HUME FERGUS

THE MYSTERY QUEEN

Fergus Hume

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Hume F.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A STRANGE VISITOR

"A penny for your thoughts, dad," cried Lillian, suppressing a school-girl desire to throw one of the nuts on her plate at her father and rouse him from his brown study.

Sir Charles Moon looked up with a start, and drew his bushy gray eye-brows together. "Some people would give more than that to know them, my dear."

"What sort of people?" asked the young man who sat beside Lillian, industriously cracking nuts for her consumption.

"Dangerous people," replied Sir Charles grimly, "very dangerous, Dan."

Mrs. Bolstreath, fat, fair, and fifty, Lillian's paid companion and chaperon, leaned back complacently. She had enjoyed an excellent dinner: she was beautifully dressed: and shortly she would witness the newest musical comedy; three very good reasons for her amiable expression. "All people are dangerous to millionaires," she remarked, pointing the compliment at her employer, "since all people enjoy life with wealth, and wish to get the millionaire's money honestly or dishonestly."

"The people you mention have failed to get mine, Mrs. Bolstreath," was the millionaire's dry response.

"Of course I speak generally and not of any particular person, Sir Charles."

"I am aware of it," he answered, nodding and showed a tendency to relapse into his meditation, but that his daughter raised her price for confession.

"A sixpence for your thoughts, dad, a shilling-ten shillings-then one pound, you insatiable person."

"My kingdom for an explicit statement," murmured Dan, laying aside the crackers. "Lillian, my child, you must not eat any more nuts or you will be having indigestion."

"I believe dad has indigestion already."

"Some people will have it very badly before I am done with them," said Sir Charles, not echoing his daughter's laughter; then, to prevent further questions being asked, he addressed himself to the young man. "How are things going with you, Halliday?"

When Sir Charles asked questions thus stiffly, Dan knew that he was not too well pleased, and guessed the reason, which had to do with Lillian, and with Lillian's friendly attitude towards a swain not overburdened with money-to wit, his very own self-who replied diplomatically. "Things are going up with me, sir, if you mean aeroplanes."

"Frivolous! Frivolous!" muttered the big man seriously, "as a well-educated young man who wants money, you should aim at higher things."

"He aims at the sun," said Lillian gaily, "how much higher do you expect him to aim, dad?"

"Aiming at the sun is he?" said Moon heavily, "h'm! he'll be like that classical chap who flew too high and came to smash."

"Do you mean Icarus or Phaeton, Sir Charles?" asked Mrs. Bolstreath, who, having been a governess, prided herself upon exceptional knowledge.

"I don't know which of the two, perhaps one, perhaps both. But he flew in an aeroplane like Dan here, and came to grief."

"Oh!" Lillian turned distinctly pale. "I hope, Dan, you won't come to grief."

Before the guest could reply, Sir Charles reassured his daughter. "Naught was never in danger," he said, still grim and unsmiling, "don't trouble, Lillian, my dear. Dan won't come to grief in that way, although he may in another."

Lillian opened her blue eyes and stared while young Halliday grew crimson and fiddled with the nut-shells. "I don't know what you mean, dad?" said the girl after a puzzled pause.

"I think Dan does," rejoined her father, rising and pushing back his chair slowly. He looked at his watch, "Seven-thirty; you have plenty of time to see your play, which does not begin until nine," he added, walking towards the door. "Mrs. Bolstreath, I should like to speak with you."

"But, dad-"

"My dear Lillian, I have no time to wait. There is an important appointment at nine o'clock here, and afterwards I must go to the House. Go and enjoy yourself, but don't" – here his stern gray eyes rested on Dan's bent head in a significant way-"don't be foolish. Mrs. Bolstreath," he beckoned, and left the room.

"Oh!" sighed the chaperon-governess-companion, for she was all three, a kind of modern Cerebus, guarding the millionaire's child. "I thought it would come to this!" and she also looked significantly at Halliday before she vanished to join her employer.

Lillian stared at the closed door through which both her father and Mrs. Bolstreath had passed, and then looked at Dan, sitting somewhat disconsolately at the disordered dinner-table. She was a delicately pretty girl of a fair, fragile type, not yet twenty years of age, and resembled a shepherdess of Dresden china in her dainty perfection. With her pale golden hair, and rose-leaf complexion, arrayed in a simple white silk frock with snowy pearls round her slender neck, she looked like a wraith of faint mist. At least Dan fancifully thought so, as he stole a glance at her frail beauty, or perhaps she was more like a silver-point drawing, exquisitely fine. But whatever image love might find to express her loveliness, Dan knew in his hot passion that she was the one girl in the world for him. Lillian Halliday was a much better name for her than Lillian Moon.

Dan himself was tall and slim, dark and virile, with a clear-cut, clean-shaven face suggestive of strength and activity. His bronzed complexion showed an open-air life, while the eagle look in his dark eyes was that new vast-distance expression rapidly being acquired by those who devote themselves to aviation. No one could deny Dan's good looks or clean life, or daring nature, and he was all that a girl could desire in the way of a fairy prince. But fathers do not approve of fairy princes unless they come laden with jewels and gold. To bring such to Lillian was rather like taking coals to Newcastle since her father was so wealthy; but much desires more, and Sir Charles wanted a rich son-in-law. Dan could not supply this particular adjective, and therefore-as he would have put it in the newest slang of the newest profession-was out of the fly. Not that he intended to be, in spite of Sir Charles, since love can laugh at stern fathers as easily as at bolts and bars. And all this time Lillian stared at the door, and then at Dan, and then at her plate, putting two and two together. But in spite of her feminine intuition, she could not make four, and turned to her lover-for that Dan was, and a declared lover too-for an explanation. "What does dad mean?" Dan raised his handsome head and laughed as grimly as Sir Charles had done earlier. "He means that I shan't be asked to dinner any more."

"Why? You have done nothing."

"No; but I intend to do something."

"What's that?" Dan glanced at the closed door and seeing that there was no immediate chance of butler or footmen entering took her in his arms. "Marry you," he whispered between two kisses. "There's no intention about that," pouted the girl; "we have settled that ever so long ago."

"So your father suspects, and for that reason he is warning Mrs. Bolstreath."

"Warning the dragon," said Miss Moon, who used the term quite in an affectionate way, "why, the dragon is on our side."

"I daresay your father guesses as much. For that reason I'll stake my life that he is telling her at this moment she must never let us be together alone after this evening. After all, my dear, I don't

see why you should look at me in such a puzzled way. You know well enough that Sir Charles wants you to marry Curberry."

"Marry Lord Curberry," cried Lillian, her pale skin coloring to a deep rose hue; "why I told dad I wouldn't do that." "Did you tell dad that you loved me?"

"No. There's no need to," said the girl promptly. Dan coughed drily. "I quite agree with you," he said rising, "there's no need to, since every time I look at you, I give myself away. But you surely understand, darling, that as I haven't a title and I haven't money, I can't have you. Hothouse grapes are for the rich and not for a poor devil like me."

"You might find a prettier simile," laughed Lillian, not at all discomposed, although she now thoroughly understood the meaning of her father's abrupt departure with Mrs. Bolstreath. Then she rose and took Dan by the lapels of his coat, upon which he promptly linked her to himself by placing both arms round her waist. "Dearest," she said earnestly, "I shall marry you and you only. We have been brought up more or less together, and we have always loved one another. Dad was your guardian: you have three hundred a year of your own, and if we marry dad can give us plenty, and-"

"I know all that," interrupted Halliday, placing her arms round his neck, "and it is just because Sir Charles knows also, that he will never consent to our marriage. I knew what was in the wind weeks ago, darling heart, and every day I have been expecting what has occurred to-night. For that reason, I have come here as often as possible and have arranged for you and the dragon to go to the theatre to-night. But, believe me, Lillian, it will be for the last time. To-morrow I shall receive a note saying that I am to stay away from Lord Curberry's bride."

"I'm not his bride and I never shall be," stamped Lillian, and the tears came into her pretty eyes, whereupon Dan, as a loyal lover, wiped them away with his pocket-handkerchief tenderly, "and-and-" she faltered. "And-and-" he mocked, knowing her requirements, which led him to console her with a long and lingering kiss. "Oh!" he sighed and Lillian, nestling in his arms, echoed the sigh. The moment of perfect understanding and perfect love held them until the sudden opening of the door placed Dan on one side of the table and Lillian on the other. "It won't do, my dears," said the new-comer, who was none other than Mrs. Bolstreath, flaming with wrath, but not, as the lovers found later, at them. "I know quite well that Dan hasn't wasted his time in this league-divided wooing."

"We thought that one of the servants-" began the young man, when Mrs. Bolstreath interrupted. "Well, and am I not one of the servants? Sir Charles has reminded me of the fact three times with the information that I am not worth my salt, much less the good table he keeps."

"Oh! Bolly dear," and Lillian ran to the stout chaperon to embrace her with many kisses, "was dad nasty?"

"He wasn't agreeable," assented Mrs. Bolstreath, fanning herself with her handkerchief, for the interview had heated her. "You can't expect him to be, my sweet, when his daughter loves a pauper." "Thank you," murmured Dan bowing, "but don't you think it is time we went to the theatre, Bolly dear."

"You must not be so familiar, young man," said the chaperon, broadly smiling at the dark handsome face. "Sir Charles wants Lillian to marry-"

"Then I shan't!" Lillian stamped again, "I hate Lord Curberry." "And you love Dan!"

"Don't be so familiar, young woman," said Halliday, in a joking way, "unless you are on our side, that is."

"If I were not on your side," rejoined Mrs. Bolstreath, majestically, "I should be the very dragon Lillian calls me. After all, Dan, you *are* poor."

"Poor, but honest."

"Worse and worse. Honest people never grow rich. And then you have such a dangerous profession, taking people flying trips in those aeroplanes. One never can be sure if you will be home to supper. I'm sure Lillian would not care to marry a husband who was uncertain about being home for supper."

"I'll marry Dan," said Lillian, and embraced Dan, who returned the embrace. "Children! Children!" Mrs. Bolstreath raised her hands in horror, "think of what you are doing. The servants may be in at any moment. Come to the drawing-room and have coffee. The motor-car is waiting and – hush, separate, separate," cried the chaperon, "someone is coming!" She spoke truly, for the lovers had just time to fly asunder when Sir Charles's secretary entered swiftly. He was a lean, tall, haggard-looking young fellow of thirty with a pallid complexion and scanty light hair. A thin moustache half concealed a weak mouth, and he blinked his eyes in a nervous manner when he bowed to the ladies and excused his presence. "Sir Charles left his spectacles here," he said in a soft and rather unsteady voice, "he sent me for them and-" he had glided to the other side of the table by this time-"oh, here they are. The motor-car waits, Miss Moon."

"Where is my father?" asked Lillian irrelevantly. "Tell me, Mr. Penn."

"In the library, Miss Moon," said the secretary glibly, "but he cannot see any one just now-not even you, Miss Moon."

"Why not?"

"He is waiting to interview an official from Scotland Yard-a Mr. Durwin on important business."

"You see," murmured Dan to Lillian in an undertone, "your father intends to lock me up for daring to love you." Miss Moon took no notice. "What is the business?" she asked sharply. "Indeed, I don't know, Miss Moon. It is strictly private. Sir Charles has related nothing to me. And if you will excuse me-if you don't mind-these spectacles are wanted and-" he babbled himself out of the room, while Mrs. Bolstreath turned on her charge. "You don't mean to say, you foolish child, that you were going to see your father about 'this'!" she indicated Halliday. "I don't care about being called a 'this'!" said Dan, stiffly. Neither lady noticed the protest. "I want to make it clear to my father as soon as possible, that I shall marry Dan and no one else," declared Lillian, pursing up her pretty mouth obstinately. "Then take him at the right moment," retorted Mrs. Bolstreath crossly, for the late interview had tried even her amiable temper. "Just now he is seething with indignation that an aviator should dare to raise his eyes to you."

"Aviators generally look down," said Dan flippantly; "am I to be allowed to take you and Lillian to the theatre this evening?"

"Yes. Although Sir Charles mentioned that you would do better to spend your money on other things than mere frivolity." "Oh!" said Halliday with a shrug, "as to that, this particular frivolity is costing me nothing. I got the box from Freddy Laurance, who is on that very up-to-date newspaper *The Moment* as a reporter. I have dined at my future father-in-law's expense, and now I go in his motor-car without paying for the trip. I don't see that my pleasures could cost me less. Even Sir Charles must be satisfied with such strict economy."

"Sir Charles will be satisfied with nothing save a promise for you to go away and leave Lillian alone," said Mrs. Bolstreath, sadly, "he has no feeling of romance such as makes me foolish enough to encourage a pauper."

"You called me that before," said Dan, coolly, "well, there's no getting over facts. I am a pauper, but I love Lillian."

"And I-" began Lillian, advancing, only to be waved back and prevented from speaking further by Mrs. Bolstreath. "Don't make love before my very eyes," she said crossly, "after all I am paid to keep you two apart, and-and-well, there's no time for coffee, so we had better finish the discussion in the car. There is plenty of time between Hampstead and the Strand to allow of a long argument. And remember, Dan," Mrs. Bolstreath turned at the door to shake her finger, "this is your last chance of uninterrupted conversation with Lillian."

"Let us make honey while the flowers bloom," whispered Halliday, poetically, and stole a final and hasty kiss before he led the girl after the amiable dragon, who had already left the room. The lovers found her talking to a poorly-dressed and rather stout female clothed in rusty mourning, who

looked the picture of decent but respectable poverty. The entrance door stood open, and the waiting motor-car could be seen at the steps, while the footman stood near Mrs. Bolstreath, watching her chatting to the stranger and wearing an injured expression. It seemed that the decent woman wished to see Sir Charles, and the footman had refused her admission since his master was not to be disturbed. The woman-she called herself Mrs. Brown and was extremely tearful-had therefore appealed to the dragon, who was explaining that she could do nothing. "Oh, but I am sure you can get Sir Charles Moon to see me, my lady," wailed Mrs. Brown with a dingy handkerchief to her red eyes, "my son has been lost overboard off one of those steamers Sir Charles owns, and I want to ask him to give me some money. My son was my only support, and now I am starving." Lillian knew that her father owned a number of tramp steamers, which picked up cargoes all over the world, and saw no reason why the woman should not have the interview since her son had been drowned while in Moon's service. The hour was certainly awkward, since Sir Charles had an appointment before he went down to the House. But a starving woman and a sorrowful woman required some consideration so she stepped forward hastily and touched Mrs. Brown's rusty cloak. "I shall ask my father to see you," she said quickly, "wait here!" and without consulting Mrs. Bolstreath she went impulsively to her father's study, while Mrs. Brown dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief and called down blessings on her young head. Dan believed the story of the lost son, but doubted the tale of starvation as Mrs. Brown looked too stout to have been without food for any length of time. He looked hard at her face, which was more wrinkled than a fat woman's should be; although such lines might be ascribed to grief. She wept profusely and was so overcome with sorrow that she let down a ragged veil when she saw Dan's eager gaze. The young gentleman, she observed, could not understand a mother's feelings, or he would not make a show of her by inquisitorial glances. The remark was somewhat irrelevant, and the action of letting down the veil unnecessary, but much might be pardoned to a woman so obviously afflicted. Dan was about to excuse his inquiring looks, when Lillian danced back with the joyful information that her father would see Mrs. Brown for a few minutes if she went in at once. "And I have asked him to help you," said the girl, patting the tearful woman's shoulder, as she passed to the motor-car. "Oh! it's past eight o'clock. Dan, we'll never be in time."

"The musical comedy doesn't begin until nine," Halliday assured her, and in a few minutes the three of them were comfortably seated in the luxurious car, which whirled at break-neck speed towards the Strand. Of course Lillian and Dan took every advantage of the opportunity, seeing that Mrs. Bolstreath was sympathetic enough to close her eyes to their philanderings. They talked all the way to the Curtain Theatre; they talked all through the musical comedy; and talked all the way back to the house at Hampstead. Mrs. Bolstreath, knowing that the young couple would not have another opportunity for uninterrupted love-making, and being entirely in favor of the match, attended to the stage and left them to whisper unreproved. She did not see why Dan, whom Lillian had loved since the pair had played together as children, should be set aside in favor of a dry-as-dust barrister, even though he had lately come into a fortune and a title. "But, of course," said Mrs. Bolstreath between the facts, "if you could only invent a perfect flying-machine, they would make you a duke or something and give you a large income. Then you could marry."

"What are you talking about, Bolly darling?" asked Lillian, much puzzled, as she could not be supposed to know what was going on inside her friend's head. "About you and Dan, dear. He has no money and-"

"I shall make heaps and heaps of money," said Dan, sturdily; "aviation is full of paying possibilities, and the nation that first obtains command of the air will rule the world. I'm no fool!"

"You're a commoner," snapped Mrs. Bolstreath quickly, "and unless, as I said, you are made a duke for inventing a perfect aeroplane, Lord Curberry is certainly a better match for Lillian."

"He's as dull as tombs," said Miss Moon with her pretty nose in the air. "You can't expect to have everything, my dear child."

"I can expect to have Dan," retorted Lillian decidedly, whereat Dan whispered sweet words and squeezed his darling's gloved hand. "Well," said Mrs. Bolstreath, as the curtain rose on the second act, "I'll do my best to help you since I believe in young love and true love. Hush, children, people are looking! Attend to the stage." Dan and Lillian did their best to follow her advice and sat demurely in their stalls side by side, watching the heroine flirt in a duet with the hero, both giving vent to their feelings in a lively musical number. But they really took little interest in "The Happy Bachelor!" as the piece was called, in spite of the pretty girls and the charming music and the artistic dresses and the picturesque scenery. They were together and that was all they cared about, and although a dark cloud of parental opposition hovered over them, they were not yet enveloped in its gloom. And after all, since Mrs. Bolstreath was strongly prejudiced in their favor, Lillian hoped that she might induce Sir Charles to change his mind as regards Lord Curberry. He loved his daughter dearly and would not like to see her unhappy, as she certainly would be if compelled to marry any one but Dan. Lillian said this to Mrs. Bolstreath and to Dan several times on the way home, and they entirely agreed with her. "Although I haven't much influence with Sir Charles," Mrs. Bolstreath warned them, "and he is fond of having his own way."

"He always does what I ask," said Lillian confidently. "Why, although he was so busy this evening he saw Mrs. Brown when I pleaded for her."

"He couldn't resist you," whispered Dan fondly, "no one could." Mrs. Bolstreath argued this point, saying that Lillian was Sir Charles's daughter, and fathers could not be expected to feel like lovers. She also mentioned that she was jeopardizing her situation by advocating the match, which was certainly a bad one from a financial point of view, and would be turned out of doors as an old romantic fool. The lovers assured her she was the most sensible of women and that if she was turned out of doors they would take her in to the cottage where they proposed to reside like two turtle doves. Then came laughter and kisses and the feeling that the world was not such a bad place after all. It was a very merry trio that alighted at the door of Moon's great Hampstead mansion. Then came a shock, the worse for being wholly unexpected. At the door the three were met by Marcus Penn, who was Moon's secretary. He looked leaner and more haggard than ever, and his general attitude was that of the bearer of evil news. Dan and Lillian and Mrs. Bolstreath stared at him in amazement. "You may as well know the worst at once, Miss Moon," said Penn, his lips quivering with nervousness, "your father is dead. He has been murdered."

CHAPTER II
A COMPLETE MYSTERY

It was Mrs. Bolstreath who carried Lillian upstairs in her stout arms, for when Penn made his brusque announcement the girl fainted straight away, which was very natural considering the horror of the information. Dan remained behind to tell the secretary that he was several kinds of fool, since no one but a superfine ass would blurt out so terrible a story to a delicate girl. Not that Penn had told his story, for Lillian had become unconscious the moment her bewildered brain grasped that the father she had left a few hours earlier in good health and spirits was now a corpse. But he told it to Dan, and mentioned that Mr. Durwin was in the library wherein the death had taken place. "Mr. Durwin? Who is Mr. Durwin?" asked Dan trying to collect his senses, which had been scattered by the dreadful news. "An official from Scotland Yard; I told you so after dinner," said Penn in an injured tone, "he came to see Sir Charles by appointment at nine o'clock and found him a corpse."

"Sir Charles was alive when we left shortly after eight," remarked Dan sharply; "at a quarter-past eight to be precise. What took place in the meantime?"

"Obviously the violent death of Sir Charles," faltered the secretary. "What evidence have you to show that he died by violence?" asked Halliday. "Mr. Durwin called in a doctor, and he says that Sir Charles had been poisoned," blurted out Penn uneasily. "I believe that woman-Mrs. Brown she called herself-poisoned him. She left the house at a quarter to nine, so the footman says, for he let her out, and-"

"It is impossible that a complete stranger should poison Sir Charles," interrupted Dan impatiently, "she would not have the chance."

"She was alone with Sir Charles for thirty minutes, more or less," said Penn tartly; "she had every chance and she took it."

"But how could she induce Sir Charles to drink poison?"

"She didn't induce him to drink anything. The doctor says that the scratch at the back of the dead man's neck-"

"Here!" Dan roughly pushed the secretary aside, becoming impatient of the scrappy way in which he detailed what had happened. "Let me go to the library for myself and see what has happened. Sir Charles can't be dead."

"It's twelve o'clock now," retorted Penn stepping aside, "and he's been dead quite three hours, as the doctor will tell you." Before the man finished his sentence, Dan, scarcely grasping the situation, so rapidly had it evolved, ran through the hall, towards the back of the spacious house, where the library was situated. He dashed into the large and luxuriously furnished room and collided with a police officer, who promptly took him by the shoulder. There were three other men in the room, who turned from the corpse at which they were looking, when they heard the noise of Halliday's abrupt entrance. The foremost man, and the one who spoke first, was short and stout and arrayed in uniform, with cold gray eyes, and a hard mouth. "What's this-what's this?" he demanded in a raucous voice. "Who are you?"

"My name is Halliday," said Dan hurriedly. "I am engaged to Miss Moon and we have just returned from the theatre to hear-to hear-" He caught sight of Moon's body seated in the desk-chair and drooping limply over the table. "Oh, it is true, then! He is dead. Good heavens! who murdered him?"

"How do you know that Sir Charles has been murdered?" asked the officer sternly. "Mr. Penn, the secretary, told me just now in the hall," said Dan, shaking himself free of the policeman. "He blurted it out like a fool, and Miss Moon has fainted. Mrs. Bolstreath has taken her upstairs. But how did it come about? Who found the body, and-"

"I found the body," interrupted one of the other men, who was tall and calm-faced, with a bald head and a heavy iron-gray moustache, perfectly clothed in fashionable evening-dress, and somewhat imperious in his manner of speaking. "I had an appointment with Sir Charles at nine o'clock and came here to find him, as you now see him" – he waved his hand toward the desk-"the doctor will tell you how he died."

"By poison," said the third man, who was dark, young, unobtrusive and retiring in manner. "You see this deep scratch on the back of the neck. In that way the poison was administered. I take it that Sir Charles was bending over his desk and the person who committed the crime scratched him with some very sharp instrument impregnated with poison."

"Mrs. Brown!" gasped Dan, staring at the heavy, swollen body of his late guardian, whom he had dined with in perfect health. The three men glanced at one another as he said the name, and even the policeman on guard at the door looked interested. The individual in uniform spoke with his cold eyes on Dan's agitated face. "What do you know of Mrs. Brown, Mr. Halliday?" he demanded abruptly. "Don't you know that a woman of that name called here?"

"Yes. The secretary, Mr. Penn, told us that Miss Moon induced her father to see a certain Mrs. Brown, who claimed that her son had been drowned while working on one of the steamers owned by Sir Charles. You saw her also, I believe?"

"I was in the hall when Miss Moon went to induce her father to see the poor woman. That was about a quarter-past eight o'clock."

"And Mrs. Brown-as we have found from inquiry-left the house at a quarter to nine. Do you think she is guilty?"

"I can't say. Didn't the footman see the body-that is if Mrs. Brown committed the crime-when he came to show her out? Sir Charles would naturally ring his bell when the interview was over, and the footman would come to conduct her to the door."

"Sir Charles never rang his bell!" said the officer, drily. "Mrs. Brown passed through the entrance hall at a quarter to nine o'clock, and mentioned to the footman-quite unnecessarily, I think-that Sir Charles had given her money. He let her out of the house. Naturally, the footman not hearing any bell did not enter this room, nor-so far as any one else is concerned-did a single person. Only when Mr. Durwin-"

"I came at nine o'clock," interrupted the baldheaded man imperiously, "to keep my appointment. The footman told Mr. Penn, who took me to Sir Charles. He knocked but there was no answer, so he opened the door and we saw this." He again waved his hands towards the body. "Does Mr. Penn know nothing?" asked Halliday, doubtfully. "No," answered the other. "Inspector Tenson has questioned him carefully in my presence. Mr. Penn says that he brought Sir Charles his spectacles from the dining-room before you left for the theatre with the two ladies, and then was sent to his own room by his employer to write the usual letters. He remained there until nine o'clock when he was called out to receive me, and we know that Mr. Penn speaks truly, for the typewriting girl who was typing Sir Charles's letters to Mr. Penn's dictation, says that he did not leave the room all the time. "May I look at the body?" asked Dan approaching the desk, and, on receiving an affirmative reply from Durwin, bent over the dead. The corpse was much swollen, the face indeed being greatly bloated, while the deep scratch on the nape of the neck looked venomous and angry. Yet it was a slight wound to bring about so great a catastrophe, and the poison must have been very deadly and swift; deadly because apparently Sir Charles had no time to move before it did its work, and swift because he could not even have called for assistance, which he surely would have done had he been able to keep his senses. Dan mentioned this to the watchful doctor, who nodded. "I can't say for certain," he remarked cautiously, "but I fancy that snake-poison has been used. That will be seen to, when the post-mortem is made."

"And this fly?" Halliday pointed to an insect which was just behind the left ear of the dead man. "Fly!" echoed Inspector Tenson in surprise, and hastily advancing to look. "A fly in November.

Impossible! Yet it is a fly, and dead. If not," he swept the neck of the corpse with his curved hand, "it would get away. H'm! Now I wonder what this means? Get me a magnifying glass." There was not much difficulty in procuring one, as such an article lay on the desk itself, being used, no doubt, by Sir Charles to aid his failing sight when he examined important documents. Tenson inspected the fly and removed it-took it to a near electric light and examined it. Then he came back and examined the place behind the left ear whence he had removed it. "It's been gummed on," he declared in surprise-a surprise which was also visible in the faces of the other men; "you can see the glistening spot on the skin, and the fly's legs are sticky." He balanced the fly on his little finger as he spoke. "I am sure they are sticky, although it is hard to say with such a small insect. However," he carefully put away the fly in a silver matchbox, "we'll have this examined under a more powerful glass. You are all witnesses, gentlemen, that a fly was found near the wound which caused Sir Charles Moon's death."

"And the scent? What about the scent?" Dan sniffed as he spoke and then bent his nose to the dead man. "It seems to come from his clothes."

"Scent!" echoed Durwin sharply and sniffed. "Yes, I observed that scent. But I did not take any notice of it."

"Nor did I," said the doctor. "I noticed it also."

"And I," followed on the Inspector, "and why should we take notice of it, Mr. Halliday? Many men use scent."

"Sir Charles never did," said Dan emphatically, "he hated scents of all kinds even when women used them. He certainly would never have used them himself. I'll swear to that."

"Then this scent assumes importance." Durwin sniffed again, and held his aquiline nose high. "It is fainter now. But I smelt it very strongly when I first came in and looked at the body. A strange perfume it is." The three men tried to realize the peculiar odor of the scent, and became aware that it was rich and heavy and sickly, and somewhat drowsy in its suggestion. "A kind of thing to render a man sleepy," said Dan, musingly. "Or insensible," said Inspector Tenson hastily, and put his nose to the dead man's chin and mouth. He shook his head as he straightened himself. "I fancied from your observation, Mr. Halliday, that the scent might have been used as a kind of chloroform, but there's no smell about the face. It comes from the clothes," he sniffed again, "yes, it certainly comes from the clothes. Did you smell this scent on Mrs. Brown?" he demanded suddenly. "No, I did not," admitted Halliday promptly, "otherwise I should certainly have noted it. I have a keen sense of smell. Mrs. Bolstreath and Lil-I mean Miss Moon-might have noticed it, however." At that moment, as if in answer to her name, the door opened suddenly and Lillian brushed past the policeman in a headlong entrance into the library. Her fair hair was in disorder, her face was bloodless, and her eyes were staring and wild. Behind her came Mrs. Bolstreath hurriedly, evidently trying to restrain her. But the girl would not be restrained, and rushed forward scattering the small group round the dead, to fling herself on the body. "Oh, father, father!" she sobbed, burying her face on the shoulder of her dearly-loved parent. "How awful it is. Oh, my heart will break. How shall I ever get over it. Father! father! father!" She wept and wailed so violently that the four men were touched by her great grief. Both Mr. Durwin and Inspector Tenson had daughters of their own, while the young doctor was engaged. They could feel for her thoroughly, and no one made any attempt to remove her from the body until Mrs. Bolstreath stepped forward. "Lillian, darling. Lillian, my child," she said soothingly, and tried to lead the poor girl away. But Lillian only clung closer to her beloved dead. "No! No! Let me alone. I can't leave him. Poor, dear father-oh, I shall die!"

"Dear," said Mrs. Bolstreath, raising her firmly but kindly, "your father is not there but in Heaven! Only the clay remains."

"It is all I have. And father was so good, so kind, – oh, who can have killed him in this cruel way?" She looked round with streaming eyes. "We think that a Mrs. Brown-" began the Inspector, only to be answered by a loud cry from the distraught girl. "Mrs. Brown! Then I have killed father! I have killed him! I persuaded him to see the woman, because she was in trouble. And she killed him-

oh, the wretch-the-the-oh-oh! What had I done to her that she should rob me of my dear, kind father?" and she cried bitterly in her old friend's tender arms. "Had you ever seen Mrs. Brown before?" asked Durwin in his imperious voice, although he lowered it in deference to her grief. Lillian winced at the harsh sound. "No, No! I never saw her before. How could I have seen her before. She said that her son had been drowned, and that she was poor. I asked father to help her, and he told me he would. It's my fault that she saw my father and now" – her voice leaped an octave-"he's dead. Oh-oh! my father-my father!" and she tried to break from Mrs. Bolstreath's arms to fling herself on the dead once more. "Lillian darling, don't cry," said Dan, placing his hand on her shoulder. "You have not lost the dearest and best of fathers!" she sobbed violently. "Your loss is my loss," said Halliday in a voice of pain, "but we must be brave, both you and I." He associated himself with her so as to calm her grief. "It's not your fault that your dear father is dead."

"I persuaded him to see Mrs. Brown. And she-she-she-"

"We can't say if this woman is guilty, as yet," said Durwin hastily, "so do not blame yourself, Miss Moon. But did you smell any scent on this Mrs. Brown?" Lillian looked at him vacantly and shook her head. Then she burst once more into hard and painful sobbing, trying again to embrace the dead man. "Don't ask her any questions, sir," said Halliday, in a low voice to Mr. Durwin, "you see she is not in a fit state to reply. Lillian," he raised her up from her knees and gently but firmly detached her arms from the dead. "My darling, your father is past all earthly aid. We can do nothing but avenge him. Go with Mrs. Bolstreath and lie down. We must be firm."

"Firm! Firm! – and father dead!" wailed Lillian. "Oh, what a wretch that Mrs. Brown must be to kill him. Kill her, Dan-oh, make her suffer. My good, kind father, who-who-oh" – she flung herself on Dan's neck-"take me away; take me away!" and her lover promptly carried her to the door. Mrs. Bolstreath, who had been talking hurriedly to Inspector Tenson, came after the pair and took the girl from Dan. "She must lie down and have a sleeping-draught," she said softly. "If the doctor will come-" The doctor was only too glad to come. He was a young man beginning to practise medicine in the neighborhood, and had been hurriedly summoned in default of an older physician. The chance of gaining a new and wealthy patient was too good to lose, so he quickly followed Mrs. Bolstreath as she led the half-unconscious girl up the stairs. Dan closed the door and returned to the Inspector and the official from Scotland Yard. The former was speaking. "Mrs. Bolstreath did not smell any perfume on Mrs. Brown," he was saying, "and ladies are very quick to notice such things. Miss Moon also shook her head."

"I don't think Miss Moon was in a state of mind to understand what you were saying, Mr. Inspector," said Halliday, drily. "However, I am quite sure from my own observation that Mrs. Brown did not use the perfume. I would have noticed it at once, for I spotted it the moment I examined the body."

"So did I," said Durwin once more; "but I thought Sir Charles might have used it. You say he did not, therefore the scent is a clue." "It does not lead to the indictment of Mrs. Brown, however, sir," said Tenson thoughtfully, "since she had no perfume of that sort about her. But she must have killed Sir Charles, for she was the last person who saw him alive."

"She may come forward and exonerate herself," suggested Dan after a pause, "or she may have left her address with Sir Charles."

"I have glanced through the papers on the desk and can find no address," was the Inspector's reply; "yet, if she gave it to him, it would be there." Durwin meditated, then looked up. "As she was the mother of the man in Sir Charles's employment who was drowned," he said in his harsh voice, and now very official in his manner, "in the offices of the company who own the steamers-Sir Charles was a director and chief shareholder, I understand from his secretary, Mr. Penn-will be found the drowned man's address, which will be that of his mother."

"But I can't see what motive Mrs. Brown had to murder Sir Charles," remarked Dan in a puzzled tone. "We'll learn the motive when we find Mrs. Brown," said Tenson, who had made a note of

Durwin's suggestion. "Many people think they have grievances against the rich, and we know that the late Sir Charles was a millionaire. He doubtless had enemies-dangerous enemies."

"Dangerous!" The word recalled to Dan what Moon had said at the dinner-table when Lillian had playfully offered him a penny for his thoughts. "Sir Charles at dinner said something about dangerous people."

"What did he say?" asked the Inspector and again opened his note-book. Dan reported the conversation, which was not very satisfactory as Moon had only spoken generally. Tenson noted down the few remarks, but did not appear to think them important. Durwin, however, was struck by what had been said. "Sir Charles asked me here to explain about a certain gang he believed was in existence," he remarked. "What's that, sir?" asked the Inspector alertly. "Did he tell you anything?"

"Of course he didn't. How could he when he was dead when I arrived," retorted Durwin with a frown. "He simply said that he wished to see me in my official capacity about some gang, but gave me no details. Those were to be left until I called here. He preferred to see me here instead of at my office for reasons which he declared he would state when we met in this room."

"Then you think that a gang-"

"Mr. Inspector," interrupted Durwin, stiffly, "I have told you all that was said by the deceased. Whether the gang is dangerous, or what the members do, or where they are, I cannot say. Have you examined those windows?" he asked suddenly, pointing to three French-windows at the side of the room. "Yes," said Tenson promptly, "as soon as I entered the apartment I did so. They are all locked."

"And if they were not, no one would enter there," put in Dan quickly. "Outside is a walled garden, and the wall is very high with broken bottles on top. I suppose, Mr. Durwin, you are thinking that some one may have come in to kill Sir Charles between the time of Mrs. Brown's departure and your coming?"

"Yes," assented the other sharply, "if the perfume is a clue, Mrs. Brown must be innocent. Penn, as we know from the statement of the typewriter girl, was in his room all the time, and the servants have fully accounted for themselves. We examined them all-the Inspector and I did, that is-when you were at the theatre," he waved his hand with a shrug. "Who can say who is guilty?"

"Well," said Tenson, snapping the elastic band round his note-book and putting it into his pocket, "we have the evidence of the fly and of the perfume."

"What do you think about the fly?" asked Dan, staring. "I don't know what to think. It is an artificial fly, exquisitely made and has been gummed on the dead man's neck behind the left ear. The assassin must have placed it there, since a man would scarcely do such a silly thing himself. Why, it was placed there I can't say, any more than I can guess why Sir Charles was murdered, or who murdered him. The affair is a complete mystery, as you must admit." Before the inquest and after the inquest, more people than the three men who had held the discussion in the presence of the dead, admitted that the affair was a mystery. In fact the evidence at the inquest only plunged the matter into deeper gloom. Tenson, acting on Durwin's advice, sought the office of the tramp-steamer company-The Universal Carrier Line-in which the late Sir Charles was chief shareholder and director, to learn without any difficulty the whereabouts of Mrs. Brown, the mother of the drowned man. She proved to be an entirely different person to the woman who had given the name on the fatal night, being lean instead of stout, comparatively young instead of old, and rather handsome in an elderly way in place of being wrinkled and worn with grief. She declared that she had never been near Moon's house on the night of the murder, or on any other night. Mrs. Bolstreath, Lillian, the footman, and Dan all swore that she was not the Mrs. Brown who had sought the interview with Sir Charles. Therefore it was argued by every one that Mrs. Brown, taking a false name and telling a false story, must have come to see Moon with the deliberate intention of murdering him. Search was made for her, but she could not be found. From the moment she passed out of the front door she had vanished, and although a description was published of her appearance, and a reward was offered for her apprehension no one came forward to claim it. Guilty or innocent, she was invisible. Inspector

Tenson did not speak at the inquest of the gang about which Sir Charles had intended to converse with Mr. Durwin, as it did not seem to have any bearing on the case. Also, as Durwin suggested, if it had any bearing it was best to keep the matter quiet until more evidence was forthcoming to show that such a gang-whatever its business was-existed. Then the strange episode of the fly was suppressed for the same reason. Privately, Tenson informed Dan that he would not be surprised to learn that there was a gang of murderers in existence whose sign-manual was a fly, real or artificial, and instanced another gang, which had been broken up some years previously, who always impressed the figure of a purple fern on their victim. But the whole idea, said Tenson, was so vague that he thought it best to suppress the fact of the artificial fly on the dead man's neck. "If there's anything in it," finished the Inspector, "there's sure to be other murders committed, and the fly placed on the victim. We'll wait and see, and if a second case occurs we'll be sure that such a gang exists and will collar the beasts. Best to say nothing, Mr. Halliday." So he said nothing, and Dan said nothing, and Durwin, who approved of the necessary secrecy, held his tongue. Of course there was a lot of talk and many theories as to who had murdered the millionaire, and why he had been murdered in so ingenious a manner. The postmortem examination proved that Moon had died of snake-poison administered through the scratch on the neck, and the circumstantial evidence at the inquest went to show that he must have been taken unawares, while bending over his desk. Some people thought that Mrs. Brown was innocent because of the absence of the perfume; others declared she must be guilty on account of her false name and false story, and the fact that Moon was found dead a quarter of an hour after she left the house. No doubt the circumstantial evidence was very strong, but it could not be said positively that the woman was guilty, even though she did not appear to defend her character. So the jury thought, for they brought in the only possible verdict twelve good and lawful men could bring in: "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," and there the matter ended for sheer want of further evidence. The affair was a mystery and a mystery it remained. "And will until the Day of Judgment!" said Tenson, finally.

CHAPTER III
DUTY BEFORE PLEASURE

The year ended sadly for Lillian, since she had lost her father, her lover, and her home; gaining instead the doubtful companionship of a paternal uncle, who stepped into the position of guardian. The girl, although she did not know it at the time, was leaving a pleasant flowery lane to turn into a flinty high road, arched by a dismal sky. It is true that she still possessed Mrs. Bolstreath to comfort her, but the loss of Dan could scarcely be compensated by the attentions of the chaperon. Not that Halliday was altogether lost; but he had been pushed out of her life by Sir John Moon, who approved as little of this suitor as the late baronet had done. "You see, my dear child," he exclaimed to Lillian, immediately after the New Year and when things were more restful, "as your guardian and uncle, I have to see that you make a good match." "What is marriage without love?" queried Miss Moon scornfully. "Love!" Sir John shrugged his elegant shoulders and sneered. "Love is all very well, but a title is better. I say nothing about money, as you have any amount of that useful article. Now, Lord Curberry-"

"I detest Lord Curberry, and I shan't marry Lord Curberry," interrupted Lillian, frowning, and her mind held a picture of the lean, ascetic peer with the cruel, grey eyes. As a barrister, Curberry was no doubt admirable; as a nobleman, he filled his new position very well; but she could not see him as a lover, try as she might. Not that she did try, for under no conditions and under no pressure did she intend to become his wife. "Your father wished you to marry Lord Curberry," hinted Uncle John softly. "My father wished me to be happy," cried Lillian hotly, "and I can't be happy unless I marry Dan."

"That aviator man! Pooh! He has nothing to give you."

"He gives himself, and that is all I want."

"I see. Love in a cottage and-" Lillian interrupted again. "There's no need for love in a cottage. I have plenty of money; you said as much yourself, Uncle John."

"My dear," said the new baronet gravely, "from what I saw of young Halliday he is too proud a man to live on his wife. And you would not respect him if he did. I think better of you than that, my child."

"Dan has his profession."

"H'm! And a dangerous one at that. Besides, he doesn't make much money."

"He will though. Dan is a genius; he has all kinds of ideas about flying machines, and some day he will conquer the air." "Meantime, you will be growing old waiting for him."

"Not at all," Lillian assured him. "I shall be with him, helping all I can."

"You won't with my consent," cried her uncle, heatedly. "Then I shall do without your consent. I shan't give up Dan."

"In that case," sighed Sir John, rising to show that the interview was ended-and certainly it had ended in a clash of wills-"there is nothing for me to do but to make young Halliday give you up."

"He'll never do that," said Miss Moon, pausing at the door with a fluttering heart, for her uncle spoke very decidedly. "Oh, I think so," replied Moon, with the air of a man sure of his ground. "He has, I am sure, some notion of honor."

"It isn't honorable to give up a woman."

"It isn't honorable to live on a woman." The two antagonists glared at one another, and a silence ensued. Neither would give way, and neither would compromise in any way. Lillian wanted Dan as her husband, a post Sir John did not intend the young man to fill. But he saw plainly enough that harsh measures would drive Lillian to desperation, and he did not yet know sufficient of Halliday to be sure that he would not grasp at a rich wife. Sir John believed that men were like himself, and would

do anything-honorable, or, at a pinch, dishonorable-to secure a life of ease and comfort. However, as he swiftly reflected, Halliday was young, and probably would be wax in the hands of a clever man, such as Moon considered himself to be. It would be best to see him and control the boy's mind by appealing to his decency-so Sir John put it. "Very good, my dear," he said, when he reached this point, "matters are at a dead-lock between us. I suggest that you let me interview Halliday."

"I don't mind, so long as I see him first," pouted the girl, mutinously. Sir John smiled drily. "So as to arm him for the fray. Very well. I consent, my dear. You can arrange your campaign, and then I can discuss the matter with this very undesirable suitor. But you must give me your promise that you will not run away with him meanwhile?" Lillian held herself very erect and replied stiffly. "Of course I promise, Uncle John. I am not ashamed of loving Dan, and I shall marry him in a proper manner. But I shan't marry Lord Curberry," she ended, and fairly ran away, so as to prevent further objections. "Oh, my dear, I think you will," grinned Sir John at the closed door, and he sat down to pen a diplomatic letter to Mr. Halliday, as he wished to have the matter settled and done with. "These romantic young nuisances," said the schemer crossly. The new baronet was a slim, well-preserved dandy of sixty, who looked no older than forty-five owing to the means he took to keep himself fit. He was the younger and only brother of Moon, and inherited the title since there was no nephew to take it. He also inherited ten thousand a year for life on condition that he acted as Lillian's guardian. It was no mean task, for the girl had an income of £50,000 coming in every twelve months. There would be plenty of hard-up flies gathering round this honey-pot, and Sir John foresaw that it would not be an easy business to settle the young lady's matrimonial future, especially as the said young lady was obstinate beyond belief. Sir John, being a loafer by nature, had never possessed sufficient money to indulge to the full in his luxurious tastes, since his brother had not financed him as largely as he could have wished. But now that he was safe for the rest of his life on an income which would enable him to enjoy the world's goods, Sir John did not wish to be bothered. It was his aim to get his niece married and settled as soon as possible, so that she would be looked after by a husband. Under these circumstances, and since Lillian was anxious to marry Dan, it was strange that the baronet did not allow her to indulge her fancy. He did not for two reasons: one was that he really did not think Halliday a good match; and, moreover, knew of his late brother's opinion on the matter of the wooing. The second reason had to do with the fact that he had borrowed a large sum of money from Lord Curberry, and did not wish to pay it back again, even though he could do so easily enough in his present flourishing circumstances. Curberry offered to forego the payment if Sir John could persuade Lillian to marry him. And as Moon wanted to be able to talk about the girl as a peeress, and did not want to reduce his new income by frittering it away in paying back debts, he was determined to bring about the very desirable marriage, as he truly considered it to be. "Curberry is sure to go in for politics," thought the plotter, "and he has enough brains to become Prime Minister if he likes. He's got a decent income, too, and a very old title. With Lillian's money and beauty she should have a titled husband. Besides," this was an after-thought, "Curberry can make himself deuced disagreeable if he likes." And perhaps it was this last idea which made Sir John so anxious for the marriage to take place. The late Sir Charles had been a big, burly, broad-shouldered man, with a powerful clean-shaven face-the kind of overbearing, pushing personality which was bound to come up on top wherever men were congregated. And Sir Charles had massively pushed his way from poverty to affluence, from obscurity into notoriety, if not fame. Now his honors and wealth were in the hands of two people infinitely weaker than he had been. Lillian was but a delicate girl, solely bent upon marriage with an undesirable suitor, while Sir John had no desire to do anything with his new income and new title save to enjoy the goods which the gods had sent him so unexpectedly. He was by no means a strong man, being finical, self-indulgent, and quite feminine in his love for dress and luxury. Much smaller and slighter than his masterful brother, he was perfectly arrayed on all occasions in purple and fine linen; very self-possessed, very polite, and invariably quiet in his manner. He had several small talents, and indulged in painting, poetry, and music, producing specimens of each as weak and

neatly finished as himself. He also collected china and stamps, old lace and jewels, which he loved for their color and glitter. Such a man was too fantastical to earn the respect of Lillian, who adored the strength, which showed itself in Dan. Consequently, she felt certain that she would be able to force him to consent to her desires. But in this, the girl, inexperienced in worldly matters and in human nature, reckoned without knowledge of Sir John's obstinacy, which was a singularly striking trait of the man's character. Like most weak people the new baronet loved to domineer, and, moreover, when his ease was at stake, he could be strong even to cruelty, since fear begets that quality as much as it fosters cowardice. Moon had removed Lillian and Mrs. Bolstreath to his new house in Mayfair, because it was not wise that the girl should remain at Hampstead, where everything served to remind her of the good father she had lost. Therefore, Sir John wished for no trouble to take place under his roof, as such-as he put it-would shatter his nerves. The mere fact that Lillian wished to marry young Halliday, and that Curberry wished to marry her, was a fruitful source of ills. It stands to Sir John's credit that he did not take the easiest method of getting rid of his niece by allowing her to become Mrs. Halliday. He had a conscience of some sort, and wished to carry out his late brother's desire that Lillian should become a peeress. So far as the girl's inclinations were concerned he cared little, since he looked upon her as a child who required guidance. And to guide her in the proper direction-that is, towards the altar in Curberry's company-Sir John put himself to considerable inconvenience, and acted honestly with the very best intentions. His egotism-the powerful egotism of a weak man-prevented him from seeing that Lillian was also a human being, and had her right to freedom of choice. It must be said that, for a dilettante, Sir John acted with surprising promptitude. He took the two women to his own house, and let the mansion at Hampstead to an Australian millionaire, who paid an excellent rent. Then he saw the lawyers, and went into details concerning the property. Luckily, Sir Charles had gradually withdrawn from business a few years before his death, since he had more or less concentrated his mind on politics. Therefore, the income was mostly well invested, and, with the exception of the line of steamers with which Mrs. Brown's son had been concerned, there were few interests which required personal supervision. Sir John, having power under the will, sold the dead man's interest in the ships, withdrew from several other speculations, and having seen that the securities, which meant fifty thousand a year to Lillian, and ten thousand a year to himself, were all in good order, he settled down to enjoy himself. The lawyers-on whom he kept an eye-received the money and banked it, and consulted with Sir John regarding reinvestments. They also, by the new baronet's direction, offered a reward of £1,000 for the discovery of the murderess. So, shortly after the New Year everything was more or less settled, and Sir John found himself able to attend once more to his lace and jewels, his music and poetry. Only Lillian's marriage remained to be arranged, and after his conversation with the girl, Sir John appointed a day for Dan to call. That young gentleman, who had been hovering round, lost no time in obeying the summons, which was worded amiably enough, and presented himself in due time. Sir John received Halliday with great affability, offered him a chair and a cigarette, and came to the point at once. "It's about Lillian I wish to see you, Mr. Halliday," he remarked, placing the tips of his fingers delicately together. "You can go up to the drawing-room afterwards and have tea with her and with Mrs. Bolstreath. But we must have a chat first to adjust the situation."

"What situation?" asked Dan, wilfully dense. "Oh, I think you understand," rejoined Sir John, drily. "Well?"

"I love her," was all that Dan could find to say. "Naturally. Lillian is a charming girl, and you are a young man of discernment. At least, I hope so, as I wish you to give Lillian up." Dan rose and pitched his cigarette into the fire. "Never," he cried, looking pale and determined and singularly virile and handsome. "How can you ask such a thing, Mr. Moon-I mean Sir John."

"My new title doesn't come easily I see," said the baronet smoothly. "Oh, I quite understand. My poor brother died so unexpectedly that none of us have got used to the new order of things. You least of all, Mr. Halliday."

"Why not 'Dan'?" asked that young gentleman, leaning against the mantelpiece since he felt that he could talk better standing than sitting. "Because, as I say, there is a new order of things. I have known you all your life, my dear boy, as your parents placed you in my late brother's charge when you were only five years of age. But I say Mr. Halliday instead of Dan as I wish you to understand that we are talking as business men and not as old friends."

"You take away your friendship-"

"Not at all, Mr. Halliday. We shall be better friends than ever when we have had our talk and you have done the right thing. Probably I shall then call you Dan, as of yore."

"You can call me what you please," said Dan obstinately, and rather angrily, for the fiddling methods of Sir John annoyed him. "But I won't give up the dearest girl in the world."

"Her father wished her to marry Lord Curberry."

"If her father had lived, bless him," retorted Halliday vehemently, "he would have seen that Lillian loves me, and not Curberry, in which case he would not have withheld his consent."

"Oh, I think he would," said Sir John amiably. "Lillian is rich, and my poor brother wished to obtain a title for her. Very natural, Mr. Halliday, as you must see for yourself. Charles always aimed at high things."

"He loved Lillian and would not have seen her unhappy," said Dan bluffly. "I don't see that Curberry would make her unhappy. He is devoted to her."

"But she does not love him," argued Halliday crossly, "and how can there be happiness when love is lacking. Come, Sir John, you have, as you said just now, known me all my life. I am honorable and clean-living and wellborn, while Lillian loves me. What objection have you to the match?"

"The same objection as my brother had, Mr. Halliday. Lillian is wealthy and you are poor."

"I have only a few hundreds a year, it is true, but-"

"No 'buts' if you please," Sir John flung up a delicate hand in protest. "You can't argue away facts. If you marry Lillian, you will live on her." Dan bit his lip and clenched his hands to prevent his temper from showing itself too strongly. "If another man had said that to me, Sir John, I should have knocked him down."

"Brute force is no argument," rejoined Moon unruffled. "Consider, Mr. Halliday, you have a few hundreds a year and Lillian has fifty thousand coming in every twelve months. Being wealthy, she can scarcely live on your income, so to keep up the position to which she has been born, she must live on her own. Husband and wife are one, as we are assured by the Church, therefore if she lives on the fifty thousand per annum, you must live on it also."

"I wouldn't take a single penny!" cried Dan hotly and boyishly. "Oh, I am not suggesting that you would," said Sir John easily, "but Lillian cannot live in the cottage your few hundreds would run to, and if she lives, as she must, being rich, in a large house, you must live there also, and in a style which your income does not warrant. You know what people will say under the circumstances. Either you must take Lillian to live on your small income, which is not fair to her, or you must live on her large one, which is not fair to you. I speak to a man of honor, remember."

"These arguments are sophistical."

"Not at all. You can't escape from facts."

"Then is this miserable money to stand between us?" asked Dan in despair, for he could not deny that there was great truth in what Sir John said. The baronet shrugged his shoulders. "It seems likely unless you can make a fortune equal to Lillian's."

"Why not? Aviation is yet in its infancy."

"Quite so, and thus accidents are continually happening. If you marry my niece, it is probable that you will shortly leave her a widow. No! No! In whatever way you look at the matter, Mr. Halliday, the match is most undesirable. Be a man-a man of honor-and give Lillian up."

"To be miserable with Lord Curberry," said Dan fiercely, "never!" And he meant what he said, as Sir John saw very plainly. This being the case the baronet used another argument to obtain what

he wanted. "I have been young myself, and I know how you feel," he said quietly. "Very good. I suggest a compromise."

"What is it?" muttered Dan dropping into his chair again and looking very miserable, as was natural, seeing what he stood to lose. "My poor brother," went on Sir John smoothly, and crossing his legs, "has been struck down when most enjoying life. The person who murdered him-presumably the woman who called herself Mrs. Brown-has not yet been discovered in spite of the efforts of the police backed by a substantial reward. I propose, Mr. Halliday, that you search for this person, the period of searching be limited to one year. If you find her and she is punished, then you shall marry Lillian; if you fail, then you must stand aside and allow her to marry Lord Curberry."

"You forget," said Dan, not jumping at the chance as Sir John expected, "if I do bring the woman to justice, your arguments regarding my living on Lillian remain in full force."

"Oh, as to that, Mr. Halliday, when the time comes, I can find arguments equally strong on the other side. To use one now, if you revenge my brother's death, no one will deny but what you have every right to marry his daughter and enjoy her income. That would be only fair. Well?"

"Well," echoed Dan dully, and reflected with his sad eyes on the carpet. Then he looked up anxiously. "Meanwhile, Lillian may marry Lord Curberry."

"Oh," said Sir John, coolly, "if you can't trust her-"

"He can trust her," cried the voice of the girl, herself, and the curtain of the folding doors was drawn quickly aside. "Lillian!" cried Dan, springing to his feet and opening his arms. Sir John saw his niece rush into those same arms and laughed. "H'm!" said he whimsically, "I quite forgot that the folding-doors into the next room were open. You have been listening." Lillian twisted herself in Dan's arms, but did not leave them, as she felt safe within that warm embrace. "Of course I have been listening," she cried scornfully; "as soon as I knew Dan was in the house, and in the library, I listened. I told Bolly that I was coming down to listen, and though she tried to prevent me, I came. Who has a better right to listen when all the conversation was about me, and remember I should have seen him first."

"Well," said her uncle unmoved, "it's no use arguing with you. A man's idea of honor and a woman's are quite opposed to one another. You heard. What have you to say?"

"I think you're horrid," snapped Lillian, in a schoolgirl manner, "as if my money mattered. I am quite willing to give it to you and marry Dan on what he has. It's better to love in a garret than to hate in a drawing-room."

"Quite epigrammatic," murmured Sir John cynically. "Well, my dear, I am much obliged to you for your fifty thousand a year offer, but I fancy what I have is enough for me. I never did care for millions, and always wondered why my late brother should wear himself out in obtaining them. I decline." "Whether you decline or not, I marry Dan," said Lillian hotly. "What does Dan say?" The young man disengaged himself. He had kept silent during the passage of arms between uncle and niece. "I say that I can trust Lillian to remain true to me for twelve months."

"For ever, for ever, for ever!" cried the girl, her face flaming and her eyes flashing; "but don't make any promise of letting our marriage depend upon finding the woman who murdered my poor father."

"Ah," said Sir John contemptuously, "you never loved your father, I see."

"How dare you say that?" flashed out the girl, panting with anger. "My dear, ask yourself," replied Moon patiently; "your father has been basely murdered. Yet you do not wish to avenge his death and prefer your own happiness to the fulfilment of a solemn duty. Of course," added Sir John, with a shrug, for he now knew what line of argument to take, "you can't trust yourself to be faithful for twelve months and-"

"I *can* trust myself to be faithful, and for twelve centuries, if necessary."

"No, no, no!" smiled Moon, shaking his head, "you prefer pleasure to duty. I see you love yourself more than you loved your father. Well," he rose and waved his hands with a gesture of

dismissal, "go your ways, my dear, and marry Dan-you observe I call you 'Dan,' Mr. Halliday, since you are to become my nephew straight away. When is the wedding to be?"

"You consent?" cried Lillian opening her eyes widely. "I can't stop you," said Moon, still continuing his crafty diplomacy. "You will soon be of age and you can buy your husband at once, since you dare not risk a probation of twelve months."

"I can risk twelve years," retorted Lillian uneasily, for in a flash she understood how selfishly she was behaving, seeing that her father's assassin was still at large, "and to prove it-" she looked at Dan. He understood and spoke, although he had already made up his mind as to the best course to pursue. "To prove it," he said steadily, "we accept your proposal, Sir John. Lillian will wait twelve months, and during that time I shall search for the woman who murdered Sir Charles. If I don't find her-"

"Lillian marries Lord Curberry," said Moon quickly. "No," cried the girl defiantly; "that part of the agreement I decline to assent to. Twelve months or twelve years it may take before the truth comes to light, but I marry no one but Dan." Sir John reflected on the dangers of aviation and swiftly came to a conclusion. "We'll see at the end of the year," he said cautiously, "much may happen in that time."

"So long as Lillian's wedding to Curberry doesn't happen," said Dan obstinately, "I don't care. But it is understood that Lillian is not to be worried about the matter?"

"That depends upon what you and Lillian call worry," said Moon drily, "so far as I am concerned I shall not coerce her in any way. All I wish is the promise of you both that you will wait twelve months before taking any steps to marry. Meantime, you must not see too much of Lillian."

"Oh," cried the girl, indignantly, "you would push Dan out of my life."

"It's a test," explained Sir John, blinking nervously. "You will be in mourning for the next twelve months, and should see few people."

"Of whom Dan will be one," she flashed out. "Occasionally-very occasionally, you can see him, but, of course, if you can't trust yourself to be true without being continually reminded that Mr. Halliday exists, there is no more to be said."

"I can trust myself," muttered the girl uneasily. "And I can trust Lillian," said Dan, promptly and decisively. "It does not look like it since you always wish to see one another. And remember, Lillian, you owe it to your father's memory to put all thoughts of love, which is self, out of your heart until the mystery of his death is entirely solved."

"There is something in that," said Halliday thoughtfully and Lillian nodded; "but of course I can write to Lillian." "Occasionally," said the baronet again, "you must both be tested by a year's separation, with a meeting or a letter every now and then. Duty must be the keynote of the twelve months and not pleasure. Well?" The lovers looked at one another and sighed. The terms were hard, but not so hard as Sir John might have made them. Still both the boy and the girl-they were little else-recognized that their duty was to the dead. Afterwards pleasure would be theirs. Silently they accepted and silently adjusted the situation. "We agree!" said the two almost simultaneously. "Very good," said Moon, rubbing his hands, "how do you intend to begin your search for the missing woman, Mr. Halliday?"

"I don't know," murmured Dan, miserably. "Neither do I," rejoined Sir John with great amiability. "Come to tea?" And to tea the lovers went as to a funeral feast. But Sir John rejoiced.

CHAPTER IV
AN AMATEUR DETECTIVE

Dan left the Mayfair house very mournfully, feeling that Sir John was indeed master of the situation. By a skilful appeal to the generous emotions of youth, to the boy's honor and to the girl's affections, he had procured a respite of twelve months, during which time the lovers could do nothing, bound as they were by silken threads. This would give Curberry time to push his suit, and there was always a chance that Dan would come to grief in one of his aerial trips in which case Lillian would certainly be driven to marry her titled swain. Halliday knew nothing of Moon's reckoning on these points, or he would have only accepted the situation on condition that Curberry was not to meet the girl or write to the girl oftener than himself. Logically speaking, the peer and the commoner should have been placed on the same footing. But Dan's grief at the parting confused his understanding, and he had not been clever enough to seize his opportunity. Therefore Sir John, winning all along the line, had cleared the path for Curberry, and had more or less blocked it for Dan. But, as yet, the young man did not grasp the full extent of Sir John's worldly wisdom. What Halliday had to do-and this dominated his mind immediately he left the house-was to solve the mystery of Sir Charles's death. The sooner he captured the false Mrs. Brown, who, presumably, had murdered the old man, the sooner would he lead Lillian to the altar. Therefore he was feverishly anxious to begin, but for the life of him he did not see how to make a start. He had absolutely no experience of what constituted the business of a detective, and was daunted at the outset by the difficulties of the path. All the same he never thought of halting, but pressed forward without a pause. And the first step he took was to consult a friend, on the obvious assumption that two heads are better than one. It was Freddy Laurance whom he decided to interview, since that very up-to-date young journalist knew every one of any note, and almost everything of interest, being, indeed, aware of much of which the ordinary man in the street was ignorant. He and Dan had been to Oxford together, and for many years had been the best of friends. Laurance had been brought up in the expectation of being a rich man. But over-speculation ruined his father, and on leaving the University he was thrown unprepared on the world to make his money as best he could, without any sort of training in particular. Hearty praise from an expert for three or four newspaper articles suggested journalism, and having an observant eye and a ready pen, the young man was successful from the beginning. For a time he was a free-lance, writing indiscriminately for this journal and for that, until the proprietor of *The Moment*, a halfpenny daily, secured his exclusive services at a salary which procured Freddy the luxuries of life. This was something to have achieved at the age of five and twenty. *The Moment* was a bright shoot-folly-as-it-flies sort of journal, which detailed the news of the day in epigrammatic scraps. Its longest articles did not exceed a quarter of a column, and important events were usually restricted to paragraphs. It, indeed, skimmed the cream of events, and ten minutes' study of its sheets gave a busy man all the information he required concerning the doings of humanity. Also it daily published an extra sheet concerned entirely with letters from the public to the public, and many of these were prolix, as the paragraph rule did not apply to this portion of the journal. People wrote herein on this, that, and the other thing, ventilating their ideas and suggesting schemes. And as many wrote many bought, so that friends and relatives might read their letters, therefore vanity gave *The Moment* quite a large circulation independent of its orthodox issue. The proprietor made money in two ways; by supplying gossip for curious people, and by giving vain persons the chance of seeing themselves in print. Seeing what human nature is, it is scarcely to be wondered at that *The Moment* was a great success, and sold largely in town and country. Freddy's post was that of a roving correspondent. Whenever any event of interest took place in any of the four quarters of the globe, Laurance went to take notes on the spot, and his information was boiled down into concise, illuminative paragraphs. Indeed, the older

journalists said that it was hardly worth while for him to make such long journeys for the sake of condensed-milk news; but, as Freddy's details were always amusing as well as abrupt, the editor and the public and the proprietor were all satisfied. A man who can flash a vivid picture into the dullest mind in few words is well worth money. Therefore was Laurance greatly appreciated. Dan walked to a grimy lane leading from Fleet Street with some doubt in his puzzled mind as to whether Freddy would be in his office. At a moment's notice, the man would dart off to the ends of the earth, and was more or less on the move throughout the three hundred and sixty-five days of the year. But, of late, sensational events had concentrated themselves in England, so Dan hoped that his friend would be on the spot. An inquiry from the gorgeous individual who guarded the entrance to the red brick building wherein *The Moment* was printed and published and composed revealed that Mr. Laurance was not only in London, but in his office at the very second, so Dan sent up his name, and rejoiced at the catching of this carrier-pigeon. And it was a good omen also that Freddy saw him straight away, since he generally refused himself to every one on the plea of business. "But I couldn't resist seeing you, Dan," remarked Mr. Laurance, when he had shaken hands, before supplying his visitor with a cigarette and a chair. "I was coming to see you, if the mountain hadn't come to Mahommed!" Dan lighted up, and through the smoke of tobacco stared inquisitively at his friend, wondering what this introductory remark meant. Laurance was rather like Dan in personal appearance, being tall and slim and clean-shaven, with Greek features and an aristocratic look. But he was decidedly fair, as Halliday was decidedly dark, and his eyes were less like those of an eagle than the eyes of the aviator. But then Laurance was not accustomed to the boundless spaces of the air, although he had twice ascended in an airship; therefore the new expression of the new race was wanting. Nevertheless, he looked a capable, alert young man, able to get the full value out of every minute. He was an admirable type of the restless, present-day seeker. "Well, Mahommed," said Dan, leisurely, "here's the mountain. What have you to say to it?"

"That murder of Sir Charles Moon." Halliday quivered with surprise. It was so amazing that Laurance should hit upon the very subject, which employed his own thoughts. "Yes?" he inquired. "You are engaged to Miss Moon; you were in the house when the crime was committed; you saw the body; you-"

"Stop! Stop! I was not in the house when the crime was committed. I returned there from the theatre some time later-in fact about midnight. I certainly did see the body. As to being engaged to Miss Moon-h'm! I came to see about that, Freddy."

"The deuce you did. Great minds jump. What?" Laurance puffed a blue cloud, sat down astride a chair and leaned his arms on the back. "Strange!"

"That you and I should be on the hunt. Well it is."

"On the hunt!" echoed Laurance, staring. "What do you mean?"

"I should rather ask that question of you," said Dan drily. "Sir Charles is dead and buried these many weeks, and the woman who assassinated him can't be found, in spite of the reward and the effort of the police. Why, at this late hour, do you wish to rake up stale news? I thought that *The Moment* was more up-to-date."

"It will be very much up-to-date when the next murder is committed," observed Laurance, grimly and significantly. The legs of Dan's chair grated, as he pushed back in sheer surprise. "What do you mean by the next murder?" he demanded sharply. "Well, this gang-"

"Gang! gang! Who says there is a gang?" and Dan's thoughts flew back to Durwin's reason for visiting Sir Charles. "Humph!" growled Laurance, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "I'm disappointed. I thought you knew more."

"I know a good deal," retorted the other quickly, "but I don't intend to talk to you about what I know until I learn your game."

"What about your own?" "That comes later also," said Halliday promptly. "Go on! I want to know why you rake up Moon's murder."

"Naturally you do, seeing you are engaged to the daughter."

"Am I? I am not quite sure. She loves me and I love her, but the new baronet wants her to marry Lord Curberry. She refused, and I kicked up a row some hours back. Result, we are on probation for one year, during which time I am to discover the assassin of Sir Charles."

"And if you don't?"

"Time enough to talk about that when I fail," said Halliday coolly; "at least I have twelve months to hunt round. I came for your help, but it seems that you want mine. Why?" Freddy, through sheer absence of mind, flung away a half-smoked cigarette and lighted another. Then he rose and strolled across the room to lean his shoulders against the mantelpiece. "We can help one another, I think," was his final observation. "I hope so. In any case I intend to marry Lillian. All the same, to pacify Sir John, I am willing to become a detective. You know my game. Yours?"

"Listen," said Laurance vivaciously. "I forgot all about the murder, since there seemed to be no chance of the truth coming to the light, and so did every one else for the same reason. But a few nights ago I was dining out, and met a chap called Durwin-"

"Scotland Yard man," interrupted Dan, nodding several times. "He came to see Sir Charles on business and found the corpse." "Just so. Well, after dinner we had a chat, and he told me that he was anxious to learn who killed Moon, because he didn't want any more murders of the kind to happen-as a police official, you understand."

"Strange he should be confidential on that point," murmured Halliday thoughtfully, "seeing that he wished his theory regarding a possible gang kept quiet, in the hope of making discoveries."

"He has changed his mind about secrecy, and so has Tenson," said Freddy. "Oh!" Dan raised his eyebrows. "The Inspector. You have seen him also?" Laurance nodded. "After I saw Durwin, and learned what he had to say I saw Tenson, and interviewed him. They told me about the fly on the neck, and remembering the case of the purple fern, and having regard to the fact that the fly in question was artificial, both men are inclined to believe in the existence of a gang, whose trade-mark the said fly is." Dan nodded again. "Quite so; and then Durwin came to see Moon and hear about the gang. He found him dead."

"So you said; so Durwin said," rejoined Laurance quietly. "It seems very certain, putting this and that together, that Sir Charles became dangerous to this gang, whatever it is, and wherever it exists, so was put to death by the false Mrs. Brown, who came expressly to kill him."

"So far I am with you on all fours," said Halliday. "Well?"

"Well, both Durwin and Tenson, dreading lest the gang may commit another crime, wish me to make the matter as public as I can, so as to frighten the beasts."

"H'm!" said Dan, looking at his neat brown boots. "They have changed their minds, it seems. Their first idea was to keep the matter quiet, so as to catch these devils red-handed. However, publicity may be a good thing. How do you intend to begin?"

"I have got facts from Tenson and from Durwin," said Freddy promptly; "and now, since you saw the body and found the fly, I want to get the facts from you. On what I acquire I shall write a letter in that extra sheet of ours, and you can be pretty certain from what you know of human nature that any amount of people will reply to my letter."

"They may reply to no purpose."

"I'm not so sure of that, Dan. If I mention the fly as a trade-mark and recall the strange case of the purple fern, some one may write about matters known to themselves from positive knowledge. If this gang exists, it has committed more murders than one, but the fly being a small insect may not have been noticed as a trade-mark in the other crimes. I wonder you spotted it anyhow."

"It was easily seen, being on the back of the neck near the wound. Besides, flies in November-the month of the murder-are rare. Finally Tenson discovered the fly to be artificial, which shows that it was purposely placed on the dead man's neck, near the wound. H'm!" he reflected, "perhaps

someone may know of some crime with the fly trade-mark, and in that case we can be certain that such a gang does exist."

"So I think," cried Laurance quickly, "and for that reason I intend to start a discussion by writing an open letter. Publicity may frighten the beasts into dropping their trade; on the other hand, it may goad the gang into asserting itself. In either case the subject will be ventilated, and we may learn more or less of the truth."

"Yes. I think it's a good idea, Freddy. And the perfume? Did Durwin or the Inspector tell you anything about the perfume. No, I can see by your blank stare that they didn't. Listen, Freddy, and store this knowledge in your blessed brain, my son. It is a clue, I am sure," and Halliday forthwith related to his attentive listener details concerning the strange perfume which had impregnated the clothes of the dead man. "And Sir Charles hated perfumes," he ended, emphatically; "he didn't even like Lillian or Mrs. Bolstreath to use them, and they obeyed him." "Curious," mused the journalist, and idly scribbling on his blotting-paper; he was back at his desk by this time. "What sort of scent is it?"

"My dear chap, you ask me to describe the impossible," retorted Dan, with uplifted eyebrows. "How the deuce can I get the kind of smell into your head? It must be smelt to be understood. All I can say is that the perfume was rich and heavy, suggestive of drowsiness. Indeed, I used that word, and Tenson thought of some kind of chloroform used, perhaps, to stupefy the victim before killing him. But there was an odor about the mouth or nose."

"On the handkerchief, perhaps?" suggested the reporter. "No. Tenson smelt the handkerchief."

"Well, if this Mrs. Brown used this perfume, you and Miss Moon and Mrs. Bolstreath must have smelt it on her in the hall. I understand from Durwin that you all three saw the woman." "Yes. And Lillian, poor girl, persuaded her father to see the wretch. But we did not smell the perfume on the woman. Tenson or Durwin-I forget which-asked us the question."

"Humph!" said Laurance, after a pause; "it may be a kind of trade-mark, like the fly business." He took a note. "I shall use this evidence in my letter to the public. I suppose, Dan, you would recognize the scent again?"

"Oh, yes! I have a keen sense of smell, you know. But I don't expect I shall ever drop across this particular fragrance, Freddy."

"There's always Monsieur Chance, you know," remarked Laurance, tapping his white teeth with a pencil. "Perhaps the gang use this scent so as to identify one another-in the dark it may be-like cats. How does that strike you?"

"As purely theoretical," said Dan, with a shrug, and reached for another cigarette; "it's a case of perhaps, and perhaps not." Laurance assented. "But everything so far is theoretical in this case," he argued; "you have told me all you know?"

"Every bit, even to my year of probation. Do you know Curberry?"

"Yes. He was a slap-up barrister. A pity he got title and money, as he has left the Bar, and is a good man spoiled. Lucky chap all the same, as his uncle and cousin both died unexpectedly, to give him his chance of the House of Lords."

"How did they die?" "Motor accident. Car went over a cliff. Only the chauffeur was saved, and he broke both legs. Do you know the present Lord Curberry?"

"I have seen him, and think he's a dried-up, cruel-looking beast," said Dan, with considerable frankness. "I'd rather see Lillian dead than his wife."

"Hear, hear!" applauded Laurance, smiling. "The girl's too delightful to be wasted on Curberry. You have my blessing on the match, Dan."

"Thanks," said Halliday ruefully, "but I have to bring it off first. Sir John's infernally clever, and managed to get both Lillian and me to consent to let matters stand over for a year, during which time I guess he'll push Curberry's suit. But I can trust Lillian to be true to me, bless her, and Mrs. Bolstreath is quite on our side. After all," murmured the young man disconsolately, "it's only fair

that Sir Charles should be avenged. Perhaps it would be selfish for Lillian and me to marry and live happy ever afterwards, without making some attempt to square things. The question is how to start. I'm hanged if I know, and so I came to you."

"Well," said Laurance thoughtfully, "there's a hope of Monsieur Chance you know. In many ways you may stumble on clues even without looking for them, since this gang-if it exists-must carry on an extensive business. All you can do, Dan, is to keep your eyes and ears and nose open-the last for that scent, you know. On my part I shall write the letter, and publish it in the annex of The Moment. Then we shall see what will happen."

"Yes, I think that's about the best way to begin. Stir up the muddy water, and we may find what is at the bottom of the pond. But there's one thing to be considered, and that is money. If I'm going to hunt for these scoundrels I need cash, and to own up, Freddy, I haven't very much." "You're so beastly extravagant," said Laurance grinning, "and your private income goes nowhere."

"Huh! what's five hundred a year?"

"Ten pounds a week, more or less. However, there's your aviation. I hear that you take people flights for money?" Dan nodded. "It's the latest fashionable folly, which is a good thing for me, old son. I get pretty well paid, and it means fun."

"With some risk of death," said Laurance drily. "Well, yes. But that is a peculiarity of present-day fun. People love to play with death-it thrills them. However, if I am to hunt for the assassin of Sir Charles, I can't give much attention to aviation, and I repeat that I want money. Oceans of it."

"Would two thousand pounds suit you?"

"Rather. Only I'm not going to borrow from you, old man, thank you."

"I haven't that amount to lend," said Freddy, drily; "but you must have seen, if you read our very interesting paper, that our proprietor has offered a prize of two thousand pounds for a successful flight from London to York."

"A kind of up-to-date Dick Turpin, I suppose," laughed Dan, rising and stretching his long limbs. "Good, I'll have a shot, I may win."

"You will, if you use a Vincent machine."

"Vincent, Vincent? Where have I heard that name?"

"Everywhere if you know anything of the aviation world," snapped Laurance rather crossly, for at times Dan's indolence in acquiring necessary information annoyed him. "Solomon Vincent, who has been inventing airships and new-fangled aeroplanes for ever so long."

"Yes, yes! I remember now. He's a genius. Every one knows him." "Every one knows of him, except yourself; but no one knows him personally. He lives a secluded life up in Hillshire, on the borders of the moors, where he can find wide space for his experiments in aerial craft. I interviewed him a year ago, and-and-" Laurance blushed red. "Hullo, what's this?" asked Dan shrewdly. "Can it be that the inventor has a daughter fair?"

"A niece," retorted Laurance, recovering; "why shouldn't I be in love as well as you, Halliday? However, that doesn't matter."

"It matters a great deal to you."

"Never mind. What you have to do is to secure one of Vincent's machines and try for this race. If you win the prize you will have heaps of money to search for the gang. But why doesn't Miss Moon-"

"I don't take Lillian's money," said Dan curtly, and blushed in his turn. "It is a good idea, Freddy. How can I get hold of the machine?"

"I shall take you up to Hillshire next week, and you can see Vincent for yourself. He can talk to you, and-"

"And you can talk to the niece. What's her name?"

"Oh, shut up and get out," said Laurance, turning away, "you're interrupting my work."

"Going to write a letter to the beloved," said Dan, leisurely making for the door. "All right, old son, I'll go. You know my address, so write me when you want me. I'd like to see Vincent's machines, as I hear he has made several good improvements, and everything tells in a race. Salaam!"

"Keep your eyes open," Laurance called after him; "remember Monsieur Chance may prove to be our best friend." Dan departed, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't believe in heaven-sent miracles," were his last words. But they were wasted on Freddy, for that alert young man was already buried in his work. It was painful to witness such industry, in Halliday's opinion. In an inquiring frame of mind, the amateur detective strolled along Fleet Street, thinking of Lillian instead of keeping his wits about him, as Freddy had requested. It seemed impossible that he should strike on a clue without deliberately searching for it, which he did not feel inclined to do at the moment. Monsieur Chance, indeed! He was a mythical personage in whom this sceptical young man did not believe. Besides love dominated his thoughts to the exclusion of minor matters, and he dreamed about his darling all along the Strand. Thus he did not look where he was going, and stumbled into the midst of a Charing Cross crowd, where a motor had broken down after colliding with a 'bus. A policeman was conversing with the chauffeur and the 'bus driver, who were conversing abusively with one another. The crowd blocked the street and stopped the traffic in order to enjoy the conversation, which left nothing to be desired in the way of free language. Dan halted idly, as a spectator, not because he wished to be one, but for the very simple reason that he could not get through the crowd into Trafalgar Square. Thrust up against one man, and wedged in by two others, and surrounded by hundreds, he grumbled at the delay, and peered over shoulders to see when the incident would end. As he did so, he suddenly in his mind's eye saw a vision of Sir Charles lying dead in the well-lighted library. While wondering why he thought of the crime at this particular moment, he became aware that a familiar scent assailed his nostrils, the scent about which he had talked to Durwin and Tenson and Laurance. Nosing like a hound, he tried to find the person from whom it emanated, and almost immediately later the man turned, and Dan found himself face to face with Marcus Penn.

CHAPTER V
MUDDY WATER

The secretary of the late Sir Charles Moon smiled irresolutely when he recognized Dan. That young gentleman, who thought Penn a weak-kneed idiot, had never taken much notice of him, but for the fact that he was perfumed with the unusual scent would not have spoken to him now. But as he looked at the lank creature with his yellow face, and scanty moustache, he guessed that he was exactly the effeminate sort of person who would use perfume. What he wished to know was why he affected this particular kind of fragrance, and whence he obtained it. To gain the information he pretended a friendliness for the man he was far from feeling. Dan, strong, virile, and self-confident, was not altogether just to Penn, who was not responsible for his pallid looks and weak character. But Halliday was not a perfect individual by any means, and had yet to learn that the weak are meant to be protected and helped instead of being despised. "You here, Mr. Penn?" said Dan, thus formal to mark the difference between them. "Yes," replied the man in his faint hesitating voice, and, as they moved out of the crowd, Halliday smelt the weird perfume more strongly than ever shaken from Penn's clothes by his movements. "I stopped to look at the accident."

"A very ordinary one," rejoined Mr. Halliday, with a shrug. "By the way, I have not seen you since the funeral of Sir Charles. What are you doing now, if I may ask?"

"I am secretary to Lord Curberry."

"Oh!" The reply gave Dan something of a shock, for he did not expect at the moment to hear his rival's name. But then the whole incident of meeting Penn and smelling the incriminating perfume was strange. Monsieur Chance had proved himself to be an actuality instead of the mythical personage Dan had believed him to be. It was certainly odd that the meeting had taken place, and odder still that Penn should prove to be the servant of Curberry. As Halliday said nothing more than "Oh!" the other man stroked his moustache and explained. "Sir John got me the post, Mr. Halliday," he said, with his shifty eyes anywhere but on Dan's inquiring face. "I was quite stranded after Sir Charles's unexpected death, and did not know where to turn for employment. As I support a widowed mother, the situation was rather serious, so I took my courage in my hands and went to Sir John. He was good enough to recommend me to Lord Curberry, and I have been with his lordship for a month, more or less."

"I congratulate you, Mr. Penn, and Lord Curberry, also. Sir Charles always said you were an excellent secretary," Dan stopped as Penn bowed his acknowledgments to the compliment, and cast a keen side glance at the man. They were walking through Trafalgar Square by this time, passing under the shadow of Nelson's Column. "Do you know what I was thinking of when behind you in the crowd yonder, Mr. Penn?" he asked abruptly, and it must be confessed rather undiplomatically, if he wished to get at the truth. "No," said the secretary, with simplicity and manifest surprise. "No, Mr. Halliday, how can I guess your thoughts?"

"I was thinking of the murder of your late employer," said Dan straightly. Penn blinked and shivered. "It's a horrible subject to think about," he remarked in a low voice. "I can scarcely get it out of my own thoughts. I suppose the sight of me reminded you of the crime, Mr. Halliday?"

"Scarcely, since I was behind you, and did not recognize you until you turned," replied Dan, calmly, and the other appeared to be surprised. "Then how-" he began, only to be cut short. "It's that scent."

"Scent!" echoed Penn nervously, but manifestly still surprised. "I don't understand exactly what you mean, Mr. Halliday. I like scent, and use much of it." Dan's lip curled. "So I perceive. But where did you get the particular scent you are using now, may I ask?" Something in his tone annoyed the secretary, for he drew himself up and halted. "I don't know why you should criticize my tastes, Mr. Halliday."

"I'm not criticizing them, and don't jump down my throat. But you reek of some strange perfume, which I last smelt-" He paused. "You cannot have smelt it anywhere," said Penn indifferently. "What do you mean by that exactly?" asked Dan with considerable sharpness. Penn resumed his walk and drew his light eyebrows together. "I am willing to explain as soon as you tell me why you speak of the scent."

"Hang it, man," rejoined Halliday, dropping into step, "any one would notice the scent and speak of it since it is so strong."

"Oh" – Penn's brow cleared-"I understand now. You have taken a fancy to the scent and wish me to get you some." Halliday was about to make an indignant denial, when he suddenly changed his mind, seeing a chance of learning something. "Well, can you get me some?"

"No," said Penn coolly; "I cannot. This is a particular perfume which comes from the Island of Sumatra. I have a cousin there who knows that I like perfumes, and he sent me a single bottle."

"Can't I buy it anywhere?"

"No, it is not to be obtained in England," said Penn curtly. "In that case," said Halliday slowly, "it is strange that I should have smelt the same perfume on the clothes of Sir Charles after his death."

"Did you?" Penn looked surprised. "That is impossible. Why, Sir Charles detested scents, and I never dared to use this one until I left him for the night."

"You used it on the night of the murder?"

"Of course. I used it every night when I left Sir Charles. On that evening he sent me away with my usual batch of letters, and was going down to the House later. I would not have seen him until the next morning, so I took the opportunity to indulge in this taste."

"Then how did Sir Charles's clothes become impregnated with it?"

"I am unable to say. Why do you ask? Surely" – Penn turned an alarmed face towards the speaker, and looked yellower than ever-"surely you do not suspect me of keeping back anything from the police likely to lead to the detection of the assassin."

"Ask yourself, Mr. Penn," said Dan coldly. "I and Inspector Tenson and Mr. Durwin smelt this particular perfume on the clothes of the dead man, and I do not mind telling you that the police consider it something of a clue."

"A clue to what? To me? It must be, since I alone possess this scent. I certainly came into the library when summoned by Mr. Durwin, and I helped to look after Sir Charles. As I was strongly perfumed with the scent it is not impossible that my employer's clothes took what, doubtless, you will call the taint. I think," ended Penn in a dignified manner, "that such is the proper explanation. You have found a mare's nest, Mr. Halliday."

"Upon my word, I believe I have," said Dan, quite good-humoredly, "but you must forgive me, Mr. Penn. Inspector Tenson agreed with me that the fly and the scent were clues."

"About the fly I know nothing," said the secretary positively, "but this scent is not to be had in England, and Sir Charles's clothes could only have gathered the fragrance from mine. If Inspector Tenson suspects me-"

"No, no, no!" interrupted Halliday quickly. "I assure you that he does not."

"He would if you told him of our meeting," retorted Penn as they passed into Piccadilly Circus, "and as I don't like even a suspicion to rest on me, Mr. Halliday-for my good name is my fortune-I shall go and see him and explain the whole circumstance. Indeed, if he wishes it, I shall give him the bottle which my cousin sent me from Sumatra, and never shall I use the scent again. I do not like these injurious suspicions."

"Don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill," said Dan, drily; "if I have hurt your feelings, I apologize."

"I accept your apology only on condition that you accept my explanation." Dan inwardly chuckled at Penn's dignity, but replied, readily enough. "Oh, yes, for if I did not accept your

explanation I should not make any apology. You are probably right since the scent must have got on to Sir Charles's clothes from your own. The clue-as we took it to be-has ended in smoke."

"But don't you think that I should see Inspector Tenson and explain?"

"There is no need," Dan assured him, soothingly. "If the Inspector says anything about the scent, I shall explain; and, after all, it was I who suggested the perfume as a clue." "Would you like what is left of the bottle?" asked Penn, pacified by the very frank apology of the other. "No, thanks, I never use perfumes. I hate them."

"So did Sir Charles," mused Penn, and eyeing Dan with a lack-lustre gaze. "I wonder he did not suspect me of liking them. If he had come upon me scented in this manner, he would have kicked me out."

"It is to be hoped Lord Curberry has not the same dislike," said Dan, who having learned all he wished, desired to escape from such boring society. "No, he has not," said Penn with great simplicity; "he is very kind to me. I suppose he will marry Miss Moon."

"Then you suppose wrong. He will not," snapped Halliday roughly. "He loves her devotedly," insisted the secretary, and with a glint of malice in his pale-colored eyes. "Good-day," rejoined Dan shortly, as he did not wish to argue the matter. He turned into Regent Street-for by this time they had crossed the Circus-when Penn ran after him and seized his arm. "Is there any chance of the woman who killed Sir Charles being found?"

"No," replied Dan, halting for a moment. "Why?"

"Because Sir Charles was good to me, and I should like his death to be avenged. That is only natural. Surely the police will search."

"They are searching, Mr. Penn, and can discover nothing."

"Perhaps Lord Curberry may hunt for this woman. I shall ask him to, and as he loves Miss Moon so devotedly, he will try to learn the truth." Irritated by this speech-for Penn knew very well of the rivalry-Dan became scarlet. "I shall discover the truth. Lord Curberry need not trouble himself." "If you discover the truth-" began Penn, and hesitated. "Well?" asked Halliday sharply. "I think Lord Curberry will certainly marry Miss Moon."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Dan, but Penn gave no answer. Shaking his head significantly, he stepped back, and in one moment was lost in the midst of the crowd which thronged the corner. Halliday would have followed, for the man's last observation seemed to hint that he knew more about the truth than he was disposed to admit; but many people came between him and the secretary, so it was impossible to get hold of him again. Dan was forced to walk on alone and he walked on pondering deeply. Did Penn know the truth? It seemed impossible that he should know it. The evidence of the typewriting girl went to show that he had not left his private room all the evening until summoned by Durwin when the death was discovered. What Penn said about the perfume appeared to be reasonable enough, as he certainly had handled the body, and if reeking of the scent-as he was reeking on this very day-it was not surprising that the odor should communicate itself to the dress clothes of the dead man. Some odors cling very powerfully, and endure for a considerable time. This Sumatra scent assuredly had done so, for it was quite three hours after the death that Dan himself had seen the corpse, and even then he had smelt the perfume. However, on the face of it, Halliday saw no reason to doubt Penn's statement, and quite understood how he became, through Sir John's mediation, the secretary of Lord Curberry. Only the last speech of the secretary was strange. Why should he say that, if the truth were discovered by Dan, Curberry would marry the girl, when, on the discovery of the truth-so far as Dan could see-the marriage of himself to Lillian depended? Dan could find no answer to this question, and had half a mind to follow Penn to his new employer's house, so as to force an explanation. But as he knew Curberry did not like him, he decided to let matters stand as they were, and only reveal what he had heard to Laurance. For the next four or five days, young Halliday went about his business in a quiet, determined manner, and thought as little as possible of Lillian. He did not even write or call to see her, since he wished to give up his whole

attention to discovering the truth about Moon's death. If he thought of love and Lillian, he certainly could not concentrate his mind on the necessary search. And it was very necessary, if he intended to marry the girl. He became certain that in some way Sir John intended to trick him, but if he found out the false Mrs. Brown, and solved the mystery, Sir John would be forced out of sheer justice to sanction the marriage. It was heroical of Halliday to turn his thoughts from his beloved and it was no easy task to one so deeply in love as he. But he saw the need of it, and manfully set himself to endure present pain for future joy. Whether Lillian saw things in the same light, or resented his neglect, he did not know, as he had no word from her, neither came there any letter from Mrs. Bolstreath. Dan had, certainly been pushed out of the girl's life by her astute uncle; but it was his own common sense that kept him out of it-for the time being-be it understood. Love demands its martyrs, and Halliday had become one for Love's sake. By doing so, although he knew it not, he was displaying more real love towards her than he had ever done in his life before. Meanwhile, Laurance lost no time in publishing his letter, which dealt with the mystery of Moon's death. As *The Moment*, including its extra letter-writing sheet, had a large circulation, and as it was a season devoid of news, the letter caused great discussions. It was sufficiently alarming to those who loved law and order, since it boldly announced that a gang of criminals existed which coldly and cautiously and deliberately employed its members to put people to death. The letter called attention to the fly-and that an artificial one-on Sir Charles's neck near the poisoned wound, and declared that such was the sign-manual of the accursed society. No mention was made of the scent, since Dan had explained what Penn had said to Laurance, and Laurance had accepted the explanation as valid. But there was quite enough in the letter to startle the most dull, especially when the writer called attention to the happening of various mysterious murders, and suggested that such were the work of this misguided set of people who constituted the unknown gang; finally, Freddy ended his letter by saying that Moon had knowledge of the gang, and had sent for a Scotland Yard official-name not given-to explain the whole matter, when he met with his death. It was a fact, therefore, that the false Mrs. Brown was an emissary of the gang who had been sent to murder Sir Charles, and had performed her vile errand only too well. A postscript to the epistle invited discussion, and particularly called upon any person who knew of an artificial fly being found on a corpse to give evidence. In two days the sheet was filled with letters from various people, and the matter was much discussed. Some of the writers laughed at the idea of such a society existing in a civilized country such as England, while others expressed alarm and asked what the police were doing not to arrest the criminals. These last scribes evidently entirely forgot that no one knew where the central quarters of the gang were, and that the letter of Mr. Laurance was an attempt to root out the heart of the mystery. Those who appeared in print and aided the circulation of *The Moment* by buying their own lucubrations certainly did not help much. The generality of the letters were discursive and ornate, wandering very much from the point, and giving no positive information such as would assist Freddy's purpose. But three or four epistles drew attention to certain mysterious crimes, the perpetrators of which had never been brought to justice, and who were not even known. There was the case of a young girl found dead on the Brighton railway line, near Redhill, and who must have been thrown out of the train. Then some one wrote about a miser in the East End who had been strangled, and another person recalled the drowning of a well-known philanthropist in the Serpentine. A verdict of suicide had been brought in as regards this last victim, but the writer of the letter positively asserted that the philanthropist had not the slightest intention of making away with himself. Finally came a batch of letters concerning children who had been murdered. But only in one case did it appear that any fly was seen on the victim, and that was when a schoolmistress was stabbed to the heart while in bed and asleep. The assassin had entered and escaped by the window, and the victim's mother-who wrote the letter drawing attention to this case-had found the fly on her daughter's cheek. She had thought nothing of it at the time, and had brushed away the insect. But after the mention of the fly on Sir Charles Moon's neck, she remembered the incident. Also it turned out that the schoolmistress, had she lived, would have inherited a large sum of money. It was this

last circumstance that suggested the intervention of the gang to murder the girl, so that someone else might inherit. But all the letters dealing with the various cases were vague, and no enlightening details could be given. All that could be said was that there were many unusual deaths, the mystery of which could not be solved. Laurance, reading the letters during the week of their appearance, felt sure that the gang existed, but he was more or less alone in his opinion. Even Dan was doubtful. "It seems such a large order for a number of people to band themselves together, to murder on this comprehensive scale," he objected; "and I don't quite see the object. Many of the victims mentioned in these letters are poor."

"You seem to have changed your mind about the matter," said Laurance drily, "for when my letter appeared you were assured that there was such a gang."

"Only because of Sir Charles's remarks to Durwin."

"It was a pity Sir Charles was not more explicit," retorted Freddy crossly. "He had no time to be explicit," said Dan patiently, "since he died before he explained. But let us admit, for the sake of argument, that such a gang exists. Why should the members murder poor people?"

"Folks have been murdered by way of revenge, as well as for money. And let me remind you, Dan, that four or five of these victims mentioned in the letters had money, or were about to inherit money. I am quite convinced," said Laurance, striking the table, "that there is such an association."

"An association for what?"

"You are very dull. To get undesirable people out of the way. Remember, in the reign of Louis XIV there were dozens of poisoners in Paris who undertook to kill people when engaged to do so. The reason was for revenge, or desire for money, or-or-or for other reasons," ended Laurance vaguely. "Hum!" Dan stroked his chin, "it may be as you say. Certainly Sir Charles was got rid of, because he knew too much."

"About this gang," insisted Laurance, "since he was to see Durwin about the same. I am certain that such an association exists."

"You said that before," Halliday reminded him. "And I say it again. At all events there is one thing certain-that we have learned from these letters of many mysterious crimes."

"But only in one case was the fly discovered," objected Dan again. "That is not to be wondered at," replied the journalist; "the wonder is that such a small insect should be noticed at all. No one would ever think of connecting a fly, whether dead or alive, with the death. The mother of this schoolmistress did not, until your experience with regard to Moon was quoted in my letter. The fly business is quite ridiculous."

"And perhaps means nothing."

"Oh, I think it does, seeing that in Moon's case, the fly was artificial. Probably in the case of the schoolmistress it was artificial also, only the mother who noticed it did not make an examination. Why should she? I wonder the gang don't have a better trade-mark."

"Perhaps the gang may think it would be spotted if it did."

"Then why have any trade-mark at all," answered Laurance, sensibly. "If there is to be a sign, there should be some sensible one. If the fly was stamped on the skin, as the purple fern was stamped, there would be some sense in the matter. But a fly, artificial or real, is-" Freddy spread out his hands, for words entirely failed him. "Well," said Dan after a pause, "I don't know what to say, since everything is so vague. However, I shall assume that such a gang exists, and shall do my best to aid you to bring about its destruction, as that means my marriage to Lillian. To help, I must have money, so the sooner we get North and engage one of Vincent's machines with all the latest improvements, the better shall I be pleased." He moved towards the door, as they were in Laurance's rooms when this conversation took place, and there he halted. "I think, Freddy, you will have a chance of proving in your own person, as to the truth of your supposition regarding this gang!" "What do you mean?" asked Laurance somewhat startled. "Well," murmured Dan, "the gang knows you started the hunt for

its destruction, as I expect the members read the papers. If that is the case you will be a source of danger, such as Sir Charles was and-"

"I'll look after myself," interrupted Laurance grimly. "Well, if you don't, and the worst comes," said Dan agreeably, "I shall carefully examine your corpse for the celebrated fly."

"I'll look after myself," said Laurance again, "and if you think I am going to give up doing business through fear of death, you are much mistaken. If I can find the gang and exterminate the gang, I'll get a much larger salary, and so will be able to marry Mildred."

"Oh, that's her name, is it? Mildred Vincent! Is she pretty?" "You might not think so, since Miss Moon is your ideal," said Freddy, with a blush. "Mildred is dark and tall, and well-proportioned-none of your skimpy women, old man."

"Lillian isn't skimpy," cried Halliday indignantly. "I never said she was. Let us call her fairy-like."

"That's better. And your Mildred?" "You'll see her when we go North the day after tomorrow."

"Good!" Dan nodded thankfully, "we go to Vincent the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes. Meet me at a quarter to twelve at St. Pancras Station; the train leaves at mid-day and we change at Thawley for Beswick about four o'clock. I expect we'll arrive-all going well-at Sheepeak about six."

"Good. But why shouldn't all go well?" inquired Dan, after a pause. Laurance chuckled. "According to you, the gang will hunt me down, and as you are in my company-well!" he chuckled again. "Oh, I don't care a cent for the gang, no more than yourself," retorted Dan with a shrug. "I'm not even going to think of the beasts. We go North to get the machine which will enable me to win this two thousand. And then-"

"And then?" echoed Laurance with a grin. "Then I shall discover the truth, crush the gang, and marry Lillian." In this way, therefore, the muddy water was stirred up.

CHAPTER VI
THE INVENTOR

Freddy Laurance usually opened his mouth to ask questions, rarely to talk about himself. In the newspaper world, confidences may mean copy, given that such are worthy to appear in print. Therefore, as the young man found, it is just as well to be sparing of personal details, and having made this discovery, he was careful to keep his tongue between his teeth in all matters dealing with his private life. This reticence, useful in business, but wholly unnecessary in friendship-particularly when the friendship had to do with Dan Halliday-had grown upon Laurance to such an extent that he said very little about his love affair. Dan, being a genial soul, and a fellow-sufferer in the cause of Cupid, and having a heart-whole liking for the journalist, resented being shut out in this way. He therefore made it his business to extract Freddy's love story from him when the two were in the train making for Sheepeak, *viâ* Thawley and Beswick. "Where did you meet her?" asked Dan abruptly, as they had the compartment to themselves, and he had exhausted not only the newspapers but the magazines. "Her?" repeated Laurance, who was calmly smoking, with his feet on the opposite seat, "what her?"

"The her. The one girl in the world for you?"

"Oh, bosh!" Freddy colored, and looked pleasantly embarrassed. "Is it? Perhaps you are right!" and Dan began to hum a simple little American song, entitled, "I wonder who's kissing her now." Laurance took this personally. "No one is! I can trust her."

"Trust who?" asked Dan innocently. "The person you mentioned now. Miss Vincent, Mildred."

"Did I mention her? Well, now you recall her name, I did. Old man, we are the best of friends, but this fourth estate habit of holding your confounded tongue is getting on my nerves. Give yourself a treat by letting yourself go. I am ready to listen," and he leaned back with a seraphic smile. Freddy did not fence any longer, but came out with details. After all, since he could trust Dan, he was beginning to think that it would be delightful to talk his heart empty. "She's the dearest girl in the world," was the preamble. Dan twiddled his thumbs. "We all say that. Now Lillian-"

"Mildred! We are speaking of her." Freddy spoke very fast lest his friend should interrupt. Since Dan wanted confidences, Dan should have them given to him in a most thorough manner. "Mildred is an angel, and her uncle is an old respectable, clever beast."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.