

HUME FERGUS

THE SECRET
PASSAGE

Fergus Hume
The Secret Passage

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CHAPTER I

THE COTTAGE

"What IS your name?"

"Susan Grant, Miss Loach."

"Call me ma'am. I am Miss Loach only to my equals. Your age?"

"Twenty-five, ma'am."

"Do you know your work as parlor-maid thoroughly?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was two years in one place and six months in another, ma'am. Here are my characters from both places, ma'am."

As the girl spoke she laid two papers before the sharp old lady who questioned her. But Miss Loach did not look at them immediately. She examined the applicant with such close attention that a faint color tinted the girl's cheeks and she dropped her eyes. But, in her turn, by stealthy glances, Susan Grant tactfully managed to acquaint herself with the looks of her possible mistress. The thoughts of each woman ran as follows, —

Miss Loach to herself. "Humph! Plain-looking, sallow skin, rather fine eyes and a slack mouth. Not badly dressed for a servant, and displays some taste. She might turn my old dresses at a pinch. Sad expression, as though she had something on her mind. Honest-looking, but I think a trifle inquisitive, seeing how she examined the room and is stealing glances at me. Talks sufficiently, but in a low voice. Fairly intelligent, but not too much so. Might be secretive. Humph!"

The thoughts of Susan Grant. "Handsome old lady, probably nearly sixty. Funny dress for ten o'clock in the morning. She must be rich, to wear purple silk and old lace and lovely rings at this hour. A hard mouth, thin nose, very white hair and very black eyebrows. Got a temper I should say, and is likely to prove an exacting mistress. But I want a quiet home, and the salary is good. I'll try it, if she'll take me."

Had either mistress or maid known of each other's thoughts, a conclusion to do business might not have been arrived at. As it was, Miss Loach, after a few more questions, appeared satisfied. All the time she kept a pair of very black eyes piercingly fixed on the girl's face, as though she would read her very soul. But Susan had nothing to conceal, so far as Miss Loach could gather, so in the end she resolved to engage her.

"I think you'll do," she said nodding, and poking up the fire, with a shiver, although the month was June. "The situation is a quiet one. I hope you have no followers."

"No, ma'am," said Susan and flushed crimson.

"Ha!" thought Miss Loach, "she has been in love — jilted probably. All the better, as she won't bring any young men about my quiet house."

"Will you not read my characters, ma'am?"

Miss Loach pushed the two papers towards the applicant. "I judge for myself," said she calmly. "Most characters I read are full of lies. Your looks are enough for me. Where were you last?"

"With a Spanish lady, ma'am!"

"A Spanish lady!" Miss Loach dropped the poker she was holding, with a clatter, and frowned so deeply that her black eyebrows met over her high nose. "And her name?"

"Senora Gredos, ma'am!"

The eyes of the old maid glittered, and she made a clutch at her breast as though the reply had taken away her breath. "Why did you leave?" she asked, regaining her composure.

Susan looked uncomfortable. "I thought the house was too gay, ma'am."

"What do you mean by that? Can any house be too gay for a girl of your years?"

"I have been well brought up, ma'am," said Susan quietly; "and my religious principles are dear to me. Although she is an invalid, ma'am, Senora Gredos was very gay. Many people came to her house and played cards, even on Sunday," added Susan under her breath. But low as she spoke, Miss Loach heard.

"I have whist parties here frequently," she said drily; "nearly every evening four friends of mine call to play. Have you any objection to enter my service on that account?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. I don't mind a game of cards. I play 'Patience' myself when alone. I mean gambling – there was a lot of money lost and won at Senora Gredos' house!"

"Yet she is an invalid I think you said?"

"Yes, ma'am. She was a dancer, I believe, and fell in some way, so as to break her leg or hurt her back. She has been lying on a couch for two years unable to move. Yet she has herself wheeled into the drawing-room and watches the gentlemen play cards. She plays herself sometimes!"

Miss Loach again directed one of her piercing looks at the pale face of the girl. "You are too inquisitive and too talkative," she said suddenly, "therefore you won't suit me. Good-day."

Susan was quite taken aback. "Oh, ma'am, I hope I've said nothing wrong. I only answered your questions."

"You evidently take note of everything you see, and talk about it."

"No, ma'am," said the girl earnestly. "I really hold my tongue."

"When it suits you," retorted Miss Loach. "Hold it now and let me think!"

While Miss Loach, staring frowningly into the fire, debated inwardly as to the advisability of engaging the girl, Susan looked timidly round the room. Curiously enough, it was placed in the basement of the cottage, and was therefore below the level of the garden. Two fairly large windows looked on to the area, which had been roofed with glass and turned into a conservatory. Here appeared scarlet geraniums and other bright-hued flowers, interspersed with ferns and delicate grasses. Owing to the position of the room and the presence of the glass roof, only a subdued light filtered into the place, but, as the day was brilliant with sunshine, the apartment was fairly well illuminated. Still, on a cloudy day, Susan could imagine how dull it would be. In winter time the room must be perfectly dark.

It was luxuriously furnished, in red and gold. The carpet and curtains were of bright scarlet, threaded with gold. The furniture, strangely enough, was of white polished wood upholstered in crimson satin fringed with gold. There were many pictures in large gilded frames and many mirrors similarly encircled with gilded wood. The grate, fender and fire-irons were of polished brass, and round the walls were numerous electric lamps with yellow shades. The whole room represented a bizarre appearance, flamboyant and rather tropical in looks. Apparently Miss Loach was fond of vivid colors. There was no piano, nor were there books or papers, and the only evidence as to how Miss Loach passed her time revealed itself in a work-basket and a pack of cards. Yet, at her age, Susan thought that needlework would be rather trying, even though she wore no glasses and her eyes seemed bright and keen. She was an odd old lady and appeared to be rich. "I'll engage you," said Miss Loach abruptly; "get your box and be here before five o'clock this afternoon. I am expecting some friends at eight o'clock. You must be ready to admit them. Now go!"

"But, ma'am, I – "

"In this house," interrupted Miss Loach imperiously, "no one speaks to me, unless spoken to by me. You understand!"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Susan timidly, and obeyed the finger which pointed to the door. Miss Loach listened to the girl's footsteps on the stairs, and sat down when she heard the front door close. But she was up again almost in a moment and pacing the room. Apparently the conversation with

Susan Grant afforded her food for reflection. And not very palatable food either, judging from her expression.

The newly-engaged servant returned that same afternoon to the suburban station, which tapped the district of Rexton. A trunk, a bandbox and a bag formed her humble belongings, and she arranged with a porter that these should be wheeled in a barrow to Rose Cottage, as Miss Loach's abode was primly called. Having come to terms, Susan left the station and set out to walk to the place. Apart from the fact that she saved a cab fare, she wished to obtain some idea of her surroundings, and therefore did not hurry herself.

It was a bright June day with a warm green earth basking under a blue and cloudless sky. But even the sunshine could not render Rexton beautiful. It stretched out on all sides from the station new and raw. The roads were finished, with asphalt footpaths and stone curbing, the lamp-posts had apparently only been lately erected, and lines of white fences divided the roads from gardens yet in their infancy. Fronting these were damp-looking red brick villas, belonging to small clerks and petty tradesmen. Down one street was a row of shops filled with the necessaries of civilization; and round the corner, an aggressively new church of yellow brick with a tin roof and a wooden steeple stood in the middle of an untilled space. At the end of one street a glimpse could be caught of the waste country beyond, not yet claimed by the ferry-builder. A railway embankment bulked against the horizon, and closed the view in an unsightly manner. Rexton was as ugly as it was new.

Losing her way, Susan came to the ragged fringe of country environing the new suburb, and paused there, to take in her surroundings. Across the fields to the left she saw an unfinished mansion, large and stately, rising amidst a forest of pines. This was girdled by a high brick wall which looked older than the suburb itself. Remembering that she had seen this house behind the cottage of Miss Loach, the girl used it as a landmark, and turning down a side street managed to find the top of a crooked lane at the bottom of which Rose Cottage was situated. This lane showed by its very crookedness that it belonged to the ancient civilization of the district. Here were no paths, no lamps, no aggressively new fences and raw brick houses. Susan, stepping down the slight incline, passed into quite an old world, smacking of the Georgian times, leisurely and quaint. On either side of the lane, old-fashioned cottages, with whitewash walls and thatched roofs, stood amidst gardens filled with unclipped greenery and homely flowers. Quickset hedges, ragged and untrimmed, divided these from the roadway, and to add to the rural look one garden possessed straw bee-hives. Here and there rose ancient elm-trees and grass grew in the roadway. It was a blind lane and terminated in a hedge, which bordered a field of corn. To the left was a narrow path running between hedges past the cottages and into the country.

Miss Loach's house was a mixture of old and new. Formerly it had been an unpretentious cottage like the others, but she had added a new wing of red brick built in the most approved style of the jerry-builder, and looking like the villas in the more modern parts of Rexton. The crabbed age and the uncultured youth of the old and new portions, planted together cheek by jowl, appeared like ill-coupled clogs and quite out of harmony. The thatched and tiled roofs did not seem meet neighbors, and the whitewash walls of the old-world cottage looked dingy beside the glaring redness of the new villa. The front door in the new part was reached by a flight of dazzling white steps. From this, a veranda ran across the front of the cottage, its rustic posts supporting rose-trees and ivy. On the cottage side appeared an old garden, but the new wing was surrounded by lawns and decorated with carpet bedding. A gravel walk divided the old from the new, and intersected the garden. At the back, Susan noted again the high brick wall surrounding the half-completed mansion. Above this rose tall trees, and the wall itself was overgrown with ivy. It apparently was old and concealed an unfinished palace of the sleeping beauty, so ragged and wild appeared the growth which peeped over the guardian wall.

With a quickness of perception unusual in her class, Susan took all this in, then rang the bell. There was no back door, so far as she could see, and she thought it best to enter as she had done

in the morning. But the large fat woman who opened the door gave her to understand that she had taken a liberty.

"Of course this morning and before engaging, you were a lady," said the cook, hustling the girl into the hall, "but now being the housemaid, Miss Loach won't be pleased at your touching the front bell."

"I did not see any other entrance," protested Susan.

"Ah," said the cook, leading the way down a few steps into the thatched cottage, which, it appeared was the servants' quarters, "you looked down the area as is natural-like. But there ain't none, it being a conservitery!"

"Why does Miss Loach live in the basement?" asked Susan, on being shown into a comfortable room which answered the purpose of a servants' hall.

The cook resented this question. "Ah!" said she with a snort, "and why does a miller wear a white 'at, Miss Grant, that being your name I take it. Don't you ask no questions but if you must know, Miss Loach have weak eyes and don't like glare. She lives like a rabbit in a burrow, and though the rooms on the ground floor are sich as the King might in'abit, she don't come up often save to eat. She lives in the basement room where you saw her, Miss Grant, and she sleeps in the room orf. When she eats, the dining-room above is at her service. An' I don't see why she shouldn't," snorted the cook.

"I don't mean any – "

"No offence being given none is taken," interrupted cook, who seemed fond of hearing her own wheezy voice. "Emily Pill's my name, and I ain't ashamed of it, me having been cook to Miss Loach for years an' years and years. But if you had wished to behave like a servant, as you are," added she with emphasis, "why didn't you run round by the veranda and so get to the back where the kitchen is. But you're one of the new class of servants, Miss Grant, 'aughty and upsetting."

"I know my place," said Susan, taking off her hat.

"And I know mine," said Emily Pill, "me being cook and consequently the mistress of this servants' 'all. An' I'm an old-fashioned servant myself, plain in my 'abits and dress." This with a disparaging look at the rather smart costume of the newly-arrived housemaid. "I don't 'old with cockes feathers and fal-de-dals on 'umble folk myself, not but what I could afford 'em if I liked, being of saving 'abits and a receiver of good wages. But I'm a friendly pusson and not 'ard on a good-lookin' gal, not that you are what I call 'andsome."

Susan seated beside the table, looked weary and forlorn, and the good-natured heart of the cook was touched, especially when Susan requested her to refrain from the stiff name of Miss Grant.

"You an' me will be good friends, I've no doubt," said Emily, "an' you can call me Mrs. Pill, that being the name of my late 'usband, who died of gin in excess. The other servants is housemaid and page, though to be sure he's more of a man-of-all-work, being forty if he's a day, and likewise coachman, when he drives out Miss Loach in her donkey carriage. Thomas is his name, my love." The cook was rapidly becoming more and more friendly, "and the housemaid is called Geraldine, for which 'eaven forgives her parents, she bein' spotty and un'ealthy and by no means a Bow-Bell's 'eroine, which 'er name makes you think of. But there's a dear, I'm talking brilliant, when you're dying for a cup of tea, and need to get your box unpacked, by which I mean that I sees the porter with the barrer."

The newly-arrived parlor-maid was pleased by this friendly if ungrammatical reception, and thought she would like the cook in spite of her somewhat tiresome tongue. For the next hour she was unpacking her box and arranging a pleasant little room at the back. She shared this with the spotty Geraldine, who seemed to be a good-natured girl. Apparently Miss Loach looked after her servants and made them comfortable. Thomas proved to be amiable if somewhat stupid, and welcomed Susan to tea affably but with sheepish looks. As the servants seemed pleasant, the house comfortable, and as the salary was excellent, Susan concluded that she had – as the saying is – fallen on her feet.

The quartette had tea in the servants' hall, and there was plenty of well-cooked if plain victuals. Miss Loach dined at half-past six and Susan assumed her dress and cap. She laid the table in a

handsome dining-room, equally as garish in color as the apartment below. The table appointments were elegant, and Mrs. Pill served a nice little meal to which Miss Loach did full justice. She wore the same purple dress, but with the addition of more jewellery. Her sharp eyes followed Susan about the room as she waited, and at the end of the dinner she made her first observation. "You know your work I see," she said. "I hope you will be happy here!"

"I think I will, ma'am," said Susan, with a faint sigh.

"You have had trouble?" asked Miss Loach quickly.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"You must tell me about it to-morrow," said the old lady rising. "I like to gain the confidence of my servants. Now bring my coffee to the room below. At eight, three people will arrive – a lady and two gentlemen. You will show them into the sitting-room and put out the card-table. Then you can go to the kitchen and wait till I ring. Be sure you don't come till I do ring," and Miss Loach emphasized this last order with a flash of her brilliant eyes.

Susan took the coffee to the sitting-room in the basement and then cleared the table. Shortly before eight o'clock there was a ring at the front door. She opened it to a tall lady, with gray hair, who leaned on an ebony cane. With her were two men, one a rather rough foolish-looking fellow, and the other tall, dark, and well-dressed in an evening suit. A carriage was just driving away from the gate. As the tall lady entered, a breath of strong perfume saluted Susan's nostrils. The girl started and peered into the visitor's face. When she returned to the kitchen her own was as white as chalk.

CHAPTER II

THE CRIME

The kitchen was rather spacious, and as neat and clean as the busy hands of Mrs. Pill could make it. An excellent range polished to excess occupied one end of the room; a dresser with blue and white china adorned the other. On the outside wall copper pots and pans, glittering redly in the firelight, were ranged in a shining row. Opposite this wall, a door led into the interior of the house, and in it was the outer entrance. A large deal table stood in the center of the room, and at this with their chairs drawn up, Geraldine and the cook worked. The former was trimming a picture-hat of the cheapest and most flamboyant style, and the latter darned a coarse white stocking intended for her own use. By the fire sat Thomas, fair-haired and stupid in looks, who read tit-bits from the Daily Mail for the delectation of Mrs. Pill and Geraldine.

"Gracious 'eavens, Susan," cried the cook, when Susan returned, after admitting the visitors, "whatever's come to you?"

"I've had a turn," said Susan faintly, sitting by the fire and rubbing her white cheeks.

At once Mrs. Pill was alive with curiosity. She questioned the new parlor-maid closely, but was unable to extract information. Susan simply said that she had a weak heart, and set down her wan appearance to the heat. "An' on that accounts you sits by the fire," said Mrs. Pill scathingly. "You're one of the secret ones you are. Well, it ain't no business of mine, thank 'eaven, me being above board in everythink. I 'spose the usual lot arrived, Susan?"

"Two gentlemen and a lady," replied Susan, glad to see that the cooks thoughts were turning in another direction.

"Gentlemen!" snorted Mrs. Pill, "that Clancy one ain't. Why the missus should hobnob with sich as he, I don't know nohow."

"Ah, but the other's a real masher," chimed in Geraldine, looking up from her millinery; "such black eyes, that go through you like a gimlet, and such a lovely moustache. He dresses elegant too."

"Being Miss Loach's lawyer, he have a right to dress well," said Mrs. Pill, rubbing her nose with the stocking, "and Mr. Clancy, I thinks, is someone Mr. Jarvey Hale's helpin', he being good and kind."

Here Geraldine gave unexpected information.

"He's a client of Mr. Hale's," she said indistinctly, with her mouth full of pins, "and has come in for a lot of money. Mr. Hale's introducing him into good society, to make a gent of him."

"Silk purses can't be made out of sows' ears," growled the cook, "an' who told you all this Geraldine?"

"Miss Loach herself, at different times."

Susan thought it was strange that a lady should gossip to this extent with her housemaid, but she did not take much interest in the conversation, being occupied with her own sad thoughts. But the next remark of Geraldine made her start. "Mr. Clancy's father was a carpenter," said the girl.

"My father was a carpenter," remarked Susan, sadly.

"Ah," cried Mrs. Pill with alacrity, "now you're speaking sense. Ain't he alive?"

"No. He was poisoned!"

The three servants, having the love of horrors peculiar to the lower classes, looked up with interest. "Lor!" said Thomas, speaking for the first time and in a thick voice, "who poisoned him?"

"No one knows. He died five years ago, and left mother with me and four little brothers to bring up. They're all doing well now, though, and I help mother, as they do. They didn't want me to go out to service, you know," added Susan, warming on finding sympathetic listeners. "I could have stopped at home with mother in Stepney, but I did not want to be idle, and took a situation with a widow lady

at Hampstead. I stopped there a year. Then she died and I went as parlor-maid to a Senora Gredos. I was only there six months," and she sighed.

"Why did you leave?" asked Geraldine.

Susan grew red. "I wished for a change," she said curtly.

But the housemaid did not believe her. She was a sharp girl and her feelings were not refined. "It's just like these men – "

"I said nothing about men," interrupted Susan, sharply.

"Well, then, a man. You've been in love, Susan, and – "

"No. I am not in love," and Susan colored more than ever.

"Why, it's as plain as cook that you are, now," tittered Geraldine.

"Hold your noise and leave the gal be," said Mrs. Pill, offended by the allusion to her looks, "if she's in love she ain't married, and no more she ought to be; if she'd had a husband like mine, who drank every day in the week and lived on my earnings. He's dead now, an' I gave 'im a 'andsome tombstone with the text: 'Go thou and do likewise' on it, being a short remark, lead letterin' being expensive. Ah well, as I allays say, 'Flesh is grass with us all.'"

While the cook maundered on Thomas sat with his dull eyes fixed on the flushed face of Susan. "What about the poisoning?" he demanded.

"It was this way," said Susan. "Father was working at some house in these parts – "

"What! Down here?"

"Yes, at Rexton, which was then just rising into notice as a place for gentlefolks. He had just finished with a house when he came home one day with his wages. He was taken ill and died. The doctor said he had taken poison, and he died of it. Arsenic it was," explained Susan to her horrified audience.

"But why did he poison himself?" asked Geraldine.

"I don't know: no one knew. He was gettin' good wages, and said he would make us all rich."

"Ah," chimed in Thomas suddenly, "in what way, Susan?"

"He had a scheme to make our fortunes. What it was, I don't know. But he said he would soon be worth plenty of money. Mother thought someone must have poisoned him, but she could not find out. As we had a lot of trouble then, it was thought father had killed himself to escape it, but I know better. If he had lived, we should have been rich. He was on an extra job down here," she ended.

"What was the extra job?" asked Thomas curiously.

Susan shook her head. "Mother never found out. She went to the house he worked on, which is near the station. They said father always went away for three hours every afternoon by an arrangement with the foreman. Where he went, no one knew. He came straight from this extra job home and died of poison. Mother thought," added Susan, looking round cautiously, "that someone must have had a wish to get rid of father, he knowing too much."

"Too much of what, my gal?" asked Mrs. Pill, with open mouth.

"Ah! That's what I'd like to find out," said Susan garrulously, "but nothing was ever known, and father was buried as a suicide. Then mother, having me and my four brothers, married again, and I took the name of her new husband."

"Then your name ain't really Grant?" asked Geraldine.

"No! It's Maxwell, father being Scotch and a clever workman. Susan Maxwell is my name, but after the suicide – if it was one – mother felt the disgrace so, that she made us all call ourselves Grant. So Susan Grant I am, and my brothers of the old family are Grant also."

"What do you mean by the old family?"

"Mother has three children by her second husband, and that's the new family," explained Susan, "but we are all Grants, though me and my four brothers are really Maxwells. But there," she said, looking round quietly and rather pleased at the interest with which she was regarded, "I've told you a lot. Tell me something!"

Mrs. Pill was unwilling to leave the fascinating subject of suicide, but her desire to talk got the better of her, and she launched into a long account of her married life. It seemed she had buried the late Mr. Pill ten years before, and since that time had been with Miss Loach as cook. She had saved money and could leave service at once, if she so chose. "But I should never be happy out of my kitchen, my love," said Mrs. Pill, biting a piece of darning-cotton, "so here I stay till missus goes under."

"And she won't do that for a long time," said Thomas. "Missus is strong. A good, kind, healthy lady."

Geraldine followed with an account of herself, which related chiefly to her good looks and many lovers, and the tyranny of mistresses. "I will say, however, that after being here a year, I have nothing to complain of."

"I should think not," grunted Thomas. "I've been twenty years with Miss Loach, and a good 'un she is. I entered her service when I was fifteen, and she could have married an earl – Lord Caranby wanted to marry her – but she wouldn't."

"Lor," said Mrs. Pill, "and ain't that his lordship's nephew who comes here at times?"

"Mr. Mallow? Yes! That's him. He's fond of the old lady."

"And fond of her niece, too," giggled Geraldine; "not but what Miss Saxon is rather sweet."

"Rather sweet," growled the cook, "why, she's a lovely gal, sich as you'll never be, in spite of your fine name. An' her brother, Mr. Basil, is near as 'andsome as she."

"He ain't got the go about him Miss Juliet have," said Thomas.

"A lot you know," was the cook's retort. "Why Mr. Basil quarrelled with missus a week ago and gave her proper, and missus ain't no easy person to fight with, as I knows. Mr. Basil left the house and ain't been near since."

"He's a fool, then," said Thomas. "Missus won't leave him a penny."

"She'll leave it to Miss Juliet Saxon, which is just the same. I never did see brother and sister so fond of one another as those two. I believe she'd put the 'air of 'er head – and lovely 'air it is, too – under his blessed feet to show him she loves him."

"She'd do the same by Mr. Mallow," said Geraldine, tittering.

Here Susan interrupted. "Who is the old lady who comes here?"

"Oh, she's Mrs. Herne," said the cook. "A cross, 'aughty old thing, who fights always. She's been coming here with Mr. Jarvey Hale and Mr. Clancy for the last three years. They play whist every evening and go away regular about ten. Missus let's 'em out themselves or else rings for me. Why, there's the bell now," and Mrs. Pill rose.

"No! I go," said Susan, rising also. "Miss Loach told me to come when she rang."

Mrs. Pill nodded and resumed her seat and her darning. "Lor bless you, my love, I ain't jealous," she said. "My legs ain't as young as they was. 'Urry, my dear, missus is a bad 'un to be kept waitin'."

Thus urged, Susan hastened to the front part of the house and down the stairs. The door of the sitting-room was open. She knocked and entered, to find Mr. Clancy, who looked rougher and more foolish than ever, standing by the table. Miss Loach, with a pack of cards on her lap, was talking, and Susan heard the concluding sentence as she entered the room.

"You're a fool, Clancy," said Miss Loach, emphatically. "You know Mrs. Herne doesn't like to be contradicted. You've sent her away in a fine rage, and she's taken Hale with her. Quite spoilt our game of – ah, here's Susan. Off with you, Clancy. I wish to be alone."

The man would have spoken, but Miss Loach silenced him with a sharp gesture and pointed to the door. In silence he went upstairs with Susan, and in silence left the house. It was a fine night, and Susan stopped for a moment at the door to drink in the fresh air. She heard the heavy footsteps of a policeman draw near and he passed the house, to disappear into the path on the opposite side of the road. When Susan returned to the kitchen she found supper ready. Soon the servants were seated at the table and talking brightly.

"Who does that house at the back belong to?" asked Susan.

"To Lord Caranby," said Thomas, although not directly addressed. "It's unfinished."

"Yes and shut up. Lord Caranby was in love with a lady and built that house for her. Before it was ready the lady died and Lord Caranby left the house as it was and built a high wall round it. He then went travelling and has been travelling ever since. He never married either, and his nephew, Mr. Cuthbert Mallow, is heir to the title."

"I thought you said Lord Caranby loved Miss Loach?"

"No, I didn't. I said she could have married him had she played her cards properly. But she didn't, and Lord Caranby went away. The lady who died was a friend of missus, and they were always together. I think missus and she were jealous of Lord Caranby, both loving him. But Miss Saul – that was the other lady – died, and Lord Caranby left the house as it stands, to go away."

"He won't allow anyone to set a foot in the house or grounds," said Mrs. Pill, "there ain't no gate in the wall –"

"No gate," echoed Susan astonished.

"Not a single 'ole as you could get a cat through. Round and round the place that fifteen-foot wall is built, and the park, as they calls it, is running as wild as a cow. Not a soul has set foot in that place for the last fifteen years. But I expect when Mr. Mallow comes in for the title he'll pull it down and build 'ouses. I'm sure he ought to: it's a shame seeing land wasted like that."

"Where is Lord Caranby now?"

"He lives in London and never comes near this place," said Thomas.

"Is Miss Loach friendly with him now?" "No, she ain't. He treated her badly. She'd have been a better Lady Caranby than Miss Saul" – here Thomas started and raised a finger. "Eh! wasn't that the front door closing?"

All listened, but no sound could be heard. "Perhaps missus has gone to walk in the garding," said cook, "she do that at times."

"Did you show 'ern out?" asked Thomas, looking at Susan.

"Only Mr. Clancy," she answered, "the others had gone before. I heard what Miss Loach was saying. Mr. Clancy had quarrelled with Mrs. Herne and she had gone away with Mr. Hale. Then Miss Loach gave it to him hot and sent him away. She's all alone."

"I must have been mistaken about the door then," said he.

"Not at all," chimed in Mrs. Pill. "Missus is walking as she do do in the garding, singing and adornin' self with flowers."

After this poetic flight of fancy on the part of the cook, the supper ended. Thomas smoked a pipe and the housemaid cleared away. Mrs. Pill occupied her time in putting her few straggling locks in curl-papers.

While Susan was assisting Geraldine, the bell rang. All started. "I thought missus had gone to bed," cried the cook, getting up hurriedly. "She'll be in a fine rage if she finds us up. Go to bed, Geraldine, and you, Thomas. Susan, answer the bell. She don't like us not to be gettin' our beauty sleep. Bless me it's eleving."

The clock had just struck as Susan left the kitchen, and the three servants were bustling about so as to get to bed before their sharp-eyed old mistress found them. Susan went down the stairs. The door of the sitting-room was closed. She knocked but no voice told her to enter. Wondering if the bell had been rung by mistake, Susan knocked again, and again received no answer. She had a mind to retreat rather than face the anger of Miss Loach. But remembering that the bell had rung, she opened the door, determined to explain. Miss Loach was seated in her usual chair, but leaning back with a ghastly face. The glare of the electric lamp fixed in the ceiling, shone full on her white countenance, and also on something else. The bosom of her purple gown was disarranged, and the lace which adorned it was stained with blood. Startled by her looks Susan hurried forward and gazed searchingly into the face. There was no sign of recognition in the wide, staring eyes. Susan, quivering with dread,

touched Miss Loach's shoulder. Her touch upset the body and it rolled on the floor. The woman was dead. With a shriek Susan recoiled and fell on her knees. Her cry speedily brought the other servants. "Look!" cried Susan pointing, "she is dead – murdered!" Geraldine and Mrs. Pill shrieked with horror. Thomas preserved his stolid look of composure.

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS DEATH

To be the husband of a celebrated woman is not an unmixed blessing. Mr. Peter Octagon found it to be so, when he married Mrs. Saxon, the widow of an eminent Q.C. She was a fine Junoesque tragic woman, who modelled herself on the portraits of the late Mrs. Siddons. Peter, on the contrary, was a small, meek, light-haired, short-sighted man, who had never done anything in his unromantic life, save accumulate a fortune as a law-stationer. For many years he lived in single blessedness, but when he retired with an assured income of three thousand a year, he thought he would marry. He had no relatives, having been brought up in a Foundling Hospital, and consequently, found life rather lonely in his fine Kensington house. He really did not care about living in such a mansion, and had purchased the property as a speculation, intending to sell it at a profit. But having fallen in with Mrs. Saxon, then a hard-up widow, she not only induced him to marry her, but, when married, she insisted that the house should be retained, so that she could dispense hospitality to a literary circle.

Mrs. Octagon was very literary. She had published several novels under the nom-de-plume of "Rowena." She had produced a volume of poems; she had written a play which had been produced at a matinee; and finally her pamphlets on political questions stamped her, in the opinion of her immediate circle, as a William Pitt in petticoats. She looked upon herself as the George Eliot of the twentieth century, and dated events from the time of her first success. "That happened before I became famous," she would say. "No, it was after I took the public by storm." And her immediate circle, who appreciated her cakes and ale, would agree with everything she said. The Kensington house was called "The Shrine of the Muses!" and this title was stamped on her envelopes and writing-paper, to the bewilderment of illiterate postmen. It sounded like the name of a public-house to them.

Peter was quite lost in the blaze of his wife's literary glory. He was a plain, homely, small man, as meek as a rabbit, fond of his garden and fireside, and nervous in society. Had he not committed the fatal mistake of wedding Mrs. Saxon, he would have taken a cottage in the country and cultivated flowers. As it was, he dwelt in town and was ordered to escort Mrs. Octagon when she chose to "blaze," as she put it, in her friends' houses. Also there was a reception every Friday when literary London gathered round "Rowena," and lamented the decline of Art. These people had never done anything to speak of, none of them were famous in any wide sense, but they talked of art with a big "A," though what they meant was not clear even to themselves. So far as could be ascertained Art, with a big "A," was concerned with something which did not sell, save to a select circle. Mrs. Octagon's circle would have shuddered collectively and individually at the idea of writing anything interesting, likely to be enjoyed by the toilers of modern days. Whatever pictures, songs, books or plays were written by anyone who did not belong to "The Circle," these were considered "pretty, but not Tart!" Anything successful was pronounced "Vulgar!" To be artistic in Mrs. Octagon's sense, a work had to possess obscurity, it had to be printed on the finest paper with selected type, and it had to be sold at a prohibitive price. In this way "Rowena" had produced her works, and her name was not known beyond her small coterie. All the same, she intimated that her renown was world-wide and that her fame would be commensurate with the existence of the Anglo-Saxon race. Mrs. Lee Hunter in the Pickwick Papers, also labored under the same delusion.

With Peter lived Mrs. Saxon's children by the eminent Q.C. Basil, who was twenty-five, and Juliet age twenty-two. They were both handsome and clever, but Juliet was the more sensible of the two. She detested the sham enthusiasm of The Circle, and appreciated Peter more than her mother did. Basil had been spoilt by his mother, who considered him a genius, and had produced a book of weak verse. Juliet was fond of her brother, but she saw his faults and tried to correct them. She wished to make him more of a man and less of an artistic fraud, for the young man really did possess talents.

But the hothouse atmosphere of "The Shrine of the Muses!" would have ruined anyone possessed of genius, unless he had a strong enough nature to withstand the sickly adulation and false judgments of those who came there. Basil was not strong. He was pleasant, idle, rather vain, and a little inclined to be dissipated. Mrs. Octagon did not know that Basil was fond of dissipation. She thought him a model young Oxford man, and hoped he would one day be Laureate of England.

Afternoon tea was just ended, and several of Mrs. Octagon's friends had departed. Basil and Mr. Octagon were out, but the latter entered with a paper in his hand shortly after the last visitor took her leave. Mrs. Octagon, in a ruby-colored velvet, looking majestic and self-satisfied, was enthroned – the word is not too strong – in an arm-chair, and Juliet was seated opposite to her turning over the leaves of a new novel produced by one of The Circle. It was beautifully printed and bound, and beautifully written in "precious" English, but its perusal did not seem to afford her any satisfaction. Her attention wandered, and every now and then she looked at the door as though expecting someone to enter. Mrs. Octagon disapproved of Juliet's pale cheeks and want of attention to her own fascinating conversation, so, when alone, she took the opportunity to correct her.

"My child," said Mrs. Octagon, who always spoke in a tragic manner, and in a kind of blank-verse way, "to me it seems your cheeks are somewhat pale."

"I had no sleep last night," said Juliet, throwing down the book.

"Your thoughts concerned themselves with Cuthbert's face, no doubt, my love," said her mother fondly.

"No, I was not thinking of him. I was worried about – about – my new dress," she finished, after vainly casting about for some more sensible reason.

"How foolish children are. You trouble about your dress when you should have been thinking of the man who loves you."

"Does Cuthbert love me?" asked Juliet, flushing.

"As Romeo loved your namesake, sweetest child. And a very good match it is too," added Mrs. Octagon, relapsing into prose. "He is Lord Caranby's heir, and will have a title and a fortune some day. But I would not force you to wed against your will, my dear."

"I love Cuthbert and Cuthbert loves me," said Juliet quickly, "we quite understand one another. I wonder why he did not come to-day."

"Ah," said her mother playfully, "I saw that your thoughts were elsewhere. Your eyes wandered constantly to the door. He may come late. By the way, where is my dearest son?"

"Basil? He went out this morning. I believe he intended to call on Aunt Selina."

Mrs. Octagon lost a trifle of her suave manner, and became decidedly more human. "Then I wish he would not call there," she said sharply. "Selina Loach is my own sister, but I do not approve of her."

"She is a poor, lonely dear, mother."

"Poor, my child, she is not, as I have every reason to believe she is well endowed with this world's goods. Lonely she may be, but that is her own fault. Had she behaved as she should have done, Lady Caranby would have been her proud title. As to dear," Mrs. Octagon shrugged her fine shoulders, "she is not a woman to win or retain love. Look at the company she keeps. Mr. Hale, her lawyer, is not a nice man. I have espied something evil in his eye. That Clancy creature is said to be rich. He needs to be, if only to compensate for his rough way. They visit her constantly."

"You have forgotten Mrs. Herne," said Juliet, rising, and beginning to pace the room restlessly and watch out of the window.

"I have never met Mrs. Herne. And, indeed, you know, that for private reasons I have never visited Selina at that ridiculous house of hers. When were you there last, Juliet, my child?"

The girl started and appeared embarrassed. "Oh, a week ago," she said hurriedly, then added restlessly, "I wonder why Basil does not come back. He has been away all day."

"Do you know why he has called on your aunt, my dear?"

"No," said Juliet, in a hesitating manner, and turned again to look out of the window. Then she added, as though to escape further questioning, "I have seen Mrs. Herne only once, but she seemed to me a very nice, clever old woman."

"Clever," said Mrs. Octagon, raising her eyebrows, which were as strongly marked as those of her sister, "no. She does not belong to The Circle."

"A person can be clever without that," said Juliet impatiently.

"No. All the clever people in London come here, Juliet. If Mrs. Herne had been brilliant, she would have found her way to our Shrine."

Juliet shrugged her shoulders and curled her pretty lip. She did not appreciate her privileges in that house. In fact, a word distinctly resembling "Bother!" escaped from her mouth. However, she went on talking of Mrs. Herne, as though to keep her mother from questioning her further.

"There is a mystery about Mrs. Herne," she said, coming to the fire; "for I asked Aunt Selina who she was, and she could not tell me."

"That is so like Selina," rejoined Mrs. Octagon tartly, "receiving a person of whom she knows nothing."

"Oh, she does know a little. Mrs. Herne is the widow of a Spanish merchant, and she struck me as being foreign herself. Aunt Selina has known her for three years, and she has come almost every week to play whist at Rose Cottage. I believe she lives at Hampstead!"

"It seems to me, Juliet, that your aunt told you a great deal about this person. Why did you ask?"

Juliet stared into the fire. "There is something so strange about Mrs. Herne," she murmured. "In spite of her gray hair she looks quite young. She does not walk as an old woman. She confessed to being over fifty. To be sure, I saw her only once."

Mrs. Octagon grew rather cross. "I am over fifty, and I'm sure I don't look old, you undutiful child. When the soul is young, what matters the house of clay. But, as I was saying," she added hastily, not choosing to talk of her age, which was a tender point with her, "Selina Loach likes low company. I know nothing of Mrs. Herne, but what you say of her does not sound refined."

"Oh, she is quite a lady."

"And as to Mr. Clancy and Mr. Jarvey Hale," added Mrs. Octagon, taking no notice, "I mistrust them. That Hale man looked as though he would do a deed of darkness on the slightest provocation."

So tragic was her mother's manner, that Juliet turned even paler than she was. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"I mean murder, if I must use so vulgar and melodramatic a word."

"But I don't understand –"

"Bless me," cried Mrs. Octagon, becoming more prosaic than ever, "there is nothing to understand. But Selina lives in quite a lonely house, and has a lot of money. I never open the papers but what I expect to read of her death by violence."

"Oh," murmured Juliet, again crossing to the window, "you should not talk like that, mother!"

Mrs. Octagon laughed good-naturedly. "Nonsense, child. I am only telling you my thoughts. Selina is such a strange woman and keeps such strange company that she won't end in the usual way. You may be sure of that. But, after all, if she does die, you will come in for her money and then, can marry Cuthbert Mallow."

Juliet shuddered. "I hope Aunt Selina will live for many a long day, if that is what you think," she said sharply. "I want none of her money. Cuthbert has money of his own, and his uncle is rich also."

"I really hope Cuthbert has enough to justify him gambling."

"He does not gamble," said Juliet quickly.

"Yes he does," insisted Mrs. Octagon. "I have heard rumors; it is but right you should hear about –"

"I want to hear nothing. I thought you liked Cuthbert."

"I do, and he is a good match. But I should like to see you accept the Poet Arkwright, who will yet be the Shakespeare of England."

"England has quite enough glory with the Shakespeare she has," rejoined Juliet tartly, "and as to Mr. Arkwright, I wouldn't marry him if he had a million. A silly, ugly, weak –"

"Stop!" cried Mrs. Octagon, rising majestically from her throne. "Do not malign genius, lest the gods strike you dumb. Child –"

What Mrs. Octagon was about to say further must remain ever a mystery, for it was at this moment that her husband hurried into the room with an evening paper in his hand. "My dear," he said, his scanty hair almost standing on end with horror, "such dreadful news. Your aunt, Juliet, my dear –"

"Selina," said Mrs. Octagon quietly, "go on. There is nothing bad I don't expect to hear about Selina. What is it?"

"She is dead!"

"Dead!" cried Juliet, clasping her hands nervously. "No!"

"Not only dead, but murdered!" cried Mr. Octagon. His wife suddenly dropped into her throne and, being a large fleshy woman, her fall shook the room. Then she burst into tears. "I never liked Selina," she sniffed, "even though she was my own sister, but I am sorry – I am dreadfully – oh, dear me! Poor Selina!"

By this time all the dramatic posing of Mrs. Octagon had gone by the wall, and she showed herself in her true colors as a kind-hearted woman. Juliet hurried to her mother and took one of her hands. The elder woman started, even in the midst of her tears. "My child, your hand is as cold as ice," she said anxiously. "Are you ill?"

"No," said the girl hurriedly and evidently trying to suppress her emotion, "but this dreadful news! Do you remember what you said?"

"Yes – but I never expected I would be a true prophetess," sobbed Mrs. Octagon. "Peter," with sudden tartness, "why don't you give me the details. Poor Selina dead, and here am I in ruby velvet!"

"There are not many details to give," said Peter, reading from the newspaper, "the police are keeping quiet about the matter."

"Who killed her?"

Juliet rose suddenly and turned on the electric light, so that her step-father could see to read more clearly. "Yes," she said in a firm voice, belied by the ghastly whiteness of her face, "who killed her?"

"It is not known," said Mr. Octagon. "Last night she entertained a few friends – to be precise, three, and she was found by her new parlor-maid dead in her chair, stabbed to the heart. The weapon has not been found, nor has any trace of the murderer been discovered."

"Entertained friends," muttered Mrs. Octagon weeping, "the usual lot. Mr. Hale, Mrs. Herne and Mr. Clancy –"

"Yes," said Peter, somewhat surprised, "how do you know?"

"My soul, whispered me," said Mrs. Octagon tragically, and becoming melodramatic again, now that the first shock was over. "One of those three killed her. Who struck the fatal blow? – the villain Hale I doubt not."

"No," cried Juliet, "it was not Mr. Hale. He would not harm a fly."

"Probably not," said her mother tartly, "a fly has no property – your Aunt Selina had. Oh, my dear," she added, darting away at a tangent, "to think that last night you and Basil should have been witnesses of a melodrama at the Marlow Theatre, at the very time this real tragedy was taking place in the rural country."

"It's a most dreadful affair," murmured Peter, laying aside the paper. "Had I not better go down to Rose Cottage and offer my services?"

"No," said Mrs. Octagon sharply, "don't mix yourself up in this dreadful affair. Few people know that Selina was my sister, and I don't want everyone to be condoling with me on this tragedy."

"But we must do something," said Juliet quickly.

"We will wait, my dear. But I don't want more publicity than is necessary."

"But I have told some of our friends that Aunt Selina is a relative."

"Then you should not have done so," replied her mother, annoyed. "However, people soon forget names, and the thing may not be noticed."

"My dear," said Octagon, seriously, "you should not be ashamed of your sister. She may not have your renown nor rank, still –"

"I know my own knowing," interrupted the lady rather violently, and crushing her meek husband with a look. "Selina and I are strangers, and have been for years. What are the circumstances of the case? I have not seen Selina for over fifteen years. I hear nothing about her. She suddenly writes to me, asking if my dear children may call and see her – that was a year ago. You insisted that they should go, Peter, because relatives should be friendly. I consented, as I heard from Mr. Hale that Selina was rich, and fancied she might leave her money to my children. Juliet has called several times –"

"More than that," interrupted Juliet in her turn, "both Basil and I have called nearly every month. We sometimes went and did not tell you, mother, as you seemed so annoyed that we should visit her."

"I consented only that you might retain her goodwill and get what money she might leave," said Mrs. Octagon obstinately. "There is nothing in common between Selina and me."

"There was nothing in common," put in Octagon softly.

"I know she is dead. You need not remind me of that unpleasant fact, sir. And her death is worthy of her strange, and I fear not altogether reputable life."

"Oh, mother, how can you? Aunt Selina was the most particular –"

"There – there," said her mother who was much agitated, "I know more than you do. And between ourselves, I believe I know who killed her. Yes! You may look. And this death, Juliet, ends your engagement with Cuthbert."

CHAPTER IV

DETAILS

What Mrs. Octagon meant by her last enigmatic remark it is impossible to say. After delivering it in her usual dramatic manner, she swept from the room, leaving Juliet and her step-father staring at one another. Peter was the first to break the silence.

"Your mother appears to be very positive," said he.

"About my giving up Cuthbert?" asked Juliet sharply.

"About the crime. She hinted that she guessed who killed the poor lady. I never knew Miss Loach myself," added Mr. Octagon, seating himself and ruffling his scanty locks, a habit with him when perplexed, "but you said you liked her."

"Yes, Aunt Selina was always very nice to me. She had strange ways, and, to tell you the truth, father," Juliet always addressed Peter thus, to his great delight, "she was not so refined as mother – "

"Few people are so refined as my wife, my dear."

"As to mother knowing who killed her," pursued Juliet, taking no notice of this interpolation, "it's nonsense. She said she believed Mr. Hale or Mr. Clancy – "

"Surely not," interposed Mr. Octagon anxiously, "both these gentlemen have participated in the delights of our literary Circle, and I should be loath to credit them with violence."

"I don't believe either has anything to do with the matter. Mother doesn't like them because they were such good friends to Aunt Selina. Can you guess why mother quarrelled with aunt, father?"

"No, my dear. Your mother has some grudge against her. What it is I do not know. She never told me. But for over fifteen years your mother spoke little of your aunt and never called to see her. I was quite astonished when she consented that you and Basil should call. Did your aunt ever speak of your mother?"

"Very little, and then she was cautious – what she said. But this is not the question," continued the girl, leaning her chin on her hand and staring into the fire; "why does mother say I must break my engagement with Cuthbert on account of this death?"

"Perhaps she will explain."

"No; she left the room to avoid an explanation. Cuthbert certainly saw Aunt Selina once or twice, but he did not care for her. But he can have nothing to do with the matter. Then again, mother, up till now, was always pleased that I should marry Cuthbert."

"Yes," said Octagon, twiddling his thumbs; "she has known Mr. Mallow ever since he was a child. Both your aunt and your mother were great friends of Lord Caranby's in their youth, over twenty years ago. I believe at one time Selina was engaged to him, but he was in love with a young lady called Miss Saul, who died unexpectedly."

"I know," said Juliet; "and then Lord Caranby abandoned the house he was building at Rexton, and it has been shut up all these years. Aunt Selina told me the story. When I asked mother for details, she refused to speak."

"Your mother is very firm when she likes."

"Very obstinate, you mean," said Juliet, undutifully. "However, I am not going to give up Cuthbert. I love him and he loves me. I intend to marry him whatever mother may say."

"But if your mother refuses her consent?"

"I am over age."

As she spoke her brother entered the room hurriedly. Basil Saxon was as fair and weak-looking as his sister was dark and strong in appearance. He was smartly dressed, and in a rather affected way. His hair was long, he wore a moustache and a short imperial, and talked in a languid way in a somewhat obscure manner. These were the traits Juliet disliked in Basil. She would rather have seen

him a spruce well-groomed man about town like Cuthbert. But at the present moment Basil's face was flushed, and he spoke hurriedly, evidently laboring under great stress of emotion.

"Have you heard the news?" he said, dropping into a chair and casting a side look at the evening paper which Peter still held.

"If you mean about the death – "

"Yes; Aunt Selina has been murdered. I called to see her this morning, and found the house in the possession of the police. All day I have been down there with Mallow."

"With Cuthbert," said Juliet, starting and growing red. "What was he doing there?"

"He came down to Rexton to see about the unfinished house. Lord Caranby has returned to England, and he has thoughts of pulling it down. Mallow came to have a look at the place."

"But he can't get in. There is a wall round the grounds."

"He climbed over the wall," said Basil, quickly, "and after looking through the house he came out. Then he saw me, and I told him what had happened. He appeared dreadfully shocked."

Juliet shivered in spite of the heat of the day and the fire, near which she was seated. "It is strange he should have been there."

Her brother threw a keen glance at her. "I don't see that!" he exclaimed. "He gave his reason for being in the neighborhood. He came up with me, and is coming on here in a few moments. This is why he did not turn up this afternoon."

Juliet nodded and appeared satisfied with this explanation. But she kept her eyes on her brother when he entered into details about the crime. Her emotions during the recital betrayed themselves markedly.

"I saw the detective," said Basil, with quicker speech than usual. "He is a first-rate chap called Jennings, and when he heard I was Miss Loach's nephew he didn't mind speaking freely."

"What did you learn?" asked Mr. Octagon.

"Enough to make the mystery surrounding the death deeper than ever."

"What do you mean?" asked his sister, restlessly. "Can't the murderer be found?"

"Not a trace of him can be discovered."

"Why do you say 'him.' It might have been a woman."

"No," rejoined Basil positively, "no woman could have struck so hard a blow. Aunt Selina was stabbed to the heart. She must have been killed as she was rising from her chair, and death, so the doctor says, must have been instantaneous."

"Has the weapon been found?" asked Juliet in a low voice.

Basil turned quickly in his chair, and looked at her sharply. "No!" he said, "not a sign of any weapon can be found, nor can it be discovered how anyone got into the house. Though to be sure, she might have admitted her visitor."

"Explain! explain," cried Mr. Octagon, ruffling his hair.

"Well, to tell the story in detail," said his step-son, "the way it happened is this. Aunt Selina had Mr. Hale and Mr. Clancy and Mrs. Herne to their usual game of whist. Clancy, as it appears from the report of what the new parlor-maid overheard, quarrelled with Hale and Mrs. Herne. They left before ten o'clock. At all events, when she entered the room in answer to my aunt's summons, she found only Mr. Clancy, and aunt was scolding him for having provoked Mrs. Herne by contradicting her. Apparently Mrs. Herne had gone away under the wing of Hale. Then aunt sent Clancy away at ten o'clock. The parlor-maid returned to the kitchen and there had supper. She heard the bell ring at eleven, and found aunt dead in the sitting-room, stabbed to the heart."

"Heard the bell ring?" echoed Juliet. "But how could aunt ring if she had been killed?"

"She might have rung as she was dying," said Basil, after a pause. "It seems she was seated near the button of the bell and could have touched it without rising. She might have rung with a last effort, and then have died before the parlor-maid could get to the room."

"Or else," said Mr. Octagon, anxious to prove his perspicuity, "the assassin may have stabbed her and then have touched the bell."

"What!" cried his step-son derisively, "to summon a witness. I don't think the assassin would be such a fool. However, that's all that can be discovered. Aunt Selina is dead, and no one knows who killed her."

"Was the house locked up?" "The front door was closed, and the windows were bolted and barred. Besides, a policeman was walking down Crooked Lane a few minutes before eleven, and would have seen anyone leaving the house. He reported that all was quiet."

"Then the assassin might have rung the bell at eleven," said Peter.

"Certainly not, for he could never have escaped immediately afterwards, without the policeman seeing him."

"He might have got out by the back," suggested Juliet.

"My dear girl, what are you thinking of. That wall round Lord Caranby's mansion blocks any exit at the back. Anyone leaving the house must go up the lane or through that part at the bottom. The policeman was near there shortly before eleven and saw no one leaving the house."

"But, look here," said Mr. Octagon, who had been ruminating; "if, as the doctor says, death was instantaneous, how could your aunt have rung the bell?"

"Yes," added Juliet. "And even had death not taken place at once, it could not have been more than a few minutes before eleven when the blow was struck. Aunt might have had strength to crawl to the bell and touch it, but the assassin could not have escaped from the house, seeing – as you say – the policeman was on guard."

"Aunt died instantaneously," insisted Basil.

"Then she could not have sounded the bell," said Juliet triumphantly.

"The assassin did that," said Peter.

"And thus called a witness," cried Basil. "Ridiculous!"

"Then how do you explain the matter?"

"I can't explain. Neither can the detective Jennings. It's a mystery."

"Could any of the servants – " began Peter.

"No," interrupted Saxon. "The four servants were having supper in the kitchen. They are innocent. Well, we'll see what the inquest reveals. Something may be found before then likely to elucidate the mystery. But here comes Mallow. He questioned Jennings also, so you can question him if you like. Does mother know?"

"Yes. And she doesn't want the fact of her relationship to your aunt talked about."

Basil understood at once. "No wonder," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It is not a pleasant affair for a woman of mother's celebrity to be mixed up with."

Meantime, Juliet having heard the ring at the front door, escaped from the room to see her lover. She met him divesting himself of his overcoat in the hall, and ran to him with outstretched hands. "But why have you got on an overcoat this warm day?" she asked.

"I have a cold. I caught one last night," said Cuthbert, kissing her.

"Where were you last night?" asked Juliet, drawing him into a side room. "I thought you were coming to the Marlow Theatre with Basil and me."

"Yes. But my uncle arrived unexpectedly in England and sent for me to his hotel in Guelph street – the Avon Hotel, you know. He will insist on a fire even in June, and the room was so hot that I caught cold when I came out. I had to go down to Rexton to-day on his business, and put on a coat so as to avoid catching further cold. But why this room, Juliet?"

"Father and Basil are in the drawing-room. They are talking of the murder, and I don't want to hear any more about it."

"There are pleasanter things to talk about," said Mallow. "I knew Basil would come crammed with news. Has he told you – "

"He told us everything he could gather from the detective. It seems that the crime is quite a mystery."

"Quite. Why your aunt should be killed, or how the assassin escaped, after killing her, cannot be discovered. Jennings is in high glee about it. He loves a puzzle of this sort."

"Do you know him?" asked Juliet anxiously.

"Oh, yes. Jennings is a gentleman. He was at Eton with me. But he ran through his money and took up the detective business. He is very clever, and if anyone will learn the truth, he will. Now, my theory – "

Juliet put her hand over his mouth. "Don't," she said. "I have had enough horrors for this afternoon. Let us talk of ourselves."

"I would rather do this," said Mallow, and kissed her.

Mallow was a handsome fellow, tall and slim, with a rather military carriage. His face was clean-shaven save for a small straw-colored moustache, which showed up almost white against the bronze of his face. He was more of an athlete than a student, and this was one reason why Juliet was fond of him. She had seen so much of literary circles that she always vowed she would marry a man who never opened a book. Cuthbert nearly fulfilled this requirement, as he read little, save novels and newspapers. He was well known in sporting circles, and having a good private income, owned race-horses. He was always irreproachably dressed, good-humored and cheerful. Consequently he was popular, and if not overburdened with brains, managed to make himself agreeable to the world, and to have what the Americans call "a good time." He had travelled much and was fond of big-game shooting. To complete his characterization, it is necessary to mention that he had served in the Boer War, and had gained a D.S.O. But that was in the days before he met Juliet or he might not have risked a life so precious to her.

Juliet was dark and rather little, not at all like her Junoesque mother. She was extremely pretty and dressed to perfection. Having more brains and a stronger will than Mallow, she guided him in every way, and had already succeeded in improving his morals. With so gentle and charming a mentor, Cuthbert was quite willing to be led into the paths of virtue. He adored Juliet and she loved him, so it appeared that the marriage would be quite ideal.

"Much as we love one another," said Cuthbert when the lovers were seated on the sofa. "I wonder you can talk of anything but this horrid murder."

"Because there is nothing to talk of," rejoined the girl impatiently; "according to Basil, the case is most mysterious, so it is useless for us to worry over it until something tangible is discovered. But I want to speak to you seriously – " here Juliet hesitated.

"Well, go on," said Cuthbert, taking her hand.

"Mother says – " began Juliet, then hesitated again. "Promise me you will keep to yourself what I am about to tell you."

"Certainly. I never was a fellow to chatter."

"Then mother says that this murder will put a stop to our marriage."

Mallow stared, then flushed up to his ears. "What on earth does she mean by that?" he asked aghast.

Juliet looked searchingly at him. "Do you know of any impediment?"

"I? Of course I don't. I am sorry for the death of your aunt, but I really don't see what it has to do with you and me."

Juliet drew a breath of relief. "Mother hints that she knows who committed the crime, and – "

"What! She knows. How does she know?"

"I can't say. She refuses to speak. She was not on good terms with Aunt Selina and they never saw one another for over fifteen years. But mother is much disturbed about the murder – "

"That is natural. A sister is a sister however much one may have quarrelled. But why should this death stop our marriage?"

"I know no more than you do. Here is mother. Ask her yourself."

It was indeed Mrs. Octagon who entered the room. She looked very pale, but otherwise was perfectly composed. In silence she gave her hand to Cuthbert, and kept her black eyes fixed steadily on his face. The young man flushed and turned away, whereat Mrs. Octagon sighed. Juliet broke an embarrassed silence.

"Mother," she said, "I have told Cuthbert what you said."

"Then you had no right to," said Mrs. Octagon sternly.

"Oh, I think she had," said Mallow, rather annoyed. "Seeing you hint that this crime will stop our marriage."

Mrs. Octagon did not answer. "Is your uncle in town?" she asked.

"Yes. He arrived from the continent a day or two ago."

"I thought so," she said, half to herself, and strove to repress her agitation. "Mr. Mallow, my daughter can't marry you."

"Why not? Give your reason."

"I have no reason to give."

"But you must. Is it on account of this murder?"

"It is. I told Juliet so. But I cannot explain."

The lovers looked at one another in a dazed fashion. The woman's objection seemed to be senseless. "Surely you don't think Cuthbert killed Aunt Selina?" said Juliet, laughing in a forced manner.

"No. I don't suspect him."

"Then whom do you suspect?" demanded Mallow.

"That I decline to say."

"Will you decline to say it to the police?"

Mrs. Octagon stepped back a pace. "Yes, I should," she faltered.

Cuthbert Mallow looked at her, wondering why she was so agitated, and Juliet stole her hand into his. Then he addressed her seriously.

"Mrs. Octagon," he said, "your remark about my uncle leads me to think you suspect him."

"No I don't. But you can't marry Juliet on account of this crime."

"Then you hear me," said Mallow, driven into a corner, "from this moment I devote myself to finding out who killed your unfortunate sister. When the assassin is discovered you may consent to our marriage."

But he spoke to empty air. Mrs. Octagon had left the room, almost before the first words left his mouth.

CHAPTER V

LORD CARANBY'S ROMANCE

Cuthbert was considerably perplexed by the attitude of Juliet's mother. She had always been more than kind to him. On the announcement that he wished to marry her daughter, she had expressed herself well pleased, and during the engagement, which had lasted some six months, she had received him as Juliet's intended husband, with almost ostentatious delight. Now, for some inexplicable reason, she suddenly changed her mind and declined to explain. But rack his brains as he might, Cuthbert could not see how the death of a sister she had quarrelled with, and to whom she had been a stranger for so long, could affect the engagement.

However, there was no doubt in his mind that the refusal of Mrs. Octagon to approve of the marriage lay in the fact that her sister had met with a violent end. Therefore Mallow was determined to see Jennings, and help him to the best of his ability to discover the assassin. When the criminal was brought to justice, either Mrs. Octagon's opposition would be at an end, or the true reason for its existence would be revealed. Meantime, he was sure that she would keep Juliet out of his way, and that in future he would be refused admittance to the "Shrine of the Muses." This was annoying, but so long as Juliet remained true, Cuthbert thought he could bear the exclusion. His betrothed – as he still regarded the girl – could meet him in the Park, at the houses of mutual friends, and in a thousand and one places which a clever woman like her could think of. And although Cuthbert knew that Mrs. Octagon had frequently regretted the refusal of her daughter to marry Arkwright, and would probably try and induce her to do so now that matters stood thus, yet he was not afraid in his own heart. Juliet was as staunch as steel, and he was certain that Mr. Octagon would be on his side. Basil probably would agree with his mother, whose lead he slavishly followed. But Mallow had rather a contempt for Basil, and did not count his opposition as dangerous.

On leaving the "Shrine of the Muses," the young man's first intention was to seek out Jennings and see what progress he was making in the matter. But on reflection he thought he would call again on his uncle and question him regarding his knowledge of Mrs. Octagon. It seemed to Cuthbert that, from the woman's question as to whether Lord Caranby had returned from abroad, and her remark on hearing that he had, some suspicion was in her mind as to his being concerned in the crime. Yet, beyond the fact that the unfinished house stood behind the cottage where the crime had been committed and belonged to Lord Caranby who had known the dead woman in the past, Cuthbert could not see how Mrs. Octagon could constitute a latter-day connection between her dead sister and her old friend. But Lord Caranby might be induced to talk – no easy matter – and from what he said, the mystery of Mrs. Octagon's attitude might be elucidated. Only in the past – so far as the perplexed young man could conjecture – could be found the reason for her sudden change of front.

Cuthbert therefore sent a wire to his uncle, stating that he wished to see him after eight o'clock on special business, and then went home to dress.

While thus employed, he thought over means and ways to make Caranby open his mouth. The old lord was a silent, grave man, who never uttered an unnecessary word, and it was difficult to induce him to be confidential. But invariably he had approved of his nephew's engagement, although he had never seen Juliet, so it might be that he would speak out – if there was anything to say – in order to remove any impediment to the match. It depended upon what information he received as to how Mallow would act.

At half-past eight he drove to the Avon Hotel and was shown up at once to his uncle's sitting-room. That he should live in an hotel was another of Caranby's eccentricities. He had a house in town and three in the country, yet for years he had lived – as the saying is – on his portmanteau. Even the villa at Nice he owned was unoccupied by this strange nobleman, and was usually let to

rich Americans. When in England he stopped at the Avon Hotel and when in the country remained at any inn of the neighborhood in which he might chance to find himself wandering. And wandering is an excellent word to apply to Lord Caranby's peregrinations. He was as restless as a gipsy and far more aimless. He never appeared to take an interest in anything: he was always moving here, there and everywhere, and had – so far as Cuthbert knew – no object in life. His reason for this Cainlike behavior, Caranby never condescended to explain.

When his nephew entered the room, looking smart and handsome in his accurate evening suit, Caranby, who was seated near the fire, stood up courteously to welcome him, leaning on his cane. He suffered from sciatica, and could not walk save with the assistance of his stick. And on this account also, he always insisted on the room being heated to an extraordinary degree. Like a salamander he basked in the heat, and would not allow either door or window to be opened, even in the midst of summer, when a large fire made the apartment almost unendurable. Cuthbert felt as though he were walking into a Turkish bath, and sat as far away from the fire as he could. After saluting him, his uncle sank back into his seat and looked at him inquiringly.

Lord Caranby was tall and thin – almost emaciated – with a lean, sallow, clean-shaven face, and a scanty crop of fair hair mixed with gray. His eyes were sunken but full of vitality, although usually they were grave and somewhat sad. His hands were deformed with gout, but for all that he wore several costly rings. He was perfectly dressed, and as quiet and composed as an artist's model. When he spoke it was in an unemotional way, as though he had exhausted all expression of his feelings early in life. Perhaps he had, for from what Cuthbert had heard from his uncle, the past of that nobleman was not without excitement. But Caranby's name was rarely mentioned in London. He remained so much abroad that he had quite dropped out of the circle to the entry of which his rank entitled him. His age was sixty-five.

"You are surprised at seeing me again to-night," said Cuthbert.

"I am never surprised at anything," replied his uncle dryly, "but we exhausted all we had to say to one another before eight o'clock last night, at which time you left. I therefore don't know why you have come this evening. Our conversation is bound to be dull, and – excuse me – I can't afford to be bored at my age."

"I cannot say that our conversation was particularly agreeable last night," rejoined Mallow, equally dryly, "we talked business and money matters, and about your will."

"And about your engagement also," said Caranby without a vestige of a smile. "That should interest a young man of your ardent temperament. I certainly thought the subject amused you."

"Would you be surprised to learn that my engagement has been broken off since our conversation," said Cuthbert, crossing his legs.

"No! Who can account for the whims of a woman. After all, perhaps you are to be congratulated on not marrying a weathercock."

"Juliet has nothing to do with the breaking of our engagement. Her mother objects."

"I understood for the last six months that her mother not only approved, but was delighted."

"That is the strange part, sir. On hearing of the death of her sister, Mrs. Octagon suddenly changed her mind, and told me that the marriage could not take place."

"Did she give any reason?"

"She declined to do so."

"The same woman," muttered Caranby, "always mysterious and unsatisfactory. You say her sister is dead?"

Cuthbert cast a look at the Globe, which lay on a small table near Caranby's elbow. "If you have read the papers, sir – " "Yes! I have read that Miss Loach has been murdered. You went down to Rexton to-day. I presume you heard something more than the details set forth by the press."

Cuthbert nodded. "It appears to be a mystery."

Caranby did not reply, but looked into the fire. "Poor Selina!" he said half to himself. "A sad end for such a charming woman."

"I should hardly apply that word to Miss Loach, sir. She did not appear to be a lady, and was by no means refined."

"She must have changed then. In her young days she and her sister were the handsomest women in London."

"I believe you were engaged to one of them," said Mallow politely.

"Yes," replied his uncle grimly. "But I escaped."

"Escaped?"

"A strange word is it not, but a suitable one."

Cuthbert did not know what to make of this speech. "Have I your permission to smoke?" he asked, taking out his case.

"Yes! Will you have some coffee?"

"Thank you. I had some before I came here. Will you – " he extended the case of cigarettes, which Caranby declined.

"Ring for Fletcher to get me my chibouque."

"It is in the corner. We will dispense with Fletcher with your permission." And Cuthbert brought the chibouque to his uncle's side. In another minute the old man was smoking as gravely as any Turk. This method of consuming tobacco was another eccentricity. For a few moments neither spoke. Then Caranby broke the silence.

"So you want me to help you to find out Mrs. Octagon's reason?"

"I do," said Mallow, rather surprised by Caranby's perspicuity.

"What makes you think I can explain?"

Cuthbert looked at his cigarette. "I asked you on the chance that you may be able to do so," he said gravely. "The fact is, to be frank, Mrs. Octagon appears to think you might have something to do with the crime."

Caranby did not seem surprised, but smoked imperturbably. "I don't quite understand."

The young man related how Mrs. Octagon had inquired if the Earl was back from the Continent, and her subsequent remark. "Of course I may be unduly suspicious," said he. "But it suggested – "

"Quite so," interrupted the old gentleman gravely. "You are quick at putting two and two together. Isabella Octagon hates me so much that she would gladly see me on the scaffold. I am not astonished that she suspects me."

"But what motive can she impute – "

Caranby laid aside the long coil he was holding and laughed quietly to himself. "Oh, she'll find a motive if it suits her. But what I cannot understand is, why she should accuse me now. She has had ample opportunity during the past twenty years, since the death of Miss Saul, for instance."

"She did not exactly accuse you."

"No, a woman like that would not. And then of course, her sister dying only last night affords her the opportunity of getting me into trouble. But I am afraid Mrs. Octagon will be disappointed of her revenge, long though she has waited."

"Revenge! remember, sir, she is the mother of Juliet."

"I sincerely hope Juliet does not take after her, then," said Lord Caranby, tartly. "To be perfectly plain with you, Cuthbert, I could never understand why Mrs. Octagon sanctioned your engagement with her daughter, considering you are my nephew."

"I don't understand," said Mallow, staring and uneasily.

Caranby did not answer immediately. He rose and walked painfully up and down the room leaning heavily on his cane. Mallow offered his arm but was impatiently waved aside. When the old man sat down again he turned a serious face to his nephew. "Do you love this girl?"

"With all my heart and soul."

"And she loves you?"

"Of course. We were made for one another."

"But Mrs. Octagon – "

"I don't like Mrs. Octagon – I never did," said Mallow, impetuously, "but I don't care two straws for her opposition. I shall marry Juliet in spite of this revenge she seems to be practising on you. Though why she should hope to vex you by meddling with my marriage, I cannot understand."

"I can put the matter in a nutshell," said Caranby, and quoted Congreve —

"Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned
Nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned."

"Oh," said Mallow, dropping his cigarette, and a whole story was revealed to him in the quotation.

"A gentleman doesn't talk of these things," said Caranby abruptly, "and for years I have held my tongue. Still, as Mrs. Octagon does not hesitate to strike at me through you, and as your happiness is at stake, and the happiness of the girl you love, I shall tell you – so far as I can guess – why the woman behaves in this way."

"If you please, sir," and Cuthbert settled himself to listen.

"About twenty years ago," said Caranby, plunging headfirst into his subject, "Isabella and Selina Loach were well-known in society. They were the daughters of a country squire – Kent, I remember – and created a sensation with their beauty when they came to town. I fell in love with Selina, and Isabella – if you will pardon my vanity – fell in love with me. She hated her sister on my account. I would have married Selina, but her father, who was hard up, wished her to marry a wealthy American. Isabella, to part Selina from me, helped her father. What arguments they used I do not know, but Selina suddenly changed in her manner towards me. Out of pique – you may think this weak of me, Cuthbert, but I was a fool in those days – I became engaged to a girl who was a singer. Her name was Emilia Saul, and I believe she was of Jewish extraction. I liked her in a way, and she had a wonderful power over me. I proposed and was accepted."

"But if you had really loved Miss Loach – "

"I should have worn the willow. I told you I was foolish, and, moreover, Miss Saul fascinated me. Selina was cold, Emilia was charming, and I was weak. Therefore, I became engaged to Emilia, and Selina – as I heard, arranged to marry her wealthy American. I believe she was angry at my apparently forgetting her so soon. But she was in fault, not I."

Cuthbert looked at his smart shoes. "Had I loved Selina," said he slowly, "I should have remained true to her, and have married her in spite of the objection of her father – "

"And of her sister Isabella – Mrs. Octagon that is; don't forget that, Cuthbert. And I could scarcely run away with a girl who believed stories about me."

"What sort of stories?" asked Mallow, remembering certain rumors.

"The sort that one always does tell of an unmarried man," retorted Caranby. "Scandalous stories, which Isabella picked up and retailed to Selina. But I never pretended to be a saint, and had Selina really loved me she would have overlooked certain faults. I did love her, Cuthbert. I did all in my power to prove my love. For a time I was engaged to her, and when she expressed a wish that I should build her a house after her own design, I consented."

"The house at Rexton!" exclaimed the young man.

"Exactly. I got an architect to build it according to designs suggested by Selina. When our engagement was broken and I became – out of pique, remember – engaged to Miss Saul, I still went on building the house. Selina, I believe, was very angry. One week when I was out of London she went down with her sister to see the house, and there met Emilia."

"Ah! then there was trouble?"

"No; there was no time for a quarrel, if that is what you mean. When the three met, Emilia was walking across a plank on the unfinished second story. On seeing the Loach girls – this is Isabella's tale – Emilia lost her footing and fell thirty feet. She was killed almost instantaneously, and her face was much disfigured. This took place during the dinner hour when the workmen were absent. When they returned, the body was found and recognized by the clothes."

"Did not the girls remain?"

"No. They took fright at the accident and returned home. But here a fresh disaster awaited them. Mr. Loach was dead. He died suddenly of heart disease. Selina at once broke her engagement with the American, and – "

"And returned to you?"

"Strangely enough she did not. I never saw her again. After the death of the father the girls went to the Continent, and only came back after two years abroad. Then Isabella, after vainly trying to get me to marry her, became the wife of Saxon, then a rising barrister. Selina went to Rexton and shut herself up in the house she now has."

"The house she did have," corrected Cuthbert, "you forget she is dead."

"Yes. I tried to see her, but she refused to look on my face again, alleging that I had treated her badly by becoming engaged to Miss Saul. That poor soul was buried, and then I shut up the house and left it as it is now. I travelled, as you know, for years, and I am travelling still, for the matter of that," added Caranby with a sigh, "all Selina's fault. She was the only woman I ever loved."

"But was there not an inquest held on Emilia's body?"

"Oh yes, and Isabella gave evidence as to the accident. Selina was too ill to appear. But there was no need. The cause of the death was plain enough. Moreover, Emilia had no relatives who cared to make inquiries. She left very little money, so those she had, did not trouble themselves."

"It is a strange story," said Cuthbert, looking puzzled. "Had you an idea that Emilia may have been pushed off the plank by Selina?"

"Certainly not," rejoined Caranby indignantly. "She was a good and kind girl. She would not do such a thing."

"Humph!" said Mallow, remembering the eagle nose and thin lips of Miss Loach. "I'm not so sure of that."

"Isabella, who was passionate, might have done it," resumed Caranby, "often did I wish to speak to her on the subject, but I never did. And after all, the jury brought in a verdict of accidental death, so there was no use making trouble."

"Had Emilia no relatives who might have made inquiries?"

"I believe she had a brother who was a clerk in an office, but, as I said, she left no money, so he did not bother himself. I saw him after the death, and the sight of him made me glad I had not married his sister. He looked a thorough blackguard, sly and dangerous. But, as I said, Emilia came of low people. It was only her fine voice and great talents that brought her into the society where I met her. I have never heard of her brother since. I expect he is dead by this time. It is over twenty years ago. But you can now understand why Mrs. Octagon objects to the marriage. She has never forgiven me for not making her my wife."

Cuthbert nodded again. "But I can't understand why she should have consented at all, only to alter her mind when Selina died."

"I can't understand that myself. But I decline to mix myself up in the matter. You will have to learn the reason yourself."

"I intend to," said Mallow rising, "and the reason I am certain is connected with the violent death of her sister!" A speech to which Caranby replied by shaking his head. He did not agree with the idea.

"And you see, in spite of Mrs. Octagon's hint, I had no reason to kill Selina," said Caranby gravely. "I cannot understand why Isabella should accuse me – "

CHAPTER VI

A PERPLEXING CASE

The morning after his visit to Lord Caranby, Mallow was unexpectedly called to Devonshire on account of his mother's illness. Mrs. Mallow was a fretful hypochondriac, who always imagined herself worse than she really was. Cuthbert had often been summoned to her dying bed, only to find that she was alive and well. He expected that this summons would be another false alarm, but being a dutiful son, he tore himself away from town and took the mid-day express to Exeter. As he expected, Mrs. Mallow was by no means so bad as she hinted in her wire, and Cuthbert was vexed that she should have called him down, but she insisted that he should remain, and, unwilling to cause her pain, he did so. It was four days before he returned to London. But his visit to Exeter was not without results, for he asked his mother about Caranby's romance. Mrs. Mallow knew all about it, and highly disapproved of her brother-in-law.

"He's crazy," she said vigorously, when the subject was brought up one evening. "All his life he has been queer. Your father should have had the title, Cuthbert!"

"Well, I shall have it some day," said her son soothingly. "Caranby is not likely to marry."

"Yes, but I'll never be Lady Caranby," lamented Mrs. Mallow, who was intensely selfish and egotistical. "And I should have adorned the title. Such an old one as it is, too. But I'm glad that horrid Selina Loach never became his wife. Even that Saul girl would have been better."

"Don't speak evil of the dead, mother."

"I don't see why we should praise the bad dead," snapped Mrs. Mallow. "I never liked either Isabella nor Selina. They were both horrid girls and constantly quarrelling. They hardly ever spoke to one another, and how you can contemplate marrying the daughter of Isabella, I really don't know. Such a slight to me. But there, I've said all I had to say on the subject."

To do her justice, Mrs. Mallow certainly had, and never ceased nagging at Cuthbert to break the engagement. Had she known that Mrs. Octagon had forbidden the marriage she would have rejoiced, but to save making awkward explanations to a woman who would not hold her tongue, Cuthbert said nothing about the breach.

"Did you like Miss Saul, mother?" he asked.

"I only saw her on the concert platform," said Mrs. Mallow, opening her eyes, "gracious, Cuthbert, I never associated myself with those sort of people. Caranby was infatuated with her. To be sure, he got engaged to spite Selina, and she really did treat him badly, but I believe Miss Saul – such a horrid Hebrew name, isn't it – hypnotized him. He forgot her almost as soon as she died, in spite of his ridiculous idea of shutting up that house. And such valuable land as there is at Rexton too. Well, I hope this violent death of Selina will be a warning to Caranby. Not that I wish him any harm, in spite of your being next heir to the title, and we do need money."

While Mrs. Mallow rambled on in this diffusive manner, Cuthbert was thinking. When she ended, "Why should this death be a warning to Caranby?" he asked quickly.

"Good gracious, Cuthbert, don't get on my nerves. Why? – because I believe that Selina pushed Miss Saul off that plank and killed her. She was just the kind of violent girl who would do a thing like that. And Miss Saul's relatives have waited all these years to kill Selina, and now she's dead, they will kill Caranby because he did not marry the wretched girl."

Cuthbert stared. "Mother, what are you talking about? Caranby told me that Miss Saul had only one brother, and that probably he was dead."

"Ah," said Mrs. Mallow, "he didn't tell you that Miss Saul's father was arrested for coining or passing false money, I forget which. I believe the brother was involved also, but I can't be sure. But

I only know the girl was dead then, and the Saul family did not move in the matter, as the police knew too much about them.

"Good gracious!" shuddered the lady, "to think if she had lived, Caranby would have married into that family and have cheated you of the title."

"Are you sure of what you say, mother?"

"Of course I am. Look up any old file of newspapers and you'll read all about the matter. It's old history now. But I really won't talk any more of these things, Cuthbert. If I do, there will be no sleep for me to-night. Oh dear me, such nerves as I have."

"Did you ever see Miss Saul, mother?"

"I told you I did on the platform. She was a fine, large, big girl, with a hook nose and big black eyes. Rather like Selina and Isabella, for I'm sure they have Jewish blood in their veins. Miss Saul – if that was her real name – might have passed as a relative of those horrid Loach girls."

"Mrs. Octagon and her sister who died are certainly much alike."

"Of course they are, and if Miss Saul had lived they would have been a kind of triplets. I hate that style of beauty myself," said Mrs. Mallow, who was slim and fair, "so coarse. Everyone called those Loach girls pretty, but I never did myself. I never liked them, and I won't call on Mrs. Octagon – such a vulgar name – if you marry fifty of her wretched daughters, Cuthbert."

"Don't say that, mother. Juliet is an angel!"

"Then she can't be her mother's daughter," said Mrs. Mallow obscurely, and finished the discussion in what she considered to be a triumphant manner. Nor would she renew it, though her son tried to learn more about the Loach and Saul families. However, he was satisfied with the knowledge he had acquired.

While returning next day to London, he had ample time to think over what he had been told. Miss Selina Loach had certainly shut herself up for many years in Rose Cottage, and it seemed as though she was afraid of being hurt in some way. Perhaps she even anticipated a violent death. And then Mrs. Octagon hinted that she knew who had killed her sister. It might not have been Caranby after all, whom she meant, but one of the Saul family, as Mrs. Mallow suggested.

"I wonder if it is as my mother thinks," mused Cuthbert, staring out of the window at the panorama of the landscape moving swiftly past. "Perhaps Selina did kill Miss Saul, and shut herself up to avoid being murdered by one of the relatives. Caranby said that Selina did not go to the inquest, but pretended she was ill. Then she and her sister went to the continent for two years, and finally, when they returned, Selina instead of taking her proper place in society as Isabella did, shut herself up as a recluse in Rose Cottage. The Saul family appear to have been a bad lot. I should like to look up that coining case. I wonder if I dare tell Jennings."

He was doubtful of the wisdom of doing this. If he told what he knew, and set Jennings on the track, it might be that a scandal would arise implicating Mrs. Octagon. Not that Cuthbert cared much for her, but she was Juliet's mother, and he wanted to avert any trouble likely to cause the girl pain. A dozen times on the journey Cuthbert altered his mind. First he thought he would tell Jennings, then he decided to hold his peace. This indecision was not like him, but the case was so perplexing, and such serious issues were involved, that the young man felt thoroughly worried.

Hitherto he had seen nothing new about the case in the papers, but on reaching Swindon he bought a few and looked through them. His search was rewarded by finding an article on the crime. The inquest had been held, and the jury had brought in a verdict of "Murder against some person or persons unknown!" But it was plainly stated that the police could not find a clue to the assassin. The article in question did not pretend to solve the mystery, but collocated the facts so as to put the case in a nutshell.

"The facts are these," said the journal, after a preliminary introduction. "A quiet maiden lady living at Rose Cottage, Rexton, received three friends to a card-party. Difference arising – and such things will arise amongst the best when cards are in question – two of the friends, Mrs. Herne, an

old lady and life-long friend of the deceased, and Mr. Hale, a lawyer of repute and the legal adviser of Miss Loach, depart before ten o'clock. In her evidence Mrs. Herne stated that she and Mr. Hale left at half-past nine, and her assertion was corroborated by Mr. Hale himself. Mr. Clancy, the third friend, left at ten, being shown out by the maid Susan Grant, who then returned to the kitchen. She left Miss Loach seated in her usual chair near the fire, and with a pack of cards on her lap. Probably the deceased lady intended to play a game of 'Patience'!

"The four servants, three women and a man, had their supper. During the supper the man asserted that he heard the front door open, but as Miss Loach was in the habit of walking in the garden before retiring, it was thought that she had gone out to take her usual stroll. Whether the man heard the door open or shut he was not quite sure. However, thinking his mistress was walking in the garden as usual, the man paid no further attention to the incident. At eleven (precisely at eleven, for the kitchen clock struck), the sitting-room bell rang. Susan Grant entered the room, and found Miss Loach seated in her chair exactly as she had left her, even to the fact that the cards were in her lap. But she had been stabbed to the heart with some sharp instrument and was quite dead. The front door was closed and the windows barred.

"Now it is certain that Miss Loach met her death between the hours of ten and eleven. Susan Grant saw her alive at ten, seated in her usual chair with the cards on her lap, and at eleven, she there found her dead, still with the cards. It would seem as though immediately after the servants left the room someone had stabbed the deceased to the heart, before she had time to rise or even alter her position. But Susan Grant asserts that no one was in the room. There was only one door, out of which she departed. The bedroom of Miss Loach on the basement floor had a door which opened into the passage, as did the sitting-room door. No one could have entered until the servant departed. The passage was lighted with electricity, but she did not observe anyone about, nor did she hear a sound. She showed out Mr. Clancy and then returned to the kitchen. Certainly the assassin may have been concealed in the bedroom and have stolen into the sitting-room when Susan Grant was showing out Mr. Clancy. Perhaps then he killed the deceased suddenly, as we said before. He could have then come up the stairs and have escaped while the servants were at supper. It might have been the murderer who opened the door, and was overheard by Thomas.

"The policeman was on duty about ten, as he was seen by Susan Grant when she showed Mr. Clancy to the door. The policeman also asserted that he was again on the spot – i.e., in the roadway opposite the cottage – at eleven. At these times the assassin could not have escaped without being seen. There is no exit at the back, as a high wall running round an unfinished house belonging to the eccentric Lord Caranby blocks the way. Therefore the assassin must have ventured into the roadway. He could then have walked up the lane into the main streets of Rexton, or have taken a path opposite to the gate of Rose Cottage, which leads to the railway station. Probably, after executing the crime, he took this latter way. The path runs between quickset hedges, rather high, for a long distance, past houses, and ends within fifty yards of the railway station. The criminal could take the first train and get to town, there to lose himself in the wilderness of London.

"So far so good. But the strangest thing about this most mysterious affair is that the bell in the sitting-room rang two minutes before Susan Grant entered the room to find her mistress dead. This was some time after the closing of the door overheard by Thomas; therefore the assassin could not have escaped that way. Moreover, by this time the policeman was standing blocking the pathway to the station. Again, the alarm was given immediately by the other servants, who rushed to the sitting-room on hearing Susan's scream, and the policeman at once searched the house. No one was found.

"Now what are we to make of all this? The doctor declares that Miss Loach when discovered had been dead half an hour, which corresponds with the time the door was heard to open or shut by Thomas. So far, it would seem that the assassin had escaped then, having committed the crime and found the coast inside and outside the house clear for his flight. But who rang the bell? That is the question we ask. The deceased could not have done so, as, according to the doctor, the poor lady

must have died immediately. Again, the assassin would not have been so foolish as to ring and thus draw attention to his crime, letting alone the question that he could not have escaped at that late hour. We can only offer this solution.

"The assassin must have been concealed in the bedroom, and after Susan ascended the stairs to let Mr. Clancy out, he must have stolen into the sitting-room and have killed the old lady before she could even rise. She might have touched the bell, and the button (the bell is an electric one) may have got fixed. Later on, the heat of the room, warping the wood round the ivory button, may have caused it to slip out, and thus the bell would have rung. Of course our readers may say that when pressed down the bell would have rung continuously, but an examination has revealed that the wires were out of order. It is not improbable that the sudden release of the button may have touched the wires and have set them ringing. The peal is described as being short and sharp. This theory is a weak one, we are aware, but the whole case is so mysterious that, weak as it is, we can offer no other solution.

"Mrs. Herne, the servants, and Messrs. Hale and Clancy were examined. All insist that Miss Loach was in her usual health and spirits, and had no idea of committing suicide, or of being in any danger of sudden death. The weapon cannot be discovered, nor the means – save as we suggest above – whereby the assassin can have made his escape. The whole affair is one of the most mysterious of late years, and will doubtless be relegated to the list of undiscovered crimes. The police have no clue, and apparently despair of finding one. But the discovery of the mystery lies in the bell. Who rang it? or did it ring of itself, as we suggest above."

Cuthbert laid down the paper with a shrug. The article did not commend itself to him, save as the means of making a precis of the case. The theory of the bell appeared excessively weak, and he could not understand a man being so foolish as to put it forward.

"If the button was pressed down by Miss Loach, the bell would have rung at once," argued Cuthbert; "and when it slipped up, even with the heat, the ringing would have stopped. But the bell rang at eleven, and the girl was in the room two minutes later. Someone must have rung it. But why did someone do this, and how did someone escape after ringing in so fool-hardy a manner?"

He could not find an answer to this question. The whole case was indeed most perplexing. There seemed absolutely no answer to the riddle. Even supposing Miss Loach had been murdered out of a long-delayed revenge by a member of the Saul family – and that theory appeared ridiculous to Mallow – the question was how did the assassin escape? Certainly, having regard to the cards still being on the lap of the deceased, and the closing of the door at a time when the policeman was not in the vicinity, the assassin may have escaped in that way. But how did he come to be hidden in the bedroom, and how did he kill the old lady before she had time to call out or even rise, seeing that he had the whole length of the room to cross before reaching her? And again, the escape of the assassin at this hour did not explain the ringing of the bell. Cuthbert was deeply interested, and wondered if the mystery would ever be solved. "I must see Jennings after all," he thought as the train steamed into Paddington.

And see Jennings he did, sooner than he expected. That same evening when he was dressing to go out, a card was brought. It was inscribed "Miles Jennings." Rather surprised that the detective should seek him out so promptly, Cuthbert entered his sitting-room. Jennings, who was standing with his back to the window, saluted him with a pleasant smile, and spoke to him as to an equal. Of course he had every right to do so since he had been at school with Mallow, but somehow the familiarity irritated Cuthbert.

"Well, Jennings, what is it?"

"I came to ask you a few questions, Mallow."

"About what?"

"About the murder at Rose Cottage."

"But, my dear fellow, I know nothing about it."

"You knew Miss Loach?"

"Yes. I saw her once or twice. But I did not like her."

"She is the aunt of the young lady you are engaged to marry?"

Mallow drew himself up stiffly. "As a matter of fact she is," he said with marked coldness.

"But I don't see –"

"You will in a minute," said Jennings briskly. "Pardon me, but are you in love with another woman?"

Mallow grew red. "What the devil do you mean by coming here to ask me such a question?" he demanded.

"Gently, Mallow, I am your friend, and you may need one."

"What do you mean. Do you accuse me of –"

"I accuse you of nothing," said Jennings quickly, "but I ask you, why did you give this photograph, with an inscription, to the servant of the murdered woman."

"I recognize my photograph, but the servant –"

"Susan Grant. The picture was found in her possession. She refuses to speak," here the detective spoke lower, "in case you get into trouble with the police."

CHAPTER VII

THE DETECTIVE

The two men looked at one another, Jennings searchingly, and Cuthbert with a look of mingled amazement and indignation. They were rather like in looks, both being tall, slim and fair-haired. But Mallow wore a mustache, whereas the detective, possibly for the sake of disguising himself on occasions, was clean-shaven. But although Jennings' profession was scarcely that of a gentleman, he looked well-bred, and was dressed with the same quiet taste and refinement as characterized Mallow. The public-school stamp was on both, and they might have been a couple of young men about town discussing sport rather than an officer of the law and a man who (it seemed from Jennings' hints) was suspected of complicity in a crime.

"Do you mean this for a jest?" said Cuthbert at length.

"I never jest on matters connected with my profession, Mallow. It is too serious a one."

"Naturally. It so often involves the issues of life and death."

"In this case I hope it does not," said Jennings, significantly.

Cuthbert, who was recovering his composure, sat down with a shrug. "I assure you, you have found a mare's nest this time. Whatever my follies may have been, I am not a criminal."

"I never thought you were," rejoined the other, also taking a seat, "but you may have become involved with people who are criminals."

"I dare say half of those one meets in society are worthy of jail, did one know what is done under the rose," returned Cuthbert; "by the way, how did you come so opportunely?"

"I knew you had gone out of town, as I came a few days ago to see you about this matter, and inquired. Your servant said you were in Devonshire – "

"I went to see my mother who was ill," said Mallow quickly.

"I guessed as much. You said something about your mother living in Exeter when we met last. Well, I had Paddington watch for your return, and my messenger – "

"Your spy, you mean," said Mallow angrily.

"Certainly, if you prefer the term. Well, your spy – I mean my spy, reported that you were back, so I came on here. Are you going out?"

"I was, but if you wish to arrest me – "

"Nonsense, man. I have only come to have a quiet chat with you. Believe me, I wish you well. I have not forgotten the old Eton days."

"I tell you what, Jennings, I won't stand this talk from any man. Are you here as a gentleman or as a detective?"

"As both, I hope," replied the other dryly, "but are we not wasting valuable time? If you wish to go out this evening, the sooner we get to business the better. Will you answer my questions?"

"I must know what they are first," said Cuthbert defiantly.

Jennings looked irritated. "If you won't treat me properly, I may as well leave the matter alone," he said coldly. "My position is quite unpleasant enough as it is. I came here to an old schoolfellow as a friend – "

"To try and implicate him in a crime. Thanks for nothing."

Jennings, whose patience appeared to be exhausted, rose. "Very well, then, Mallow. I shall go away and hand over the matter to someone else. I assure you the questions must be answered."

Cuthbert made a sign to the other to be seated, which Jennings seemed by no means inclined to obey. He stood stiffly by his chair as Mallow paced the room reflectively. "After all, I don't see why we should quarrel," said the latter at length.

"That's just what I've been driving at for the last ten minutes."

"Very good," said Mallow soothingly, "let us sit down and smoke. I have no particular engagement, and if you will have some coffee – "

"I will have both cigarette and coffee if you will help me to unravel this case," said Jennings, sitting down with a smoother brow.

"But I don't see what I can – "

"You'll see shortly. Will you be open with me?"

"That requires reflection."

"Reflect as long as you like. But if you decline, I will hand the case over to the next man on the Scotland Yard list. He may not deal with you so gently."

"I don't care how he deals with me," returned Mallow, haughtily; "having done no wrong, I am not afraid. And, what is more, Jennings, I was coming to see you as soon as I returned. You have only forestalled our interview."

"What did you wish to see me about?"

"This case," said Cuthbert, getting out a box of cigarettes and touching the bell. "The deuce!" said Jennings briskly, "then you do know something?"

Cuthbert handed him the box and gave an order for coffee. "Any liqueur?" he asked in friendly tones.

"No. I never drink when on – ah – er – pleasure," said the other, substituting another word since the servant was in the room. "Well," he asked when the door closed, "why did you wish to see me?"

"To ask if you remember a coining case that took place some twenty years ago?"

"No. That was before my time. What case is it?"

"Some people called Saul were mixed up in it."

"Humph! Never heard of them," said Jennings, lighting his cigarette, "but it is strange you should talk of coining. I and several other fellows are looking for a set of coiners now. There are a lot of false coins circulating, and they are marvellously made. If I can only lay my hands on the coiners and their factory, there will be a sensation."

"And your reputation will be enhanced."

"I hope so," replied the detective, reddening. "I want a rise in my salary, as I wish to marry. By the way, how is Miss Saxon?"

"Very well. You met her, did you not?"

"Yes! You took me to that queer house. What do they call it? the – 'Shrine of the Muses' – where all the sham art exists. Why do you look so grave, old boy?"

The two men, getting more confidential, were dropping into the language of school-days and speaking more familiarly. Mallow did not reply at once, as his servant had just brought in the coffee. But when each gentleman was supplied with a cup and they were again alone, he looked gravely at Miles. "I want to ask your advice," he said, "and if you are my friend – "

"I am, of course I am."

"Well, then, I am as interested in finding out who killed Miss Loach as you are."

"Why is that?" demanded Jennings, puzzled.

"Before I answer and make a clean breast of it, I should like you to promise that you will get no one I know into trouble."

Jennings hesitated. "That is a difficult matter. Of course, if I find the assassin, even if he or she is one of your friends, I must do my duty."

"Oh, I don't expect anything of that sort," said Mallow easily, "but why do you say 'he' or 'she'?"

"Well, the person who killed Miss Loach might be a woman."

"I don't see how you make that out," said Cuthbert reflectively. "I read the case coming up in the train to-day, and it seems to me from what The Planet says that the whole thing is a mystery."

"One which I mean to dive into and discover," replied Miles. "I do not care for an ordinary murder case, but this is one after my own heart. It is a criminal problem which I should like to work out."

"Do you see your way as yet?" asked Cuthbert.

"No," confessed Jennings, "I do not. I saw the report you speak of. The writer theorizes without having facts to go on. What he says about the bell is absurd. All the same, the bell did ring and the assassin could not have escaped at the time it sounded. Nor could the deceased have rung it. Therein lies the mystery, and I can't guess how the business was managed."

"Do you believe the assassin rang the bell?"

Miles shrugged his shoulders and sipped his coffee. "It is impossible to say. I will wait until I have more facts before me before I venture an opinion. It is only in detective novels that the heaven-born Vidocq can guess the truth on a few stray clues. But what were you going to tell me?"

"Will you keep what I say to yourself?"

"Yes," said Jennings, readily enough, "so long as it doesn't mean the escape of the person who is guilty."

"I don't ask you to betray the confidence placed in you by the authorities to that extent," said Mallow, "just wait a moment."

He leaned his chin on his hand and thought. If he wished to gain the hand of Juliet, it was necessary he should clear up the mystery of the death. Unaided, he could not do so, but with the assistance of his old schoolfellow – following his lead in fact – he might get at the truth. Then, when the name of the assassin of her sister was known, the reason of Mrs. Octagon's strange behavior might be learned, and, moreover, the discovery might remove her objection. On the other hand, Cuthbert could not help feeling uneasy, lest Mrs. Octagon had some secret connected with the death which made her refuse her consent to the match, and which, if he explained to Jennings what he knew, might become known in a quarter which she might not approve of. However, Mallow was certain that, in spite of Mrs. Octagon's hint, his uncle had nothing to do with the matter, and he had already warned her – although she refused to listen – that he intended to trace the assassin. Under these circumstances, and also because Jennings was his friend and more likely to aid him, than get anyone he knew and respected into trouble, the young man made up his mind to tell everything.

"The fact is, I am engaged to Juliet Saxon," he began, hesitatingly.

"I know that. She is the daughter of that absurd Mrs. Octagon, with the meek husband and the fine opinion of herself."

"Yes. But Juliet is the niece of Miss Loach."

"What!" Jennings sprang from his chair with a look of surprise; "do you mean to tell me that Mrs. Octagon is Miss Loach's sister?"

"I do. They quarrelled many years ago, and have not been friendly for years. Mrs. Octagon would never go and see her sister, but she did not forbid her children being friendly. As you may guess, Mrs. Octagon is much distressed about the murder, but the strange thing is that she declares this death renders it impossible for me to marry her daughter."

Jennings looked searchingly at his friend. "That is strange. Does she give no reason?"

"No. But knowing my uncle knew her when she was a girl, I thought I would ask him what he thought. He told me that he had once been engaged to Miss Loach, and –"

"Well, go on," said Miles, seeing Cuthbert hesitating.

"There was another lady in the case."

"There usually is," said Jennings dryly. "Well?"

"The other lady's name was Saul – Emilia Saul."

"Oh," Miles sat down again. He had remained standing for a few moments. "Saul was the name you mentioned in connection with the coining case of twenty years ago."

Cuthbert nodded, and now, being fully convinced that he badly needed Jennings' aid, he told all that he had heard from Caranby, and detailed what his mother had said. Also, he touched on the speech of Mrs. Octagon, and repeated the warning he had given her. Miles listened quietly, but made no remark till his friend finished.

"You have told me all you know?" he asked.

"Yes. I want you to help me. Not that I think what I have learned has anything to do with the case."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Jennings musingly, his eyes on the carpet. "Mrs. Octagon bases her refusal to allow the marriage on the fact of the death. However, you have warned her, and she must take the consequence."

"But, my dear Jennings, you don't think she has anything to do with the matter. I assure you she is a good, kind woman – "

"With a violent temper, according to your mother," finished Jennings dryly. "However, don't alarm yourself. I don't think she is guilty."

"I should think not," cried Mallow, indignantly. "Juliet's mother!"

"But she may have something to do with the matter all the same. However, you have been plain with me, and I will do all I can to help you. The first thing is for us to follow up the clue of the portrait."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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