuesday evening before and after the hour of the murder; the remaining ten per

cent. reviled the police, and protested, with more or less forceful adjectives, that "there was one law for the rich and another for the poor."

At the inquest itself, Osborne was too sorrow-laden and stunned to realize the significance of certain questions which now seemed to leap at him viciously from out the printed page.

"How were you dressed when you visited Miss de Bercy that afternoon?" the coroner had asked him.

"I wore a dark gray morning suit and black silk hat," he had answered.

"You did not change your clothing before going to the Ritz Hotel?"

"No. I drove straight there from Feldisham Mansions."

"Did you dress for dinner?"

"No. My friends and I discussed certain new regulations as to the proposed international polo tournament, and it was nearly eight o'clock before we concluded the business of the meeting, so we arranged to dine in the grill-room and go to a Vaudeville entertainment afterwards."

That statement had puzzled the coroner. He referred to his notes.

"To the Vaudeville?" he queried. "I thought you went to the Empire Theater?" and Osborne explained that Americans spoke of "vaudeville" in the same sense as Englishmen use the word "music-hall" or "variety."

"You were with your friends during the whole time between 6.30 p.m. and midnight?"

"Practically. I left them for a few minutes before dinner, but only to go to the writing-room, where I wrote two short letters."

"At what hour, as nearly as you can recollect?"

"About ten minutes to eight. I glanced at the clock when the letters were posted, as I wished to be sure of catching the American mail."

"Were both letters addressed to correspondents in America?"

"No, one only. The other was to a man about a dog."

A slight titter relieved the gray monotony of the court at this explanation, but the coroner frowned it down, and Rupert added that he was buying a retriever in readiness for the shooting season.

But the coroner's questions suddenly assumed a sinister import when William Campbell, driver of taxicab number X L 4001, stated that on the Tuesday evening, at 7.20, he had taken a gentleman dressed in a dark gray suit and a tall hat from the corner of Berkeley Street (opposite the Ritz Hotel) to the end of the street in Knightsbridge in which Feldisham Mansions were situated, had waited there for him for about fifteen minutes, and had brought him back to Berkeley Street.

"I thought I might know him again, sir, an', as I said yesterday –" the man continued, glancing at Rupert, but he was stopped peremptorily.

"Never mind what you said yesterday," broke in the coroner. "You will have another opportunity of telling the jury what happened subsequently. At present I want you to answer my questions only."

An ominous hush in the court betrayed the public appreciation of the issues that might lurk behind this deferred evidence. Rupert remembered looking at the driver with a certain vague astonishment, and feeling that countless eyes were piercing him without cause.

The hall-porter, too, Simmonds by name, introduced a further element of mystery by saying that at least two gentlemen had gone up the stairs after Mr. Osborne's departure in his automobile, and that one of them bore some resemblance to the young millionaire.

"Are you sure it was not Mr. Osborne?" said the coroner.

"Yes, sir – leastways, I'm nearly positive."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because Mr. Osborne, like all American gentlemen, uses the lift, sir."

"Can any stranger enter the Mansions without telling you their business?"

"Not as a rule, sir. But it does so happen that between seven an' eight o'clock I have a lot of things to attend to, and I often have to run round the corner to get a taxi for ladies and gentlemen goin' out to dinner or the theater."

So, there was a doubt, and Rupert Osborne had not realized its deadly application to himself until he read question and answer in cold type while he toyed with his breakfast on the day after the inquest, which, by request of Mr. Winter, had been adjourned for a fortnight.

It was well for such shreds of stoicism as remained in his tortured brain that the housemaid was still unable to give evidence, and that no mention was made of the stone ax-head found in Rose de Bercy's drawing-room. The only official witnesses called were the constable first summoned by the hall-porter, and the doctor who made the autopsy. The latter – who was positive that Mademoiselle de Bercy had not been dead many minutes when he was brought to her flat at ten minutes to eight – ascribed the cause of death to "injuries inflicted with a sharp instrument," and the coroner, who knew the trend of the inquiry, would not sate public curiosity by putting, or permitting the jury to put, any additional questions until the adjourned inquest. Neither Clarke nor Furneaux was present in court. To all seeming, Chief Inspector Winter was in charge of the proceedings on behalf of the police.

Rupert ultimately abandoned the effort to eat, shoved his chair away from the table, and determined to reperuse with some show of calmness and criticism, the practically verbatim report of the coroner's inquiry.

Then he saw clearly two things – Rose de Bercy had willfully misled him as to her past life, and he was now regarded by the public as her probable betrayer and certain murderer. There was no blinking the facts. He had almost committed the imprudence of marrying a woman unworthy of an honorable man's love, and, as if such folly called for condign punishment, he must rest under the gravest suspicion until her slayer was discovered and brought to justice.

Rupert Osborne's lot had hitherto been cast in pleasant places, but now he was face to face with a crisis, and it remained to be seen if the force that had kept three generations of ancestors in the forefront of the strenuous commercial warfare of Wall Street had weakened or wholly vanished in the person of their dilettante descendant.

At any rate, he did not flinch from the drab reality of fact. He read on, striving to be candid as to meanings and impartial in weighing them.

At the end of the evidence were two paragraphs setting forth the newspaper's own researches. The first of these ran:

Our correspondent at St. Heliers has ascertained that the father and sister of the deceased will leave the island by to-day's mail steamer for the double purpose of identifying their relative and attending the funeral. There can be no question that their first sad task will be in the nature of a formality. They both admit that Rose de Bercy was none other than Mirabel Arnaud. Mademoiselle Marguerite Arnaud, indeed, bears a striking resemblance to her wayward sister, while Monsieur Arnaud, though crippled with toil and rheumatism, shows the same facial characteristics that are so marked in his two daughters. The family never revealed to their neighbors in the village any knowledge of Mirabel's whereabouts. After her disappearance eight years ago her name was seldom, if ever, mentioned to any of their friends, and their obvious wishes in the matter soon came to be respected by would-be sympathizers. It is certain, however, that Marguerite, on one occasion, dared her father's anger and went to Paris to plead with her sister and endeavor to bring her home. She failed, as might be expected, since Rose de Bercy was then attaining the summit of her ambition by playing a small part in a play at the Gymnase, though at that period no one in Paris was able to foresee the remarkable success she was destined to achieve on the stage.

Each word cut like a knife. The printed statements were cruel, but the inferences were far worse. Rupert felt sick at heart; nevertheless he compelled himself to gather the sense of the next item:

It was a favorite pose of Mademoiselle de Bercy – using the name by which the dead actress was best known – to describe herself as an Anarchist. It is certain that she attended several Anarchist meetings in Paris, probably for amusement or for professional study of an interesting type, and in this connection it is a somewhat singular coincidence that Detective-Inspector Clarke, who was mentioned on Wednesday as being in charge of the police investigations into the murder, should have arrested two notorious Anarchists on the Thames Embankment yesterday shortly before the Tsar passed that way *en route* to the Guildhall. The two men, who refused to give any information as to their identity, were said to be none other than Emile Janoc and Antoine Descartes, both well-known French revolutionaries. They were brought before the Extradition Court, and ordered to be deported, the specific charge against them being the carrying of fire-arms without a license. It was stated that on each man was found an unloaded revolver.

So far as Rupert could judge, the newspaper was merely pandering to the craze for sensationalism in bracketing Rose de Bercy with a couple of unwashed scoundrels from Montmartre. On one occasion, indeed, she had mentioned to him her visits to an Anarchist club; but their object was patent when she exhibited a collection of photographs and laudatory press notices of herself in the stage part of a Russian lady of high rank who masqueraded as a Terrorist in order to save her lover from assassination.

"It would have been only fair," he growled savagely, "if the fellow who is raking up her past so assiduously had placed on record her appearance on the stage as *Marie Dukarovna*. And who is this detective who made the arrests? Clarke was not the name of the man I met yesterday."

Then he groaned. His glance had just caught a detailed description of himself, his tastes, his family history, and his wealth. It was reasonably accurate, and not unkindly in tone, but it grated terribly at the moment, and in sheer desperation of spirit he crushed the newspaper in his clenched hands.

At that instant his man entered. Even the quiet-voiced and impenetrable-faced Jenkins spoke in an awed tone when he announced:

"Chief Inspector Winter, of Scotland Yard, wishes to see you, sir."

"Very well, show him in; and don't be scared, Jenkins. He will not arrest *you*."

Rupert must have been stung beyond endurance before he would fling such a taunt at his faithful servitor. Jenkins, at a loss for a disclaimer, glanced reproachfully at the table.

"You have hardly eaten a morsel, sir," he said. "Shall I bring some fresh coffee and an egg?"

Then Rupert laughed grimly.

"Wait till I have seen Mr. Winter," he said. "Perhaps he may join me. If he refuses, Jenkins, be prepared for the worst."

But the Chief Inspector did not refuse. He admitted that coffee-drinking and smoking were his pet vices, and his breezy cheerfulness at once established him on good terms with his host.

"I want you to understand, Mr. Osborne, that my presence here this morning is entirely in your interests," he said when they were seated, and Rupert was tackling a belated meal. "The more fully we clear up any doubtful points as to your proceedings on Tuesday the more easy it will be for the police to drop you practically out of the inquiry except as an unimportant witness."

Rupert's heart warmed to this genial-mannered official.

"It is very kind of you to put things in that light when every newspaper in the country is prepared to announce my arrest at any moment," he replied.

Winter was astonished. His face showed it; his big blue eyes positively bulged with surprise.

"Arrest!" he cried. "Why should I arrest you, sir?"

"Well, after the chauffeur's evidence – "

"That is exactly what brings me here. Personally, I have no doubt whatsoever that you did not leave the Ritz Hotel between half-past six and nine o'clock on the evening of the murder. Two of your friends on the committee saw you writing those letters, and the clerk at the inquiry desk remembers supplying you with stamps. Just as a matter of form, you might give me the names of your correspondents?"

Rupert supplied the desired information, which Winter duly scribbled in a notebook, but it did not escape the American's usually quick perception that his visitor had already verified the statement made before the coroner. That being so, some other motive lay behind this visit. What was it?

Winter, at the moment, seemed to be fascinated by the leaf-color and aroma of the cigar which Jenkins had brought with the coffee. He puffed, smelled, pinched, and scrutinized – was completely absorbed, in fact.

"Don't you like it?" asked Osborne, smiling. The suggestion was almost staggering to the Chief Inspector.

"Why, of course I do," he cried. "This is a prize cigar. You young gentlemen who are lucky enough to command practically unlimited money can generally obtain anything you want, but I am bound to say, Mr. Osborne, that you could not buy a thousand cigars like this in London to-day, no matter what price you paid."

"I imagine you are right," said Rupert. "The estate on which that tobacco was grown is one of the smallest in Cuba, but it is on the old rich belt. My manager is a scientist. He knows to half an ounce per acre how much sulphate of potash to add each year."

"Sulphate of potash?" questioned Winter, ever ready to assimilate fresh lore on the subject of the weed.

"Yes, that is the secret of the flavor, plus the requisite conditions of soil and climate, of course. The tobacco plant is a great consumer of mineral constituents. A rusty nail, a pinch of salt, and a small lump of lime, placed respectively near the roots of three plants in the same row, will produce three absolutely different varieties of tobacco, but all three will be inferior to the plants removed from such influences."

"Dear me!" said Winter, "how very interesting!"

But to his own mind he was saying: "Why in the world did Furneaux refuse to meet this nice young fellow? Really, this affair grows more complex every hour."

Osborne momentarily forgot his troubles in the company of this affable official. It was comforting, too, that his hospitality should be accepted. Somehow, he felt certain that Winter would have declined it if any particle of suspicion had been attached to the giver, and therein his knowledge of men did not deceive him. With a lighter heart, therefore, than he would have thought possible a few minutes earlier, he, too, lit a cigar.

Winter saw that Rupert was waiting for him to resume the conversation momentarily broken. He began with a straightforward question.

"Now, Mr. Osborne," he said, "will you kindly tell me if it is true that you were about to marry Mademoiselle de Bercy?"

"It is quite true."

"How long have you known her?"

"Since she came to London last fall."

"I suppose you made no inquiries as to her past life?"

"No, none. I never gave a thought to such a thing."

"I suppose you see now that it would have been wiser had you done something of the kind?"

"Wisdom and love seldom go hand in hand."

The Chief Inspector nodded agreement. His profession had failed utterly to oust sentiment from his nature.

"At any rate," he said, "her life during the past nine months has been an open book to you?"

"We soon became friends. Since early in the spring I think I could tell you of every engagement Mademoiselle de Bercy fulfilled, and name almost every person she met, barring such trivialities as shopping fixtures and the rest."

"Ah; then you would know if she had an enemy?"

"I – think so. I have never heard of one. She had hosts of friends – all sympathetic."

"What was the precise object of your visit on Tuesday?"

"I took her a book on Sicily. We – we had practically decided on Taormina for our honeymoon. As I would be occupied until a late hour, she arranged to dine with Lady Knox-Florestan and go to the opera to hear *Pagliacci*. It was played after *Philémon et Baucis*, so the dinner was fixed for half-past eight."

"Would anyone except yourself and Lady Knox-Florestan be aware of that arrangement?"

"I think not."

"Why did she telephone to Lady Knox-Florestan at 7.30 and plead illness as an excuse for not coming to the dinner?"

Rupert looked thoroughly astounded. "That is the first I have heard of it," he cried.

"Could she have had any powerful reason for changing her plans?"

"I cannot say. Not to *my* knowledge, most certainly."

"Did she expect any visitor after your departure?"

"No. Two of her servants were out for the evening, and the housemaid would help her to dress."

Winter looked at the American with a gleam of curiosity when the housemaid was mentioned.

"Did this girl, the housemaid, open the door when you left?" he asked.

"No. I just rushed away. She admitted me, but I did not see her afterwards."

"Then she may have fancied that you took your departure much later?"

"Possibly, though hardly likely, since her room adjoins the entrance, and, as it happened, I banged the door accidentally in closing it."

Winter was glad that a man whom he firmly believed to be innocent of any share in the crime had made an admission that might have told against him under hostile examination.

"Suppose – just suppose – " he said, "that the housemaid, being hysterical with fright, gave evidence that you were in Feldisham Mansions at half-past seven – how would you explain it?"

"Your own words 'hysterical with fright' might serve as her excuse. At half-past seven I was arguing against the ever-increasing height of polo ponies, with the rest of the committee against me. Does the girl say any such thing?"

"Girls are queer sometimes," commented Winter airily. "But let that pass. I understand, Mr. Osborne, that you have given instructions to the undertaker?"

Rupert flinched a little.

"What choice had I in the matter?" he demanded. "I thought that Mademoiselle de Bercy was an orphan – that all her relatives were dead."

"Ah, yes. Even now, I fancy, you mean to attend the funeral to-morrow?"

"Of course. Do you imagine I would desert my promised wife at such an hour – no matter what was revealed – "

"No, Mr. Osborne, I did not think it for one instant. And that brings me to the main object of my visit. Please be advised by me – don't go to the funeral. Better still, leave London for a few days. Lose yourself till the day before the adjourned inquest."

"But why – in Heaven's name?"

"Because appearances are against you. The public mind – I had better be quite candid. The man in the street is a marvelous detective, in his own opinion. Being an idler, he will turn up in his

thousands at Feldisham Mansions and Kensal Green Cemetery to-morrow afternoon, and, if you are present, there may be a regrettable scene. Moreover, you will meet a warped old peasant named Jean Arnaud and a narrow-souled village girl in his daughter Marguerite. Take my advice – pack a kit-bag, jump into a cab, and bury yourself in some seaside town. Let me know where you are – as I may want to communicate with you – and – er – when you send your address, don't forget to sign your letter in the same way as you sign the hotel register."

Rupert rose and looked out of the window. He could not endure that another man should see the agony in his face.

"Are you in earnest?" he said, when he felt that his voice might be trusted.

"Dead in earnest, Mr. Osborne," came the quiet answer.

"You even advise me to adopt an alias?"

"Call it a *nom de voyage*," said Winter.

"I shall be horribly lonely. May I not take my valet?"

"Take no one. I suppose you can leave some person in charge of your affairs?"

"I have a secretary. But she and my servants will think my conduct very strange."

"I shall call here to-morrow and tell your secretary you have left London for a few days at my request. What is her name?"

"Prout – Miss Hylda Prout. She comes here at 11 a.m. and again at 3 p.m."

"I see. Then I may regard that matter as settled?"

Again there was silence for a time. Oddly enough, Rupert was conscious of a distinct feeling of relief.

"Very well," he said at last. "I shall obey you to the letter."

"Thank you. I am sure you are acting for the best."

Winter, whose eyes had noted every detail of the room while Rupert's back was turned, rose as if his mission were accomplished.

"Won't you have another cigar?" said Rupert.

"Well, yes. It is a sin to smoke these cigars so early in the day – "

"Let me send you a hundred."

"Oh, no. I am very much obliged, but – "

"Please allow me to do this. Don't you see? – if I tell Jenkins, in your presence, to pack and forward them, it will stifle a good deal of the gossip which must be going on even in my own household."

"Well – from that point of view, Mr. Osborne – "

"Ah, I cannot express my gratitude, but, when all this wretched business is ended, we must meet under happier conditions."

He touched a bell, and Jenkins appeared.

"Send a box of cigars to Chief Inspector Winter, at Scotland Yard, by special messenger," said Rupert, with as careless an air as he could assume.

Jenkins gurgled something that sounded like "Yes, sir," and went out hastily. Rupert spread his hands with a gesture of utmost weariness.

"You are right about the man in the street," he sighed. "Even my own valet feared that you had come to arrest me."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Winter.

But when Jenkins, discreetly cheerful, murmured "Good-day, sir," and the outer door was closed behind him, Winter's strong face wore its prizefighter aspect.

"Clarke *would* have arrested him," he said to himself. "But that man did not kill Mirabel Arnaud. Then who did kill her? *I* don't know, yet I believe that Furneaux guesses. *Who* did it? Damme, it beats me, and the greatest puzzle of all is to read the riddle of Furneaux."

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW LIFE

No sooner did Rupert begin to consider ways and means of adopting Winter's suggestion than he encountered difficulties. "Pack a kit-bag, jump into a cab, and bury yourself in some seaside town" might be the best of counsel; but it was administered in tabloid form; when analyzed, the ingredients became formidable. For instance, the Chief Inspector had apparently not allowed for the fact that a man in Osborne's station would certainly carry his name or initials on his clothing, linen, and portmanteaux, and on every article in his dressing-case.

Despite his other troubles – which were real enough to a man who loathed publicity – Rupert found himself smiling in perplexity when he endeavored to plan some means of hoodwinking Jenkins. Moreover, he could not help feeling that his identity would be proclaimed instantly when a sharp-eyed hotel valet or inquisitive chambermaid examined his belongings. He was sure that some of the newspapers would unearth a better portrait of himself than the libelous snapshot reproduced that day, in which event no very acute intelligence would be needed to connect "Osborne" or "R. G. O." with the half-tone picture. Of course, he could buy ready-made apparel, but the notion was displeasing; ultimately, he abandoned the task and summoned Jenkins.

Jenkins was one of those admirable servants – bred to perfection in London only – worthy of a coat of arms with the blazoned motto: "Leave it to me." His sallow, almost ascetic, face brightened under the trust reposed in him.

"It is now half-past ten, sir," he said. "Will it meet your convenience if I have everything ready by two o'clock?"

"I suppose so," said his master ruefully.

"What station shall I bring your luggage to, sir?"

"Oh, any station. Let me see – say Waterloo, main line."

"And you will be absent ten days or thereabouts, sir."

"That is the proposition as it stands now."

"Very well, sir. I shall want some money – not more than twenty pounds – "

Rupert opened a door leading to the library. He rented a two-story maisonette in Mayfair, with the drawing-room, dining-room, library, billiard-room and domestic offices grouped round the hall, while the upper floor was given over to bedrooms and dressing-rooms. His secretary was not arrived as yet; but he had already glanced through a pile of letters with the practiced eye of one who receives daily a large and varied correspondence.

He wrote a check for a hundred pounds, and stuffed the book into a breast pocket.

"There," he said to Jenkins, "cash that, buy what you want, and bring me the balance in five-pound notes."

"Yes, sir, but will you please remember to pack the clothes you are now wearing into a parcel, and post them to me this evening?"

"By gad, Jenkins, I should have forgotten that my name is stitched on to the back of the coat I am wearing. How will you manage about my other things?"

"Rip off the tabs, sir, and get you some new linen, unmarked."

"Good. But I may as well leave my checkbook here."

"No, sir, take it with you. You may want it. If you do, the money will be of more importance than the name."

"Right again, Socrates. I wish I might take you along, too, but our Scotland Yard friend said 'No,' so you must remain and answer callers."

"I have sent away more than a dozen this morning, sir."

"Oh? Who were they?"

"Newspaper gentlemen, sir, every one of 'em, though they tried various dodges to get in and have a word with you. If I were you, sir, I would drive openly in the motor to some big hotel, and let your car remain outside while you slip out by another door."

"Jenkins, you seem to be up to snuff in these matters."

"Well, sir, I had a good training with Lord Dunningham. His lordship was a very free and easy sort of gentleman, and I never did meet his equal at slipping a writer. They gave it up at last, and went in for what they call substituted service."

A bell rang, and they heard a servant crossing the hall.

"That will be Miss Prout, sir," said Jenkins. "What shall I tell her?"

"Nothing. Mr. Winter will see her in the morning. Now, let us be off out of this before she comes in."

Rupert was most unwilling to frame any subterfuge that might help to explain his absence to his secretary. She had been so manifestly distressed in his behalf the previous day, that he decided to avoid her now, being anxious not to hurt her feelings by any display of reticence as to his movements. As soon as the library door closed behind the newcomer, he went to his dressing-room and remained there until his automobile was in readiness. He was spoken to twice and snapshotted three times while he ran down the steps and crossed the pavement; but he gave no heed to his tormentors, and his chauffeur, quick to appreciate the fact that a couple of taxicabs were following, ran into Hyde Park by the nearest gate, thus shaking off pursuit, since vehicles licensed to ply for hire are not allowed to enter London's chief pleasure-ground.

"Yes," said Rupert to himself, "Winter is right. The solitary cliff and the deserted village for me during the next fortnight. But where are they to be found? England, with August approaching, is full to the brim."

He decided to trust to chance, and therein lay the germ of complications which might well have given him pause, could he have peered into the future.

Having successfully performed the trick of the cab "bilker" by leaving his motor outside a hotel, Rupert hurried away from the main stream of fashion along several narrow streets until his attention was caught by a tiny restaurant on which the day's eatables were scrawled in French. It was in Soho; an open-air market promised diversion; and he was wondering how winkles tasted, extracted from their shells with a pin, when some commotion arose at the end of an alley. A four-wheeled cab had wormed its way through a swarm of picturesque loafers, and was drawn up close to the kerb. Pavement and street were pullulating with child life, and the appearance from the interior of the cab of a couple of strongly-built, square-shouldered men seemed to send an electric wave through adults and children alike.

Instantly there was a rush, and Rupert was pinned in the crowd between a stout Frenchwoman and a young Italian who reeked of the kitchen.

"What is it, then?" he asked, addressing madame in her own language.

"They are police agents, those men there," she answered.

"Have they come to make an arrest?"

"But no, monsieur. Two misérables who call themselves Anarchists have been sent back to France, and the police are taking their luggage. A nice thing, chasing such scarecrows and letting that bad American who killed Mademoiselle de Bercy go free. Poor lady! I saw her many times. Ah, *mon Dieu*, how I wept when I read of her terrible end!"

Rupert caught his breath. So he was judged and found guilty even in the gutter!

"Perhaps the police know that Monsieur Osborne did not kill her," he managed to say in a muffled tone.

"Oh, là, là!" cried the woman. "He has money, *ce vilain* Osborne!"

The ironic phrase was pitiless. It denounced, condemned, explained. Rupert forced a laugh.

"Truly, money can do almost anything," he said.

A detective came out of the passage, laden with dilapidated packages. The woman smiled broadly, saying:

"My faith, they do not prosper, those Anarchists."

Rupert edged his way through the crowd. On the opposite side of the street the contents bills of the early editions of the evening newspapers glared at him: "West End murder – Relatives sail from Jersey." "Portrait sketch of Osborne"; "Paris Life of Rose de Bercy"; the horror of it all suddenly stifled his finer impulses: from that hour Rupert squared his shoulders and meant to scowl at the jeering multitude.

Probably because he was very rich, he cultivated simple tastes in the matter of food. At one o'clock he ate some fruit and a cake or two, drank a glass of milk, and noticed that the girl in the cashier's desk was actually looking at his own "portrait sketch" when he tendered her a shilling. About half-past one he took a hansom to Waterloo Station, where he bought a map and railway guide at the bookstall, and soon decided that Tormouth on the coast of Dorset offered some prospect of a quiet anchorage.

So, when Jenkins came with a couple of new leather bags, Rupert bought a third-class ticket. Traveling in a corridor compartment, he heard the Feldisham Mansions crime discussed twice during the afternoon. Once he was described as a "reel bad lot – one of them fellers 'oo 'ad too little to do an' too much to do it on." When, at Winchester, these critics alighted, their places were taken by a couple of young women; and the train had hardly started again before the prettier of the two called her companion's attention to a page in an illustrated paper.

"Poor thing! Wasn't she a beauty?" she asked, pointing to a print of the Academy portrait of Mademoiselle de Bercy.

"You can never tell – them photographs are so touched up," was the reply.

"There's no touching up of Osborne, is there?" giggled the other, looking at the motor-car photograph.

"No, indeed. He looks as if he had just done it," said the friend.

A lumbering omnibus took him to Tormouth. At the Swan Hotel he haggled about the terms, and chose a room at ten shillings per diem instead of the plutocratic apartment first offered at twelve and six. In the register he signed "R. Glyn, London," and at once wrote to Winter. He almost laughed when he found that Jenkins's address on the label was some street in North London, where that excellent man's sister dwelt.

He found that Tormouth possessed one great merit – an abundance of sea air. It was a quiet old place, a town of another century, cut off from the rush of modern life by the frenzied opposition to railways displayed by its local magnates fifty years earlier. Rupert could not have selected a better retreat. He dined, slept, ate three hearty meals next day, and slept again with a soundness that argued him free from care.

But newspapers reached even Tormouth, and, on the second morning after his arrival, Osborne's bitter mood returned when he read an account of Rose de Bercy's funeral. The crowds anticipated by Winter were there, the reporters duly chronicled Rupert's absence, and there could be no gainsaying the eagerness of the press to drag in his name on the slightest pretext.

But the arrows of outrageous fortune seemed to be less barbed when he found himself on a lonely path that led westward along the cliffs, and his eyes dwelt on the far-flung loveliness of a sapphire sea reflecting the tint of a turquoise sky. A pleasant breeze that just sufficed to chisel the surface of the water into tiny facets flowed lazily from the south. From the beach, some twenty feet or less beneath the low cliff, came the murmur of a listless tide. On the swelling uplands of Dorset shone glorious patches of gold and green, with here and there a hamlet or many-ricked farm, while in front, a mile away, the cliff climbed with a gentle curve to a fine headland that jutted out from the shore-line like some great pier built by a genie for the caravels of giants. It was a morning to dispel

shadows, and the cloud lifted from Rupert's heart under its cheery influence. He stopped to light a cigar, and from that moment Rupert's regeneration was complete.

"It is a shame to defile this wonderful atmosphere with tobacco smoke," he mused, "so I must salve my conscience by burning incense to the spirit of the place. That sort of spirit is invariably of the female gender. Where is the lady? Invisible, of course."

Without the least expectation of discovering either fay or mortal on the yellow sands that spread their broad highway between sea and cliff, Rupert stepped off the path on to the narrow strip of turf that separated it from the edge and looked down at the beach. Greatly to his surprise, a girl sat there, painting. She had rigged a big Japanese umbrella to shield herself and her easel from the sun. Its green-hued paper cover, gay with pink dragons and blue butterflies, brought a startling note of color into the placid foreground. The girl, or young woman, wore a very smart hat, but her dress was a grayish brown costume, sufficiently indeterminate in tint to conceal the stains of rough usage in climbing over rocks, or forcing a way through rank vegetation. Indeed, it was chosen, in the first instance, so that a dropped brush or a blob of paint would not show too vivid traces; and this was well, for some telepathic action caused the wearer to lift her eyes to the cliff the very instant after Rupert's figure broke the sky-line above the long grasses nodding on the verge. The result was lamentable. She squeezed half a tube of crimson lake over her skirt in a movement of surprise at the apparition.

She was annoyed, and, of course, blamed the man.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "Why creep up in that stealthy fashion?"

"I didn't," said Rupert.

"But you did." This with a pout, while she scraped the paint off her dress with a palette knife.

"I am very sorry that you should have cause to think so," he said. "Will you allow me to explain

— "

As he stepped forward, lifting his hat, the girl cried a warning, but too late; a square yard of dry earth crumbled into dust beneath him, and he fell headlong. Luckily, the strata of shale and marl which formed the coast-line at that point had been scooped by the sea into a concavity, with a ledge, which Rupert reached before he had dropped half-way. Some experience of Alpine climbing had made him quick to decide how best to rectify a slip, and he endeavored now to spring rather than roll downward to the beach, since he had a fleeting vision of a row of black rocks that guarded the foot of the treacherous cliff. He just managed to clear an ugly boulder that would have taken cruel toll of bruised skin, if no worse, had he struck it, but he landed on a smooth rock coated with seaweed. Exactly what next befell neither he nor the girl ever knew. He performed some wild gyration, and was brought up forcibly by the bamboo shaft of the umbrella, to which he found himself clinging in a sitting posture. His trousers were split across both knees, his coat was ripped open under the left arm, and he felt badly bruised; nevertheless, he looked up into the girl's frightened face, and laughed, on which the fright vanished from her eyes, and she, too, laughed, with such ready merriment and display of white teeth, that Rupert laughed again. He picked himself up and stretched his arms slowly, for something had given him a tremendous thump in the ribs.

"Are you hurt?" cried the girl, anxiety again chasing the mirth from her expressive features.

"No," he said, after a deep breath had convinced him that no bones were broken. "I only wished to explain that your word 'stealthy' was undeserved."

"I withdraw it, then... I saw you were a stranger, so it is my fault that you fell. I ought to have told you about that dangerous cliff instead of pitching into you because you startled me."

"I can't agree with you there," smiled Rupert. "We were both taken by surprise, but I might have known better than to stand so near the edge. Good job I was not a mile farther west," and he nodded in the direction of the distant headland.

"Oh, please don't think of it, or I shall dream to-night of somebody falling over the Tor."

"Is that the Tor?" he asked.

"Yes; don't you know? You are visiting Tormouth, I suppose?"

"I have been here since the day before yesterday, but my local knowledge is nil."

"Well, if I were you, I should go home and change my clothes. How did your coat get torn? Are you sure you are not injured?"

He turned to survey the rock on which his feet had slipped. Between it and the umbrella the top of a buried boulder showed through the deep sand, ever white and soft at highwater mark.

"I am inclined to believe that I butted into that fellow during the hurricane," he said. Then, feeling that an excuse must be forthcoming, if he wished to hear more of this girl's voice, and look for a little while longer into her face, he threw a plaintive note into a request.

"Would you mind if I sat down for a minute or so?" he asked. "I feel a bit shaken. After the briefest sort of rest I shall be off to the Swan."

"Sit down at once," she said with ready sympathy. "Here, take this," and she made to give him the canvas chair from which she had risen at the first alarm.

He dropped to the sand with suspicious ease.

"I shall be quite comfortable here," he said. "Please go on with your painting. I always find it soothing to watch an artist at work."

"I must be going home now," she answered. "I obtain this effect only at a certain stage of tide, and early in the day. You see, the Tor changes his appearance so rapidly when the sun travels round to the south."

"Do you live at Tormouth?" he ventured to ask.

"Half a mile out."

"Will you allow me to carry something for you? I find that I have broken two ribs – of your umbrella," he added instantly, seeing that those radiant eyes of hers had turned on him with quick solicitude.

"Pity," she murmured, "bamboo is so much harder to mend than bone. No – you will not carry anything. I think, if you are staying at the Swan, you will find a path up a little hollow in the cliff about a hundred yards from here."

"Yes, and if you, too, are going – "

"In the opposite direction."

"Ah, well," he said, "I am a useless person, it seems. Good-by. May I fall at your feet again to-morrow?"

The absurd question brought half a smile to her lips. She began to reply: "Worship so headlong – "

Then she saw that which caused her face to blanch.

"Why, your right hand is smothered in blood – something has happened – "

He glanced at his hand, which a pebble had cut on one of the knuckles; and he valiantly resisted the temptation that presented itself, and stood upright.

"It is a mere scratch," he assured her. "If I wash it in salt water it will be healed before I reach Tormouth. Good-by – mermaid. I believe you live in a cavern – out there – beneath the Tor. Some day soon I shall swim out among the rocks and look for you."

With that he stooped to recover his hat, walked seaward to find a pool, and held his hand in the water until the wound was cauterized. Then he lit another cigar, and saw out of the tail of his eye that the girl was now on the top of the cliff at some distance to the west.

"I wonder who she is," he murmured. "A lady, at any rate, and a very charming one."

And the girl was saying:

"Who is he? – A gentleman, I see. American? Something in the accent, perhaps. Or perhaps not. Americans don't come to torpid old Tormouth."

CHAPTER V

THE MISSING BLADE

On that same morning of the meeting on the sands at Tormouth, Inspector Clarke, walking southward down St. Martin's Lane toward Scotland Yard, had a shock. Clarke was hardly at the moment in his best mood, for to the natural vinegar of his temperament a drop of lemon, or of gall, had been added within the last few days. That morning at breakfast he had explained matters with a sour mouth to Mrs. Clarke.

"Oh, it was all a made-up job between Winter and Furneaux, and I was only put on to the Anarchists to make room for Furneaux – that was it. The two Anarchists weren't up to any mischief – 'Anarchists' was all a blind, that's what '*Anarchists*' was. But that's the way things are run now in the Yard, and there's no fair play going any more. Furneaux must have Feldisham Mansions, of course; Furneaux this, and Furneaux that – of course. But wait: he hasn't solved it yet! and he isn't going to; no, and I haven't done with it yet, not by a long way... Now, where do you buy these eggs? Just look at this one."

The fact was, now that the two Anarchists, Descartes and Janoc, had been deported by the Court, and were gone, Clarke suddenly woke to find himself disillusioned, dull, excluded from the fun of the chase. But, as he passed down St. Martin's Lane that morning, his underlooking eyes, ever on the prowl for the "confidence men" who haunt the West End, saw a sight that made him doubt if he was awake. There, in a little by-street to the east, under the three balls of a pawnbroker's, he saw, or dreamt that he saw – Émile Janoc! – Janoc, whom he *knew* to be in Holland, and Janoc was so deep, so lost, in talk with a girl, that he could not see Clarke standing there, looking at him.

And Clarke knew the girl, too! It was Bertha Seward, the late cook of the murdered actress, Rose de Bercy.

Could he be mistaken as to Janoc? he asked himself. Could *two* men be so striking to the eye, and so alike – the lank figure, stooping; the long wavering legs, the clothes hanging loose on him; the scraggy throat with the bone in it; the hair, black and plenteous as the raven's breast, draping the sallow-dark face; the eyes so haggard, hungry, unresting. Few men were so picturesque: few so greasy, repellent. And there could be no mistake as to Bertha Seward – a small, thin creature, with whitish hair, and little Chinese eyes that seemed to twinkle with fun – it was she!

And how earnest was the talk!

Clarke saw Janoc clasp his two long hands together, and turn up his eyes to the sky, seeming to beseech the girl or, through her, the heavens. Then he offered her money, which she refused; but, when he cajoled and insisted, she took it, smiling. Shaking hands, they parted, and Janoc looked after Bertha Seward as she hurried, with a sort of stealthy haste, towards the Strand. Then he turned, and found himself face to face with Clarke.

For a full half-minute they looked contemplatively, eye to eye, at one another.

"Janoc?" said Clarke.

"That is my name for one moment, sare," said Janoc politely in a very peculiar though fluent English: "and the yours, sare?"

"Unless you have a very bad memory you know mine! How on earth come you to be here, Émile Janoc?"

"England is free country, sare," said Janoc with a shrug; "I see not the why I must render you account of movement. Only I tell you this time, because you are so singular familiarly with my name of family, you deceive yourself as to my little name. I have, it is true, a brother named Émile – "

Clarke looked with a hard eye at him. The resemblance, if they were two, was certainly very strong. Since it seemed all but impossible that Émile Janoc should be in England, he accepted the statement grudgingly.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind letting me see your papers?" he asked.

Janoc bowed.

"That I will do with big pleasure, sare," he said, and produced a passport recently viséd in Holland, by which it appeared that his name was not Émile, but Gaston.

They parted with a bow on Janoc's side and a nod on Clarke's; but Clarke was puzzled.

"Something queer about this," he thought. "I'll keep my eye on *him*... What was he doing talking like that —*so earnest*— to the actress's cook? Suppose she was murdered by Anarchists? It is certain that she was more or less mixed up with them — more, perhaps, than is known. Why did those two come over the night after her murder? — for it's clear that they had no design against the Tsar. I'll look into it on my own. Easy, now, Clarke, my boy, and may be you'll come out ahead of Furneaux, Winter, and all the lot in the end."

When he arrived at his Chief's office in the Yard, he mentioned to Winter his curious encounter with the other Janoc, but said not a word of Bertha Seward, since the affair of the murder was no longer his business, officially.

Winter paid little heed to Janoc, whether Émile or Gaston, for Furneaux was there with him, and the two were head to head, discussing the murder, and the second sitting of the inquest was soon to come. Indeed, Clarke heard Winter say to Furneaux:

"I promised Mr. Osborne to give some sort of excuse to his servants for his flight from home. I was so busy that I forgot it. Perhaps you will see to that, too, for me."

"Glad you mentioned it. I intended going there at once," Furneaux said in that subdued tone which seemed to have all at once come upon him since Rose de Bercy was found lying dead in Feldisham Mansions.

"Well, then, from henceforth everything is in your hands," said Winter. "Here I hand you over our dumb witness" — and he held out to Furneaux the blood-soiled ax-head of flint that had battered Rose de Bercy's face.

He was not sure — he wondered afterwards whether it was positively a fact — but he fancied that for the tenth part of a second Furneaux shrank from taking, from touching, that object of horror — a notion so odd and fantastic that it affected Winter as if he had fancied that the poker had lifted its head for the tenth part of a second. But almost before the conceit took form, Furneaux was coolly placing the celt in his breast-pocket, and standing up to go.

Furneaux drove straight, as he had said, to Mayfair, and soon was being ushered into Osborne's library, where he found Miss Prout, the secretary, with her hat on, busy opening and sorting the morning's correspondence.

He introduced himself, sat beside her, and, while she continued with her work, told her what had happened — how Osborne had been advised to disappear till the popular gale of ill-will got stilled a little.

"Ah, that's how it was," the girl said, lifting interested eyes to his. "I was wondering," and she pinned two letters together with the neatness of method and order.

Furneaux sat lingeringly with her, listening to an aviary of linnets that prattled to the bright sunlight that flooded the library, and asking himself whether he had ever seen hair so glaringly red as the lady secretary's — a great mass of it that wrapped her head like a flame.

"And where has Mr. Osborne gone to?" she murmured, making a note in shorthand on the back of one little bundle of correspondence.

"Somewhere by the coast — I think," said Furneaux.

"West coast? East coast?"

"He didn't write to me: he wrote to my Chief" – for, though Furneaux well knew where Osborne was, his retreat was a secret.

The girl went on with her work, plying the paper-knife, now jotting down a memorandum, now placing two or more kindred letters together: for every hospital and institution wrote to Osborne, everyone who wanted money for a new flying machine, or had a dog or a hunter to sell, or intended to dine and speechify, and send round the hat.

"It's quite a large batch of correspondence," Furneaux remarked.

"Half of these," the girl said, "are letters of abuse from people who never heard Mr. Osborne's name till the day after that poor woman was killed. All England has convicted him before he is tried. It seems unfair."

"Yes, no doubt. But 'to understand is to pardon,' as the proverb says. They have to think something, and when there is only one thing for them to think, they think it – meaning well. It will blow over in time. Don't you worry."

"Oh, I! – What do I care what forty millions of vermin choose to say or think?"

She pouted her pretty lips saucily.

"Forty – millions – of vermin," cried Furneaux; "that's worse than Carlyle."

Hylde Prout's swift hands plied among her papers. She made no answer; and Furneaux suddenly stood up.

"Well, you will mention to the valet and the others how the matter stands as to Mr. Osborne. He is simply avoiding the crowd – that is all. Good-day."

Hylde Prout rose, too, and Furneaux saw now how tall she was, well-formed and lithe, with a somewhat small face framed in that nest of red hair. Her complexion was spoiled and splashed with freckles, but otherwise she was dainty-featured and pretty – mouth, nose, chin, tiny, all except the wide-open eyes.

"So," she said to Furneaux as she put out her hand, "you won't let me know where Mr. Osborne is? I may want to write to him on business."

"Why, didn't I tell you that he didn't write to me?"

"That was only a blind."

"Dear me! A blind... It is the truth, Miss Prout."

"Tell that to someone else."

"What, don't you like the truth?"

"All right, keep the information to yourself, then."

"Good-by – I mustn't allow myself to dally in this charming room with the linnets, the sunlight, and the lady."

For a few seconds she seemed to hesitate. Then she said suddenly: "Yes, it's very nice in here. That door there leads into the morning room, and that one yonder, at the side – "

Her voice dropped and stopped; Furneaux appeared hardly to have heard, or, if hearing, to be merely making conversation.

"Yes, it leads where?" he asked, looking at her. Now, her eyes, too, dropped, and she murmured: "Into the museum."

"The – ! Well, naturally, Mr. Osborne is a connoisseur – quite so, only I rather expected you to say 'a picture gallery.' Is it – open to inspection? Can one – ?"

"It is open, certainly: the door is not locked, But there's nothing much – "

"Oh, do let me have a look around, and come with me, if it will not take long. No one is more interested in curios than I."

"I – will, if you like," said the girl with a strange note of confidence in her voice, and led the way into the museum.

Furneaux found himself in a room, small, but full of riches. On a central table were several illuminated missals and old Hoch-Deutsch MSS., some ancient timepieces, and a collection of

enameled watches of Limoges. Around the walls, open or in cabinets, were arms, blades of Toledo, minerals arranged on narrow shelves, an embalmed chieftain's head from Mexico, and many other bizarre objects.

Hylde Prout knew the name and history of every one, and murmured an explanation as Furneaux bent in scrutiny.

"Those are what are called 'celts,'" she said; "they are not very uncommon, and are found in every country – made of flint, mostly, and used as ax-heads by the ancients. These rough ones on this side are called Palæolithic – five hundred thousand years old, some of them; and these finer ones on this side are Neolithic, not quite so old – though there isn't much to choose in antiquity when it comes to hundreds of thousands! Strange to say, one of the Neolithic ones has been missing for some days – I don't know whether Mr. Osborne has given it away or not?"

The fact that one *was* missing was, indeed, quite obvious, for the celts stood in a row, stuck in holes drilled in the shelf; and right in the midst of the rank gaped one empty hole, a dumb little mouth that yet spoke.

"Yes, curious things," said Furneaux, bending meditatively over them. "I remember seeing pictures of them in books. Every one of these stones is stained with blood."

"Blood!" cried the girl in a startled way.

"Well, they were used in war and the chase, weren't they? Every one of them has given agony, every one would be red, if we saw it in its true color."

Red was also the color of Furneaux's cheek-bones at the moment – red as hectic; and he was conscious of it, as he was conscious also that his eyes were wildly alight. Hence, he continued a long time bending over the "celts" so that Miss Prout might not see his face. His voice, however, was calm, since he habitually spoke in jerky, clipped syllables that betrayed either no emotion or too much.

When he turned round, it was to move straight to a little rack on the left, in which glittered a fine array of daggers – Japanese kokatanas, punals of Salamanca, cangiars of Morocco, bowie-knives of old California, some with squat blades, coming quickly to a point, some long and thin to transfix the body, others meant to cut and gash, each with its label of minute writing.

Furneaux's eye had duly noted them before, but he had passed them without stopping. Now, after seeing the celts, he went back to them.

To his surprise, Miss Prout did not come with him. She stood looking on the ground, her lower lip somewhat protruded, silent, obviously distraught.

"And these, Miss Prout?" chirped he, "are they of high value?"

She neither answered nor moved.

"Perhaps you haven't studied their history?" ventured Furneaux again.

Now, all at once, she moved to the rack of daggers, and without saying a word, tapped with the fore-finger of her right hand, and kept on tapping, a vacant hole in the rack, though her eyes peered deeply into Furneaux's face. And for the first time Furneaux made acquaintance with the real splendor of her eyes – eyes that lived in sleep, torpid like the dormouse; but when they woke, woke to such a lambency of passion that they fascinated and commanded like the basilisk's.

With eyes so alight she now kept peering at Furneaux, standing tall above him, tapping at the empty hole.

"Oh, I see," muttered Furneaux, *his* eyes, too, alight like live coals, "there's an article missing here, also – one from the celts, one from the daggers."

"He is innocent!" suddenly cried Hylde Prout, in a tempest of passionate reproach.

"She loves him," thought Furneaux.

And the girl thought: "He knew before now that these things were missing. His acting would deceive every man, but not every woman. How glad I am that I drew him on!"

Now, though the fact of the discovery of the celt by Inspector Clarke under the dead actress's piano had not been published in the papers, the fact that she had been stabbed through the eye by

a long blade with blunt edges was known to all the world. There was nothing strange in this fierce outburst of Osborne's trusted secretary, nor that tears should spring to her eyes.

"Mr. Furneaux, he is innocent," she wailed in a frenzy. "Oh, he is! You noticed me hesitate just now to bring you in here: well, *this* was the reason – this, this, this – " she tapped with her forefinger on the empty hole – "for I knew that you would see this, and I knew that you would be jumping to some terrible conclusion as to Mr. Osborne."

"Conclusion, no," murmured Furneaux comfortingly – "I avoid conclusions as traps for the unwary. Interesting, of course, that's all. Tell me what you know, and fear nothing. Conclusion, you say! I don't jump to conclusions. Tell me what was the shape of the dagger that has disappeared."

She was silent again for many seconds. She was wrung with doubt, whether to speak or not to speak.

At last she voiced her agony.

"Either I must refuse to say, or I must tell the truth – and if I tell the truth, you will think – "

She stopped again, all her repose of manner fled.

"You don't know what I will think," put in Furneaux. "Sometimes I think the most unexpected things. The best way is to give me the plain facts. The question is, whether the blade that has gone from there was shaped like the one supposed to have committed the crime in the flat?"

"It was labeled 'Saracen Stiletto: about 1150,'" muttered the girl brokenly, looking Furneaux straight in the face, though the fire was now dead in her eyes. "It had a square bone handle, with a crescent carved on one of the four faces – a longish, thin blade, like a skewer, only not round – with blunt-edged corners to it."

Furneaux took up a little tube containing radium from a table at his hand, looked at it, and put it down again.

Hylde Prout was too distraught to see that his hand shook a little. It was half a minute before he spoke.

"Well, all that proves nothing, though it is of interest, of course," he said nonchalantly. "How long has that stiletto been lying there?"

"Since – since I entered Mr. Osborne's employment, twelve months ago."

"And you first noticed that it was gone – when?"

"On the second afternoon after the murder, when I noticed that the celt, too, was gone."

"The second – I see."

"I wondered what had become of them! I could imagine that Mr. Osborne might have given the celt to some friend. But the stiletto was so rare a thing – I couldn't think that he would give that. I assumed – I assume – that they were stolen. But, then, by whom?"

"That's the question," said Furneaux.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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