

HUME FERGUS

THE WHITE
ROOM

Fergus Hume

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CHAPTER I

THE POLICEMAN'S DISCOVERY

"Eleven o'clock and a windy night!" might have been the cry of a mediæval watchman at that hour on the 24th July 19-. Constable Mulligan was more reticent, as it formed no part of his duties to intimate publicly the time or the state of the weather. Nevertheless the bells of the Anglican Church, Troy, London, S.W., chimed the hour through the clamour of a high wind; and those people who were not in bed must have decided to retire. Not that any one appeared to be stirring. The lights were extinguished in all windows within the range of Mulligan's vision, and the flashing of his lantern on the doors and gates in Achilles Avenue showed that they were discreetly closed. Not even a tramp or a cat enlivened the roadway. Mulligan was apparently the sole waking person in a sleeping world.

Troy was a bran-new suburb, built by a jerry-builder, who knew Greek history through the medium of Lempriere's Dictionary. This pseudo-scholar had erected classic villas with classic names in roads, avenues, and streets designated by Hellenic appellations. The rents in this anachronistic suburb were rather high, and the houses were inhabited mostly by stockbrokers, prosperous or not, according to their wits or the state of the money-market. There was also a sprinkling of schoolmasters, professors, and students, attracted by the phraseology of the place, which promised cultured surroundings. The drainage was perfect and the morals were unexceptional. So new was the suburb, that not even a slum had been evolved to mar its cleanliness. The police, having little to do in so genteel a neighbourhood, were individually and collectively more for ornament than use. The ten years' history of the locality was one of order, intense respectability, and consequent dulness. Only in a rogues' purlieu is life picturesque and exciting.

Mulligan was a black-haired giant, somewhat dull, but possessed of a dogged sense of duty, eminently useful when taken in conjunction with brute force. He paced his beat in a ruminative frame of mind, thinking, not unpleasantly, of a certain pretty housemaid, with whom he intended to walk out on Sunday. Being as talkative as Bunyan's character of that name, Mulligan would not have been displeased to meet a brother-officer, or even a stray reveller, with whom to converse. But his fellows were in other neighbourhoods, and revellers were unknown in the respectable streets of Troy; so Mulligan, for the sake of hearing his own voice, hummed a little song in a deep bass growl. He passed Hector Villa, Agamemnon Villa, Paris Villa, and Priam Villa, all of which were in darkness, enshrined in leafy gardens. At the gate of Ajax Villa he halted. A light in a first-floor window over the classic porch showed that the inmates had not yet retired. Also a woman was singing. Constable Mulligan, being fond of music, waited to hear the song.

"Kathleen Mavourneen;" thought he, recognising the melody, "and a fine pipe she has who sings it. It's a party they'll be having within, with the tongues clapping and the whisky flowing. Begorra, it's myself that's wishing I had some of that same," and he wiped his mouth with a longing air.

As he stood at the gate, looking up the wide path which ran straightly to the shallow steps of the porch through a short avenue of elms in full leaf, he became aware that some one was coming out of the front door. The constable put it to himself in this way, as he heard the sound of opening and shutting, but no stream of light, as he expected, poured from the hall. With such darkness there could scarcely be a party in progress. Also-as Mulligan's quick ears detected-the door was opened with unusual caution and closed with equal care. The person who had emerged-whether it was a man or a woman the policeman could not guess-hesitated on the steps for a few minutes. Apparently

the officer's form bulked blackly against the light of the opposite street-lamp, and the stranger was undecided whether to re-enter the house, or to come down the path. Mulligan was too dense to be suspicious, and merely wondered why the person in question did not fulfil his or her original intention. Meanwhile the song flowed on smoothly, and Mulligan half unconsciously noted that although the words were sung slowly, the piano music between each verse was played hurriedly.

Finally, thinking that the stranger on the steps would not approve of a policeman leaning on the gate, Mulligan turned away with the airy grace of an elephant. Hardly had he taken a few steps when a young man came quickly down the path with a light, springy step. In a pleasant tenor voice he called to the constable. "Anything wrong, officer?" he asked, and the gate clicked behind him as he uttered the words.

Mulligan, halting under a street-lamp, saluted good-humouredly. "No, sir," he declared. "I was just listening to your good lady singing."

"My sister," corrected the man, also pausing under the lamp, but in such a position that the light did not reveal his countenance. "You ought to like that song, constable."

"An' for why, sir?"

"It's Irish, as you are."

"Augh! An' is it me, sir, you'd be calling Irish?"

"The way in which you turn that sentence would stamp your nationality, even if the brogue didn't," retorted the young man, taking out a silver cigarette-case. "You smoke, officer?"

"Mostly a pipe, sir," rejoined Mulligan, accepting the little roll of tobacco. "Is it a light you'll be wanting?"

"Thanks," said the other, and bent down to ignite his cigarette at the match provided by the policeman. But he still kept his face in shadow. Not that Mulligan had any desire or reason to see it. He merely thought that the gentleman was a departing guest, although he could not account for the dark hall, which set aside the idea of a party. Moreover, the stranger was arrayed in a light tweed suit, which was not exactly appropriate for a party. Also he wore a loose overcoat of bluish-black cloth, with a deep velvet collar and velvet cuffs made in the latest fashion. On so warm a night, this garment was quite unnecessary. Still, Mulligan had no reason to be suspicious, and was the last man to be inquisitive. He had the politeness if not the keen wit of the Celt.

After lighting his cigarette the gentleman strolled away towards the ancient village which formed the nucleus of modern Troy. Unwilling to lose the chance of a pleasant conversation, and perhaps a kindly shilling, Mulligan followed, and beside the light active form of his companion looked like a bear lumbering in the company of an antelope. The gentleman did not appear anxious to talk, so Mulligan made the first remark.

"The song's done," said he, as they walked on.

"It isn't a long song," replied the other carelessly. "I dare say she'll start another soon, and you can listen at the gate half the night, if you have a mind to."

"It's a party you'll be having then, sir?"

"Party! No! Can't people sit up till midnight without having the house full of dancers?"

"Augh," grunted Mulligan; "there being no light in the hall, I might have guessed there was no party."

The other man started slightly and laughed uneasily. "My sister asked me to turn out the light when I went," said he. "I did so before I opened the door."

"You'll be going home then, sir?"

"Yes-to the other end of London. Is there a hansom about?"

"Near the station, sir. That'll be half a mile away."

"I know-I know," retorted the other quickly. "I often come here to see my sister." He paused, then added anxiously: "I suppose you know most of the people who live in these villas?"

"None, sir. I've only been on this beat a week."

"You'll get to know them soon, I expect. A quiet place, officer."

"It is that, sir," assented Mulligan, as they turned down a narrow and lonely street. "Never a robbery or an accident or a murder to make things happy."

"Why should there be a murder?" asked the man angrily. "Murders are not so common."

"More common than you think, sir, but the most of them aren't found out. It is I who'd like a really fine crime with my name in the papers, and a printed recommendation as an efficient officer. None of your poker murders and plain sailing you'll understand, sir, but a mystery, as you read of in them little books written by gentry as don't know the law."

"Ah! Incidents in detective novels rarely occur in real life," said the other, with a more tranquil laugh. "Providence is too original to borrow in that way. But live in hope, officer, a crime may come your way sooner than you expect."

"Not hereabouts, sir." Mulligan shook his head gloomily. "It's too clean a neighbourhood."

"The very place where a crime is likely to occur. Have you another light, constable?"

Mulligan struck another match, and this time he saw the face of the speaker clearly. It was a handsome face, rather worried-looking. But as the stranger wore a moustache and a small pointed beard, and as his Homberg hat-it was grey with a black band-was pressed down over his eyes, Mulligan could not determine if he were more than usually worried. Not that he minded. He fancied after some reflection that this handsome young gentleman was-as he put it-out on the spree, and therefore took the marks of worry for those of dissipation. He did not even examine the face closely, but when the match was extinguished he halted. "There's the half-hour, sir. I must get back to my beat."

"And I must race for a cab," said the stranger, pressing a half-crown into a not unwilling hand. "Thanks for coming so far with me, officer. I wonder if my watch is right," he added, pulling it out. "It's half-past eleven." Something fell at the moment, chipped against the curb with a tinkling sound, and rebounded into the road. "You've dropped something, sir," said Mulligan, flashing his lantern towards the middle of the street.

The other felt his pockets. "No, I don't think so. Can you see anything? Oh, no matter. I dare say-what can I have dropped?"

The two searched for a time without success. At length the stranger shook his head positively, and felt his pockets again. "You must be mistaken," he remarked. "I don't think anything is missing. However, if you do find anything, you can give it to me when you see me next. You are usually on this beat?"

"For the next three nights, sir."

"Ah then, we are sure to meet. I often come here. Good night." And with a wave of his hand the gentleman walked rapidly away. At the turn of the street he looked back and again waved his hand. It might have been that he was anxious to see if the constable was watching him. But no such suspicion occurred to Mulligan. He was too pleased with the half-crown.

"A fine upstanding young gentleman," was the policeman's verdict; "free with his money" – he here produced the cigarette-"and his tobacco, good luck go with him."

As the inspector was not within sight, and indeed would not be until Mulligan returned to the fixed point in Achilles Avenue, the policeman decided to solace himself with a smoke. After lighting up he threw away the match. It fell almost in the middle of the road, and flamed up brightly in a pause of the wind. Although it went out with the next gust, Mulligan, in the short time, caught with his keen eye the glitter of steel. Striking another match, he searched round, and picked up a latch-key, long and slim and with scarcely projecting wards. "He'll not get to his bed this night," said Mulligan, looking towards the corner. "If I was to run after him now-"

But this, he decided, was impossible. The gentleman, walking at an unusually rapid pace, would be some distance away, and also in the meantime he might have met with a hansom. Also Mulligan had to return to the fixed point, as failure to meet his superior officer would meet with a sharp

reprimand. "Ah well," said the philosophic policeman, "the young gentleman will be here to-morrow night, or maybe his sister will be still up, and I can give the key to her."

On the chance of securing another half-crown, Mulligan decided that this latter course would be the more diplomatic. Astutely adopting it, he walked smartly to Achilles Avenue. A consultation of his Waterbury watch assured him that he had nearly twenty minutes to spare before the arrival of the inspector. He therefore sought out Ajax Villa, being guided thereto by the fact that the light was still burning on the first floor. But he heard no singing. However, the light showed that the lady was still in the room, though doubtless the servants-as was shown plainly by the stranger's conversation-were in bed. Mulligan walked up to the door and rang. With some foresight he argued the lady would come herself to the door, whereby he would be more certain of his money.

The wind was dying down, now that it was close upon midnight, and everything in the house and garden was absolutely still. Walking up the path under the umbrageous shelter of the elms, Mulligan saw the colours of the flowers in neutral tints under a faint starry sky. There was no moon, but a kind of luminous twilight pervaded the atmosphere. Mulligan, being a Celt, was not impervious to the charm of the place which might have been Juliet's garden, so strangely had the magic of night transmuted its commonplace into romance. But his housemaid was expensive, and he hurried to the door, anxious to obtain a reward for the return of the key.

Several times did he ring, and although he heard the shrill vibration of the bell echo through the house, no one appeared in answer to its imperative summons. Thinking he might have made a mistake, the constable stepped back into the garden. But he was right. This was the villa out of which the young man had issued, for there burned the guiding light on the first floor. Mulligan felt puzzled by the inexplicable silence and rang the bell again. Indeed he pressed his great thumb on the ivory button for nearly one minute. The bell shrilled continuously and imperiously. Still no one came. Mulligan scratched his head and considered. "Something's wrong," thought he. "If I'd the key I'd enter and see if the lady is ill. Queer, the bell don't waken the servants. Augh! The lazy beasts."

It occurred to him that in his hand he held the key dropped by the young gentleman. Almost without thinking he fumbled for the hole and slipped in the key. To his surprise it turned under his involuntary pressure, and the door swung open noiselessly. Again the constable scratched his head. Things-so he assured himself-were becoming mysterious, and he scented an adventure. It was strange that this key should open the door. "Unless this is his home, and he's running away for some devilment. Maybe the lady isn't his sister; perhaps his wife or his sweetheart. Augh! But she'd not let him go at this hour. Catch her."

However he might argue, it was foolish to stand before an open door without doing something. The inspector would be round soon, and might-probably would-demand an explanation. Now that he had got this far, Mulligan naturally decided to see the adventure through. As yet he had no suspicion that anything was wrong, though he certainly thought the whole affair mysterious. Walking into the dark hall, at the end of which, by the light of his lantern, he saw the glimmer of a marble staircase, he called gently up into the blackness. "Is there any one there?" demanded Mulligan. "If so, come down, for I'm in want of an explanation."

He paused and listened. There came no reply. The dense silence held the house. Not even a clock ticked. Mulligan suppressed his breath and listened with all his ears. No sound filled them save the drumming of his heart. Again he ran into the garden and again assured himself that the light was burning overhead. He began to conclude that the position called for the intervention of the law. Assuming an official air, he tramped up the stairs, flashing the light right and left as he ascended. He did not know the position of the room, save that it was in the front of the house. But thus indicated, he thought there would be little difficulty in finding it and solving the mystery.

From the glimpses he caught, the house appeared to be richly furnished. He saw pictures, velvet curtains, marble statues, and all the paraphernalia of a wealthy man's mansion. The stairs were draped with scarlet hangings, contrasting vividly with the whiteness of the polished marble. On the landing,

curtains of the same flamboyant hue were parted before another dark hall. Mulligan crossed this, for he saw-or thought he saw-a thread of light beneath a door. The hall was of marble and filled with tropical plants. A glass roof overhead revealed the starry night and the grotesque forms of the plants. The flooring was of mosaic, and here and there stood velvet-cushioned chairs, deep and restful. Evidently the house was owned by rich and artistic people. And the fitful gleams from his lantern exaggerated the wealth and splendour around.

In spite of the noise made by his boots-which were anything but light-no one appeared to demand the reason of his intrusion. He began to feel an eerie feeling creeping over him. This silent, lordly house, the darkness, the stillness, the loneliness: it was all calculated to appeal strongly-as it did-to the Celtic imagination of the policeman.

Towards the thin stream of light flowing, as it seemed, from under the door, Mulligan took his cautious way. Knocking softly, he waited. No reply came. Again he knocked, and again the silence which struck a chill to his heart ensued. At length he took his courage in both hands and flung open the door. It was not locked. A gush of light nearly blinded him. He staggered back, and placed his hands across his dazzled eyes. Then he looked in bewilderment at a remarkable scene. The room was square and rather large, unbroken by pillar or arch, and contained only one window. Walls and roof and flooring and furniture and hangings were absolutely white. There was not a spot or speck of colour in the place. The walls were of white enamel studded with silver fleur-de-lis; the floor of polished marble strewn with white skins of long-haired animals. The curtains, drawn aside from the window, were of milky velvet. The furniture was of white polished wood cushioned with pearly silks. Everywhere the room was like snow, and the milky globes of the lamps shed an argent radiance over the whole. It looked cold and cheerless but eminently beautiful. An artistic room, but not one that had a homely look about it. The white glow, the dazzling expanse, colourless and severe, made the man shiver, rough though he was. "It's like a cold winter's day," said the imaginative Celt.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation. On moving cautiously into the room, he saw a piano of polished white wood in a recess, concealed by a white velvet curtain from the door. Before the piano lay a white bearskin; on this, face downward; the body of a woman. She was dressed in black, the one spot of colour in that pale room. But there was another colour-a vivid red, staining the skin. Mulligan touched the body-it was cold and limp. "Dead," said Mulligan. From under the left shoulder-blade trickled a thin stream of blood, and his voice, strong as it was, used as he had been to scenes of terror, faltered in the dead silence of that death-chamber.

"Dead! Murdered!"

Not a sound. Even the wind had died away. Only the strong man looking down at that still corpse, only the blackness of her dress; the redness of her life-blood soaking into the white bearskin, and all around the wan desolation of that white, mysterious room, Arctic and silent.

CHAPTER II

ANOTHER MYSTERY

Mulligan stared at the dead woman, but beyond touching her to see if life remained, he did not attempt to alter the position of the corpse. For corpse it was. The woman was as dead as a stone, and Mulligan knew his duty too well to take any authority upon himself. The inspector was the man to issue orders, and the inspector would be at the head of Achilles Avenue when the clock struck twelve. As this thought passed slowly through the policeman's mind—for the unexpectedness of the tragedy had somewhat dazed him—he heard the midnight chimes. With a sudden start he recovered his wits and wheeled round. In a few minutes he was out of the house, and had closed the door. Only when in the roadway did his brain begin to work at its normal speed.

"It's that young gentleman," thought Mulligan. "He said I'd come across a crime sooner than I expected. And the key is his. Mary, be good to us; but he must have killed the poor creature before he joined me. Augh!" He stopped and considered. "But if that's so, what about the singing. She was at the piano, and the song wasn't done when the gentleman joined me. Augh!"

At this moment of his reflection, and while he was looking anxiously down the road for the inspector, a man came walking rapidly along, and suddenly emerged from a side-street that ran at right angles to Achilles Avenue. He almost dashed into the arms of Mulligan, who brought up short under a lamp. "Where are ye going?" asked the policeman, rendered suspicious by his recent discovery and by the manifest haste of the man.

"Going, confound you!" snapped the man, who seemed to be in a very bad temper. "I'm looking for my motor-car."

"For your what?"

"Motor-car! Automobile! Can't you understand English? I've lost it. Some one's bolted with the whole kit. Have you seen my car? It's painted yellow picked out with black, and—"

"Here's the inspector," chipped in Mulligan, recognising with relief the rigid form of his superior. "You can tell him, and if you're the man, anything you may say will be used in evidence against you. That's the law. Augh!"

The man stared at this speech, but Mulligan wiped his heated brow and glared at him in a resentful manner, not at all sure but what this might be the criminal. There was no ground for such a supposition, especially as the key belonged to another man. But Mulligan was not in a position to weigh his words, and therefore said the first thing that came into his mind. So the man stared, Mulligan scowled, and the inspector drew near.

"You've been drinking, bobby," said the man at length. "My name is Luther Tracey. I manufacture motor-cars, and some beast has bolted with one of the best I've ever turned out. Such a flier. I guess you police hereabouts ain't worth a cent."

"You're American," said Mulligan.

"And you're several kinds of ass, I reckon. See here, about this car of mine."

Mr. Tracey would have gone on to explain at length, but that he was interrupted by the arrival of the inspector, who was tall and thin, military and sharp. He glanced keenly at Tracey, and inquiringly at Mulligan. The engineer would have begun talking at once, as he appeared to have a considerable fund of what his countrymen call "chin-music"; but Mulligan waved him aside, and reported hurriedly to Inspector Derrick what he had discovered. Although Derrick was manifestly surprised and excited by the strange recital, he made no remark; but when in possession of Mulligan's facts—which ranged from his meeting with the young gentleman to his leaving the dead body in the house—he turned to Tracey. That man was listening eagerly, and seemed quite interested.

"Well, I surmise that's a queer case," said he, smacking his leg. "What do you make of it, inspector? If you want to know my opinion, the man as laid out that lady corpse has bolted with my motor-car."

"No," said Mulligan; "he walked with me for a- When did you miss your car, sir?"

"You might call it a few minutes after eleven."

"He was with me then," said the policeman; "'twasn't him. No!"

Derrick, who had preserved silence, chimed in "Who are you, sir?"

"My name's Tracey," replied the American smartly; "here's my card. I manufacture motor-cars, and came to see some friends of mine this night in one of my latest. I left her humming at the gate, and at ten minutes after eleven I went out to start her for the factory. Nary a sign of the car, sir, and I've been chasing round these lanes for the last hour. This lunatic" – he pointed to Mulligan – "seems to think I have to do with the murder. Don't you think you'd better run me in? It 'ull be an advertisement and a smart action for false imprisonment."

Derrick smiled under his heavy moustache, and took a long look at Mr. Tracey. The American was fair and handsome, active in his movements and compact in his frame. He wore fashionable evening-dress, and looked a shrewd, pleasant man of the world, who had travelled much and had his wits about him. The mention he made of arrest showed Derrick that the man was innocent. Not even a Yankee's passion for advertising his goods would hurry a man into the grip of the law if he were in any way guilty. The inspector, however, did not think it wise to lose sight of Tracey, and being diplomatic he behaved towards him in quite an affable way. "You might come with me and see into this matter," he said, moving on.

"Rather," rejoined Tracey with alacrity. "I'm dead gone on adventures, and this is a ripper. Wonder if I can get an advertisement out of it? What do you think, sir?"

"Well, if your car is missing-"

"Course. The man's raced off with it."

"No," denied Mulligan again; "he was with me at the time your car was lost."

"Do you think the man you talked to, killed this woman?" asked the inspector, turning sharply on Mulligan.

"I do and I don't, sir."

"What do you mean by that?"

Mulligan scratched his head. "He had the key, and he came out of the house sure enough. But she was singing when he talked to me at the gate. She wasn't dead then."

"Then he must be innocent," said Derrick sharply. "Do you know to whom the villa belongs?"

"No, sir. Here it is, and you can see that the light's still burning as I left it. I haven't touched the body, sir."

"You did right," approved Derrick, swinging open the gate. "Wait, we must look at the name. Your lantern, Mulligan."

The light illuminated the black letters on the gate, but before the inspector could pronounce the name, Tracey did it for him. "Ajax Villa-Ajax Villa," said he, stopping; "sakes, it's Fane's house. Don't tell me it's Mrs. Fane-such a fine woman. But it can't be."

"Why not?" said Derrick, looking at him suspiciously.

"Because the whole family are at the seaside-all except Miss Mason."

"Where is she, and who is she?"

"Miss Mason is the sister of Mrs. Fane, and she's stopping with the friends I was seeing when my car was stolen."

This was a strange discovery, and Derrick looked puzzled. Tracey spoke in all good faith, and seemed quite willing to enter the house. All the same it was queer he should know so much about the matter. As the constable opened the door Derrick asked a question. "You heard Mulligan describe the man who came out of this house," he said; "can you tell me who he is?"

"No," confessed Tracey. "I know very little of Mr. Fane and his family. I've never been in this house. But Miss Mason is the bosom friend of the girl I'm going to engineer into the position of Mrs. Tracey. She's Gerty Baldwin at present, and lives at No. 20 Meadow Lane along with her mother and the kids. Now, is there anything else you want, to know, Mr. Inspector?"

"Not at present. But later on." Derrick nodded and walked into the house, followed by the two men.

"Oh, anything you like," called out Tracey, not at all damped by the fact of death being in the house, "anything for an advertisement. I guess I'll sell that ear at a big figure. Tussaud's will buy it if the murderer's skipped in it."

"He hasn't," said Mulligan, still confused.

"He has," insisted the American. "Why should an honest man yank off my car? Some one wanted to get out of the way in a hurry, and he took my flier. I guess he's out of London by this time. She can skim a bit. Oh, I reckon she's no slouch."

"Hush," said Derrick sharply, and removed his cap. Tracey did the same, for the presence of death-the immediate presence-began to sober him. Mulligan stood rigidly at the door while Derrick examined the body. "Is it Mrs. Fane?" he asked.

"No," said Tracey, staring at a girlish face, still and white and waxen. "Mrs. Fane would make two of this poor thing. She's a Junoesque sort of woman, about the size of the Venus of Milo, and the same shape, too. This is a slip of a girl."

"A married woman," said Derrick, pointing to a ring on the hand. He walked slowly round the room. "Mulligan," said he, "go and see if any one else is in the house-"

"I tell you Fane and family are at the seaside," said Tracey.

"Never mind. There may be a caretaker. Look round, Mulligan, and see if any windows or doors are unlocked or open. Mr. Tracey, please sit still and silent. I wish to make an examination."

Mulligan departed promptly, and the American sat comfortably in a deep armchair watching the inspector. That gentleman prowled round like a sleuth-hound. He examined the window, then scrambled along the floor, shook various curtains, shifted several cushions, and finally knelt beside the body after a glance at the piano. He interrupted his examination to point out the music. "According to Mulligan, she was singing 'Kathleen Mavourneen,'" said he. "There's the song. Poor soul. She was evidently struck down when singing."

"Then the man met by Mulligan is innocent, since he was outside while the song was still being sung."

"He might be an accessory before the fact, Mr. Tracey."

"In other words, an accomplice. But he didn't nick my car. No, sir. The real murderer did that, and I guess that car's worth money at the boss waxwork show of this metropolis. They can fire it into the chamber of horrors along with Napoleon's cart and the baby's pram. What figure would you ask now, inspector?"

"You go too fast, Mr. Tracey. We don't know yet that the criminal has stolen your car. Is the house you were visiting far from here?"

"Oh, I guess not. Mrs. Baldwin hangs out No. 20-"

"Yes," interrupted Derrick, "you told me. That's no distance. Meadow Lane-to be sure-part of Old Troy."

"No," contradicted Tracey. "The village is called Cloverhead."

"And round the village Troy has been built, so the lesser name is merged in the larger."

"Sounds legal, and not quite right, Mr. Inspector. Say, your name's-"

"Derrick. Inspector Derrick. I am in charge of the Troy police, and this is the first crime of any sort I have stumbled across here."

"Slow lot," commented the American. "In our country we'd have filled the boneyard in six months."

"We don't murder on that gigantic scale here, Mr. Tracey," Derrick answered, somewhat dryly. Then he looked steadily and keenly at the man. "I'm going to trust you," he declared.

Tracey whistled, and stared doubtfully at the body. "Shouldn't if I were you, sir. Here's a crime, and I know a lot-"

"Oh, you do! What do you know?"

"What I've told you. I might be an accomplice too, you see, along with the other man."

"The murderer?"

"No. The rooster who skipped with my car. He didn't stick that poor girl there. Not he. Guess he kept your copper employed in jaw while the real murderer polished off the female. That's how I size up things. Well, sir, and what do you want me to do?"

"Fetch a doctor."

"Don't know any hereabouts My knowledge of this township is limited to Meadow Lane, and Miss Baldwin's favourite walk across the fields. 'Sides" – he cast a quizzical look at the officer-"I might not come back."

"Oh yes, you will. I shouldn't let you go if I wasn't sure you'd return, if only for the sake of your car and the advertisement."

Tracey laughed. "Well, where's the medicine man?"

Derrick scribbled a few lines on his card, and passed it along. "Go there, and ask Dr. Geason to come here-the sooner the better."

"Right, sir!" Tracey rose and looked wistfully down at the dead. "I guess the man who did that would be lynched in our country."

"He'll be hanged in this when found," retorted Derrick. "Go, please."

When the American was out of the room the inspector resumed his examination. Mulligan returned when he was in the middle of a brown study. "There's nothing to be seen, sir," he reported. "No one in the house. Doors and windows all bolted and barred. Not a sign."

"Strange," mused Derrick. "You are sure that the man who came out of the house was speaking with you while the singing was going on?"

"I'll take my oath on it, sir. He can't be guilty."

"Did he strike you as being confused?"

"Not very, sir. He didn't want his face to be seen, though, and kept his hat down on his eyes. He said the lady who was singing was his sister, and that he often came to see her."

"H'm! Why should he come to a house which is shut up?"

"He had the latch-key."

"Hand it over to me," said Derrick, and when in possession of it, took a long look at the size and shape. "New," said he, rapping it on his knuckles. "Hasn't been used much."

"Might be polished from too much use, sir," ventured Mulligan.

"The edges wouldn't be so rough if it wasn't new." Derrick pointed this fact out. "You don't know the man's name?"

"No, sir."

"Nor where he lives?"

"No, sir; I had no reason to ask him anything."

"Well, I suppose you couldn't foresee that we should want him. I don't expect he'll turn up in this neighbourhood again."

"What's your theory, sir?"

"It's early to form one, Mulligan. I fancy two men killed this woman. The one you saw kept you in conversation, while the other murdered the woman, and then cleared, while his accomplice led you away. Did you hear a scream?"

"No, sir. The song ended as we left the gate, and in a few minutes we were too far away to hear any cry."

"As I thought. The man was an accomplice sent out to lure you away."

"It might be, sir," confessed Mulligan. "I was leaning over the gate when the young gentleman came out."

"The men saw you from the window, and as they couldn't kill the woman while you were there, Number One went out to draw you away, while Number Two remained behind to commit the crime. At what hour did you part with Number One?"

"Half-past eleven, sir. I was with him thirty minutes."

"Time enough for Number Two to murder the woman and make off. He escaped by the front door, since you say the back premises are locked up. Ah! there's the doctor. Go to the station and send on-" Here Derrick named two of his most trusted subordinates.

When Mulligan left, the inspector resumed his examination. Already he had looked over the clothing of the deceased. She was plainly but tastefully dressed in black, but wore no ornaments. Everything was of good quality, but made without trimmings. The under-linen was equally fine, but on it the inspector could find no mark or initials likely to indicate the name. Apparently she had been seated at the piano when stabbed, and had fallen dead on the bearskin almost without a cry. The assassin had assured himself that she was dead, then had turned her face downward, so as to avoid the horrified stare of those wide-open eyes. At least this was the inspector's view.

"A pretty woman," said Derrick musingly. "Fair, slender, blue eyes, delicate hands. I should think she was a lady. Married" – he touched the ring-"but not rich, since she wears no ornaments. Careful in her dress, but, not mean, and not fashionable either. Hullo!"

This exclamation was drawn from him by the sight of a hat and cloak thrown over a chair on the further side of the piano. These were also fine, but neat and unpretentious. The woman must have come to the house on a visit, since she certainly would not have placed her out-of-door things in such a place and have sat down had she a bedroom in the house. But what was she doing in a mansion, the owner of which was at the seaside? Had the first man let her in with his latch-key, and if so, how did he come to be in possession of the latch-key? These were questions which the inspector was trying to answer when the doctor arrived.

Geason was an ambitious young medical man who had set up in Troy a year previously, and was trying hard to scrape a practice together. He was well aware that such a case as this would give him a much-desired publicity, and consequently expressed himself profoundly grateful to Derrick for the job. Then he knelt beside the body and made an examination, while Tracey, who had returned, questioned the inspector. "Found out anything?" he asked.

"Only that the woman was a visitor to this house," and Derrick pointed out the cloak and hat.

"Strange," said the American. "Wonder what she meant making free with a man's house in his absence?"

"Are you sure Mr. Fane's at the seaside?"

"Certain. Miss Baldwin was told by Miss Mason-and she's Mrs. Fane's sister-that they would stay a month. Westcliff-on-Sea is the place. Miss Mason got a letter yesterday. Fane was there then."

"It is an easy run from Westcliff-on-Sea to this place," responded Derrick dryly. "A man can fetch this house from there in a couple of hours. But I don't suspect Mr. Fane."

"He might be the man with the latch-key."

"No." Derrick thought of the key being new. "I don't think so. Did any young man stay in this house?"

"Not that I know of. You'd better ask Miss Mason. I know nothing about this ranche. Well, doctor?"

"She's been dead nearly five hours," said Geason, rising.

"Nonsense," said Derrick. "She was alive at eleven, and it's not one o'clock yet."

"I don't know about that," persisted Geason, "but from the condition of the body and the lack of warmth, I say she has been dead five hours."

Derrick and Tracey looked at one another perplexed. If the doctor was right-and he seemed positive-this unknown person could not have been the woman who sang "Kathleen Mavourneen."

"There's four of them," said Tracey; "two women and two men."

Derrick shook his head. The case was too mysterious for him to venture an opinion.

CHAPTER III

THE BALDWINS

"Maryanneliza, do keep the children quiet. The bad twins are fighting with the good twins, and the odd ones are making such a noise that I can't finish this story."

"Well, ma'am, there's so much to be done. The breakfast's to clear away, and the washing to be counted, and-"

"Oh, don't trouble me," cried Mrs. Baldwin, settling herself on the sofa. "It's one of my bad days. What Miss Mason will think of the way this house is kept, I don't know. What do I pay you wages for?"

"It's little enough I get," said Mary Ann Eliza, firing up.

"More than you're worth," retorted her mistress. "If you were a mother, with seven orphans to keep, you might talk. Where's Miss Gerty?"

"Gone to see Mr. Tracey at the factory."

"So like her," lamented the mother; "no consideration for my feelings. What I feel only the doctor knows. There!" as several wild screams rent the air to tatters, "that's blood. If any one of my darlings die, I'll hold you responsible, Maryanneliza!" Mrs. Baldwin ran the three names into one as the children did, and shrieked out to stop the servant from going. But Maryanneliza knew better. If she stopped to listen to Mrs. Baldwin's complaints, there would be no work done. She simply bolted to see which child was being tormented to death, and Mrs. Baldwin, after calling in vain, subsided into her book, and solaced herself with a lump of Turkish delight.

She was not unlike a Turkish odalisque herself, if rumour speaks truly of their fatness and flabbiness. A more shapeless woman it would have been hard to discover, and she usually wore a tea-gown as the least troublesome garment to assume. From one week's end to the other, Mrs. Baldwin never went out, save for a stroll in the garden. Not even the delights of shopping could tempt her into making any exertion, and she had long since ceased to care for the preservation of her figure or good looks. At one time of her life she had been handsome, but the production of seven children, including two sets of twins, had proved too much for her. Also her second husband had deserted her, and as he had been responsible for six children, she complained bitterly of his absence. He was supposed to be alive, but kept carefully away from his too prolific wife. For eight years she had not heard from him, but never ceased to expect him back.

Mrs. Baldwin's first husband had been a gentleman, and she was the pretty daughter of a lodging-house keeper, who had ensnared him when he was not on his guard. His family disowned him, and after the birth of a daughter, the young man broke his neck when hunting. He left Mrs. Harrow, as she was then, with the child and five hundred a year. Afterwards a man called Rufus Baldwin, attracted by the money, married the pretty young widow. Luckily, owing to the will, Mr. Baldwin was not able to seize the principal of the income. But he lived on his wife till six children came to lessen the money, and then finding he could get nothing more luxurious, he ran away. Mrs. Baldwin then removed to Cloverhead, and occupied an old manor-house at a small rent. It was a pleasant, rambling old mansion in a quiet street, and here she lived very comfortably on her five hundred a year.

"Do you remember Gerty Harrow with whom we were at school?" wrote Laura Mason to an old friend. "She lives here, near the place of my brother-in-law, and is now about twenty-two years of age. Such a nice girl-pretty and clever, and engaged to a most amusing American called Luther Tracey. He manufactures motor-cars, and Gerty Baldwin drives them. Whenever a car is sold, Gerty goes down and stops for a week or so with the people who buy it, to show them how it works. Being pretty she gets plenty to do. Mrs. Baldwin objected to Gerty doing this for a livelihood, and only

consented when Gerty agreed to drop her father's name. She is Miss Baldwin now, and I like her more than ever. The mother-"

Here followed several marks of exclamation, as though Laura's powers of writing failed her, as they assuredly did. It would have taken the pen of Dickens to describe this lazy, self-indulgent, querulous woman, who lay on a sofa all day reading novels. At the present moment, she was deep in a *Family Herald* story called "Only an Earl," in which a governess with a single rose in her hair marries, with great self-abnegation, a mere earl, after refusing two dukes and a foreign prince. Mrs. Baldwin, basking like a cat in the sunshine that poured through the window, read each page slowly, and ate a lump of Turkish delight every time she turned a page.

The sitting-room was most untidy. Children's toys were strewn about; the carpet was raggedy the pictures hung askew, the red plush table-cloth-it was a most abominable covering-was stained, the blind was torn, and a broken window-pane had been filled up with brown paper. Yet the room had a comfortable, homely look, and if it had not been so disorderly, would have been pleasant to live in. But Mrs. Baldwin, quite undisturbed by the confusion, read on with great enjoyment. She only lifted her eyes when Laura Mason entered the room, and then her first words were querulous.

"How you can bear to stop here with Getty when your own home is so beautiful, I really don't know," moaned Mrs. Baldwin, keeping her place in the tale by bending the book backward. "Just look at this room. I may toil from morning to night, and it never will look tidy."

"It's comfortable, at all events," said Laura, sitting down. "Do you feel well this morning, Mrs. Baldwin."

"Just alive. I could hardly get out of bed. Not a wink of sleep, and dreadful dreams."

Mrs. Baldwin did not explain how she could dream without sleeping, but she was such a wonderful woman that she could do anything. For instance, she could be idle throughout the day, and keep up the fiction that she worked like a slave. She could enjoy her life in laziness and dirt and selfishness, posing as a martyr to every one. Laura saw through her as most people did; but as Laura was a guest, and Gerty's friend, she did not explain herself at length, as she would have liked to do. Besides, Mrs. Baldwin was a good-natured old dormouse, and no one could be angry with her long.

"I have been out with Gerty," said Laura, sitting near the window; "she has gone to the factory to see Mr. Tracey."

"She never thinks of me slaving from morning till night," moaned the mother. "I'm skin and bone."

Miss Mason nearly laughed outright, for Mrs. Baldwin was as fat as butter, and quite as soft. "You should take more care of yourself."

"No, Miss Mason," said the heroic woman. "I must deny myself all pleasures for the sake of my babes. Ah, they will never know what a mother they have."

It certainly would not be for the want of telling, for Mrs. Baldwin was always recounting her virtues at length. She did so now. "When I was young and gay, and truly lovely, and lived with ma in Soho Square," she rambled on, "I little thought that life would be so hard. When Mr. Harrow led me to the altar, all was sunshine, but now penury and disgrace are my portion."

"Oh, not so bad as that, Mrs. Baldwin," protested Laura.

"Penury, disgrace, and desertion, Miss Mason. Rufus Baldwin has left me with six pledges of his affection, and but for the forethought of my first husband-who must have foreseen the twins-I would have starved in chains and miry clay."

Having thus placed herself in the lowest position she could think of, in order to extort sympathy, Mrs. Baldwin ate more Turkish delight-she was too selfish to offer Laura any-and stated that her heart was broken. "Though I don't show it, being trained by ma to bear my woes in silence," she finished.

Laura said a few words of comfort in order to stop further complaints, and then stated that she was going to Westcliff-on-Sea in two days. "My sister Julia is expecting me," she said, "and I have been with you for over a week. It is so good of you to have me."

"Not at all. I've done my best to make you comfortable, Miss Mason, though heaven knows I can hardly keep on my feet." Here Mrs. Baldwin closed her eyes as a token of extreme exhaustion. "But we must do our duty in the world, as I always tell Horry, who is to be a parson, if he can pass the examinations, which I doubt. Of course Gerty will marry Mr. Tracey, who is well off, and leave her poor ma, who has done so much for her. But I am determined that my babes shall occupy the best places in society. Totty, Dolly, and Sally shall marry money. Jimmy and Dickey must win renown to repay me for my lifelong agonies. You don't look well, Miss Mason?"

The suddenness of this question, coming so quickly after the rambling discourse, made Laura start and colour. She was a fair, pretty girl, with yellow hair and a creamy complexion. Her eyes were dark, her mouth delightful, and her nose was "tip-tilted like the petal of a flower," to quote her favourite poet. Not a particularly original girl either in looks or character, but charming and sympathetic. Laura had a wide circle of friends who all loved her, but no one could call her clever. But she was so womanly that men liked her. "I am quite well, Mrs. Baldwin," she declared; "only I did not sleep much last night."

"Dreams! dreams!" moaned Mrs. Baldwin. "I had horrible dreams about you. I fancied I saw you eating bananas. Every one knows that means trouble. But pine-apples growing in ice are the worst," said Mrs. Baldwin. "I have never dreamed that. Trouble is coming to you."

"Don't!" cried Laura, starting to her feet, and with an anxious air; "please don't! I think dreams are nonsense."

"No," said Mrs. Baldwin, producing a small book from under her sofa pillow. "Read this, and see what it means to dream of sparrows pecking cats to death."

Laura laughed. "I should rather think the cats would eat the birds."

"Not in a dream. Everything goes by contraries in dreams. Before John Baldwin ran away, I dreamed he was rushing into my arms, crowned with honeysuckle. But that day he went. Didn't your walk last night do you good?"

"No," said Laura shortly, then went on with some hesitation. "I was away only for half an hour."

"Where did you go?"

"Across the fields."

"Thinking of Mr. Calvert, no doubt," said Mrs. Baldwin playfully.

Laura grew red, and on another occasion would have resented this remark about the young gentleman mentioned by Mrs. Baldwin. But at this moment she appeared to be rather glad of the suggestion. "I *was* thinking of him," she assented.

"A very nice young man, though he is an actor."

"Why shouldn't he be an actor?" demanded Laura angrily.

"There! there!" said Mrs. Baldwin soothingly; and aggravatingly, "We know that love levels all ranks."

"Arnold Calvert is a gentleman."

"Your sister, Mrs. Fane, doesn't think so. She expressed herself much annoyed that he should pay his addresses to you."

"Julia can mind her own business," said Laura angrily. "She married Mr. Fane, and he wasn't a very good match."

"No indeed. Your sister had the money."

"And I have money also. Quite enough for Arnold and I to live on, as you-" Here Laura held her tongue. She really did not see why she should tell Mrs. Baldwin all her private affairs. But when the heart is very full, the tongue will speak out. Luckily at this moment there was another outburst of noise overhead, and Mrs. Baldwin moaned three times.

"The bad twins are persecuting the good ones, and the odd ones are looking on," she lamented. "Do go up and see, Miss Mason."

Laura, glad of an excuse to leave the room, saw Mrs. Baldwin with another lump of delight in her mouth, and another page turned, and flew up the stairs. Here she found a general rebellion. The bad twins, Totty and Dickey, aged ten, were pinching the good twins, Jimmy and Sally, aged twelve. Horry and Dolly, who, not being twins, were called the odd ones, looked on complacently. Laura darted into the middle of the fray, and parted the fighters.

"Horry! Dolly! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves to see these children fight so. Horry, you are fourteen, and you, Dolly, are seventeen. Why don't you behave?"

"We are behaving," said Dolly, a girl in the stage of long legs, short frocks, and inky fingers. "We haven't touched them. I can't study my French lesson for the noise."

"And I've got my algebra to do."

"You shouldn't learn lessons on Sunday," said Laura.

"Why not? Gerty's gone to business."

"She has not. She only went to see if Mr. Tracey found his motor-car that was lost last night."

"Ah! And I'm glad of it," cried Horry triumphantly. "He wouldn't let me sit in it to watch."

"And a good thing to," said Dolly, pensively picking a hole in her stocking; "you started it last time."

"And nearly ran us over," said one of the good twins.

"I wish he had," said the bad twins in chorus. "Come and play, Miss Mason. Bible games!"

"I have no time. Gerty will be back soon. Now, be good children, and don't disturb your mother. She has a headache. Besides, you must get ready for church."

"I hate church," growled Horry. "And if mother thinks I'm going to be a parson, I ain't. So there now."

"You'll never go to heaven then," said Sally, who was the most pious of the good twins.

"*Oh, mon Dieu, quel dommage!*" said Dolly.

"Dolly!" cried Laura, shocked.

"I'm only swearing in French. It doesn't sound so bad as using bad words in English."

"No," chimed in a bad twin. "I heard the gardener say-"

"Hold your tongue, Jimmy; you needn't say the word!"

But Jimmy, being bad by nature and training, had made up his mind to say the word, and did so very distinctly. An uproar ensued, which ended by the entrance of Mary Anne Eliza. "Come and be washed." There was a chorus of protests, in the midst of which Laura escaped. Not being inclined to talk further to Mrs. Baldwin, she went out in the garden, which was large and as ill-kept as the house within. At the gate she paused, and leaning over, looked up the lane. It was a beautiful morning, and the air was as balmy as the sky was blue. But the exquisite weather did not banish the dark look from Laura's face. She gazed up the road with compressed lips, and then taking a letter out of her pocket, she read it hurriedly. Thus engaged, she did not see a tall brunette flying down the lane, with a flushed face, and an air of excitement.

"O Laura!" cried the newcomer; "O Laura! Such news-dreadful news."

Miss Mason started, and her face grew pale. Hastily thrusting the letter into her pocket, she looked at the girl. "What is it, Gerty? Nothing is wrong with Arnold?"

"No! no! What a timid thing you are," said Gerty, opening the gate. "But I have just seen Luther. He hasn't found his car. But he told me that a murder had been committed in your sister's house."

"A murder!" Laura grasped her friend's arm. "Not Arnold?"

"No. It's a woman."

"Who is she?"

"No one knows. She was found lying dead in the White Room. Stabbed in the back, and quite dead. Such a pretty woman, Luther says, and quite young. Luther thinks the murderer ran away with his car, and that's how it's missing. He's coming round here this morning to see you."

"To see me? Why should he see me? I know nothing."

Laura spoke sharply, and her face was in a glow of colour. At the same time it expressed bewilderment. "How did the woman enter the house?" she asked; "and who is she?"

"I tell you no one knows," said Gerty impatiently. "You'll hear all from Luther, when he comes. But don't say anything to mother. She'll only moan and make a fuss. Besides, Luther says it had better be kept quiet till your brother-in-law comes up. He has been telegraphed for by the police."

"The police. O Gerty, will they bring the police into the matter?"

"Of course. It was a policeman who found the body last night."

"How did the policeman enter the house?" asked Laura. "It's shut up, and not even a caretaker was left."

"I don't know the whole story. Luther would not tell me much." Here Gerty looked at her friend. "Laura, I thought you went to the house last night."

"No," said Laura, after a moment's hesitation. "I told you that I was going to meet Arnold. You know that I have to meet him by stealth, since Julia objects to our engagement. It is not likely we would meet at the house-especially as it is locked up."

"Did you meet him?" asked Gerty persistently and curiously.

"I didn't. I went into the fields by the Nightingale's Tree, and waited till nearly a quarter to ten. But Arnold never came."

"Did he promise to come?"

"No. I only went on the chance. He thought that he might be able to get away if his understudy could take his part in the piece."

"I expect he couldn't get away," said Gerty. "How awful this murder is. I wonder who the woman can be, and how she came to be killed."

"It's very strange," said Laura, who was pale but composed. "Gerty, did you tell Luther I was out last night?"

"No. We were too busy talking of the crime."

"Then say nothing. I should only get into trouble with Julia."

CHAPTER IV

THE MISSING MOTOR-CAR

It was not from Tracey that Laura learned the details of the Ajax Villa tragedy. Leaving Gerty in the garden with her lover, Miss Mason walked round to the house, eager to hear all that had taken place. A rumour about the murder had crept round Troy, and a few curious people were staring at the windows. But no policeman was to be seen. The inspector kept his officers on guard inside the villa, thinking, and very rightly, that the sight of a constable in the garden would provoke inquiry, and bring onlookers. Derrick wished the matter kept as quiet as possible until the arrival of Mr. Fane. The body of the unfortunate woman had been removed to one of the bedrooms, and a policeman watched at the door. Everything in the house was in the same order as it had been when entered by Mulligan, and Derrick himself took up his quarters in the White Room. Here he issued orders.

"If a young lady calls to see me, let her in," he said; "but no one else is to be admitted."

"Mr. Tracey, sir?" asked Mulligan, who was full of official pride.

"Yes; certainly. I except him. But no one else, mind."

"What about the wire to Mr. Fane, sir?"

"I'll send it as soon as I get his address from the lady. Ah" – he nodded as a ring came to the door – "there she is."

Laura entered the room, looking pale and discomposed, evidences of emotion of which Derrick took note. To be sure, it was natural that a girl of this tender age should be unstrung by the tragedy which had taken place, and Derrick scarcely expected to see her other than moved. But having regard to the crime, he was suspicious of all the Fane family. He admired Laura's fresh beauty, and placed a chair for her, apologising meanwhile for the disagreeable duty he had to perform.

"But I am sure you will excuse me, Miss Mason," said the gallant Derrick. "I will ask as few questions as possible."

"I really don't know what questions you can ask me," said Laura.

"Oh, that is an easy matter, Miss Mason. However, we had better clear the ground, so that we may understand one another. It was Mr. Tracey who told me that you are the sister-in-law of Mr. Fane, and I requested him to bring you round. Is he below?"

"No; I preferred to come myself. Mr. Tracey is of a very inquiring nature, and I don't want him to hear all I may have to tell you."

Derrick shook his head. "I fear you will be obliged to let the whole of London hear, Miss Mason. There will be an inquest."

"Must I appear at that?"

"Certainly. You may be able to identify the woman."

"I fear not, from the description Mr. Tracey gave of her."

Derrick looked at her sharply as she said this. Her eyes met his fairly, and she did not flinch from his scrutiny. But her bosom rose and fell hurriedly, her cheeks flushed, she passed her tongue over her dry lips. All these things gave evidence of inward discomposure. Whether she knew anything, Derrick was not prepared to say. But if she did, he was sure it would be difficult to make her speak out. Laura was innocent and young, but in spite of her delicate appearance, she had a strong will. Derrick guessed as much from the way in which she tightened her lips. But he could not conceive that she could hold out against his examination. "Have you anything to conceal?" he asked abruptly and rashly.

Laura coloured still more and glanced at him indignantly. "How can you speak to me like that?" she said; "do you suspect me?"

"No. Certainly not. But the affair is strange, Miss Mason."

"From the little I gathered from Mr. Tracey, it is," she assented.

"Here is a house shut up," said Derrick, pursuing his own train of thought; "left without even a caretaker—"

"There was no need for one to be left," interposed the girl. "My sister, Mrs. Fane, thinks that Troy is a safe suburb. There have been no burglaries hereabouts, so she merely asked the police to keep an eye on the house. Besides, she is away only for three weeks."

"When do Mrs. Fane and family return?"

"In six days."

"You remained behind?"

Laura bowed. "My sister and I are not on very good terms," she began, "and I thought it best to remain with my friend, Miss Baldwin, while the house was shut up. But you were saying something."

"Merely that it is queer this woman—this stranger—if she is a stranger, should obtain admittance into the house while those who own it are away. She came on Saturday evening—at what time we are not as yet able to learn. No one saw her come. We do not know if she came alone or in the company of any one. But come she did, and entered the house. How did she get in?"

"I am as puzzled as you are, sir. But if you will let me see the body, I may be able to tell you if it is that of a stranger to me."

"We can do that later," said Derrick. "Meanwhile I wish to put a few questions. And even if this woman were not a stranger is it likely that she could enter the house?"

"No. So far as I know, my brother-in-law alone has a latch-key."

"Is there not another possessed by a young man?"

Laura looked out of the window while answering this question. "Not that I know of," she said faintly.

Derrick appeared satisfied with this reply, and took out his note-book. "Answer my questions, please," he began. "Who is Mr. Fane?"

"My brother-in-law. He is the second partner in the shipping firm of Mason, Son, and Mason."

"Oh! And why does not his name appear?"

Laura explained. "The firm is an old one," she said; "there are two partners, my brother and Walter Fane. When my father died, the firm was Mason, Son, and Mason, and as it is an old-established one, my brother did not change the name when Mr. Fane became a partner."

"When did Mr. Fane become a partner?"

"Three years ago, when he married my sister Julia!"

"Did Mr. Fane bring any money into the business?" asked Derrick; then seeing Laura's look of surprise, he continued apologetically, "Excuse me, Miss Mason, but I must know everything."

"I believe Mr. Fane brought very little money into the business. It was my sister Julia who had the money, and she paid sufficient to my brother to buy Walter a share. But I have no right to tell you these things," said Laura, flushing. "If you wish to know anything further you must ask Mr. Fane himself."

"I intend to. Will you give me his address?"

"Ocean View, Wandle Road, Westcliff-on-Sea."

Derrick noted this in his book. "I'll send a wire to him," he said, "as the inquest takes place to-morrow and we must have him present. By the way, do you know a young man with a pointed beard and slim figure? Is he a visitor at this house?"

"Not that I know of," said Miss Mason promptly. "I know no one of that type—with a pointed beard, I mean."

"Yet such a young man came out of the house, and held the policeman in talk while his accomplice murdered this woman."

"Were there two men, then?"

"We think so," answered Derrick cautiously. "I presume, Miss Mason," he added, "you have been to this house since Mrs. Fane left it?"

"Certainly not."

"But living so near-Meadow Lane is but a stone-throw away."

"Quite so. All the same I had no reason to return here."

"You live in this house?"

"With my sister. Yes."

"Then your things are here?"

Laura looked hard at Derrick, trying to fathom his meaning. "I took all needful things with me, as though I were going on a long journey, Mr. Inspector. For nearly two weeks I have lived with Mrs. Baldwin, and have not been in Achilles Avenue."

"Have you not passed the house?"

"I said that I had not been in Achilles Avenue," replied Laura.

"Then you know nothing," said Derrick, obviously disappointed with the result of his examination.

"Absolutely nothing."

The inspector nursed his chin, and thought with his eyes on the ground. There was nothing else he could ask. Mr. Fane was the owner of Ajax Villa, and as this unknown woman had been murdered therein, Mr. Fane alone would be able to say how she had come by her death. In his past life might be found the reason that the poor creature should be so slain. "What did Mr. Fane do before he joined the firm?"

"Nothing," replied Laura, rousing herself from her own thoughts; "he is possessed of independent means and travelled a great deal. I suppose he grew weary of so aimless a life. However, my sister persuaded him to become a partner, which he did, after he married her."

"Hum!" said Derrick, not finding this reply threw any light on the subject. Then he cast his eyes round the room. "This is a queer place, Miss Mason. Mrs. Fane's idea?"

"No. Mr. Fane furnished the house. My sister does not like this room. It is too cold in its looks for her. Mr. Fane is fond of it. But the whole house was furnished before Mr. Fane married."

"For the marriage, I presume."

"No. Mr. Fane lived here as a bachelor for six months before he married my sister."

"But no doubt the engagement lasted six months, and Mr. Fane furnished the house as he thought your sister would like it."

"He did not. Mr. Fane married my sister at the end of three months, and before that he furnished the house according to his own taste."

Derrick thought this strange. However, he did not ask any more questions, as he felt that he had rather exceeded the limits of an even official courtesy. "I am much obliged to you for replying so frankly to my questions, Miss Mason," he said. "If I have been too curious, the strange nature of this case must be my excuse. We will now inspect the body."

Laura's cheeks grew even paler than they were. But she made no objection. Silently she followed the inspector, moving indifferently through the house. Only when they arrived at the door of the death-chamber did she draw back. "You have put the body into my room," she said resentfully.

"I am sorry," said Derrick, opening the door, "but of course I was quite in ignorance."

"I shall never be able to sleep in the room again," murmured Laura, and passed through the door which Derrick held open.

Out of delicacy the inspector did not enter with her. He remained outside, thinking over what she had said. It seemed to him that Mr. Fane had married very suddenly, and had taken his bride to a house which had not been furnished for her. The house was too large for a bachelor, and must have been intended for two. What if Fane had been engaged to some one else, for whom the house was furnished, but the engagement being broken, and married Miss Julia Mason so hurriedly. If this

were so, the house with its strange White Room which was not to the present Mrs. Fane's taste must have been furnished for the unknown woman. And perhaps the unknown woman was the poor soul who lay dead within. Only Fane had the latch-key, only Fane could have admitted her, and then—here Derrick broke off. He felt that he was taking too much for granted; that he was building up a theory on unsubstantial foundations. Until he saw Fane, and learned what kind of a man he was, it was impossible to formulate any theory. Still, for his own satisfaction, Derrick determined to ask Laura a few more questions. It was at this moment she emerged, pale but composed.

"I do not know the woman at all," she said, before he could speak.

"You are quite sure?"

"Perfectly. I never set eyes on her before. A pretty woman," added Laura sadly, "and with quite a girlish face. I wonder what brought her here to meet her death."

"I wonder," said Derrick; "and who could have killed her?"

"That is the mystery," sighed Laura, turning to go away.

"It will not remain one long. Mr. Fane must know her, since only he had the latch-key."

"Yes. Only he has—" here Laura broke off and flashed an inquiring look on the inspector. "Do you mean to say that my brother-in-law knows something about this crime?"

"If only he has the latch-key—"

"You stated that this young man with a pointed beard met by your policeman had a latch-key."

"Yes. But has Mr. Fane a beard?"

"A beard? No. He is clean-shaven."

"He might have assumed a disguise."

"How dare you hint at such a thing?" said Laura indignantly. "I am quite sure that Mr. Fane knows nothing. Last night he was at Westcliff-on-Sea, ill in bed. I can show you a wire. My sister knew that I was going to her to-morrow, and she wired last night at five o'clock saying that Walter was ill and that I had better not come."

"Oh!" This statement took the inspector aback. If Fane had been ill at Westcliff-on-Sea, he certainly could not be the man met by Mulligan. "Can you show me the wire?" he asked.

"I will send it round to you. And I am quite sure that when you see Mr. Fane you will not suspect him of this crime. A better and more kindly man does not live. However this woman came to enter the house, however she was killed, and for what reason, Mr. Fane can know nothing of the matter. How was she killed?"

"Stabbed under the left shoulder-blade while she was singing."

"Singing! What was she singing, and why in a strange house?"

"She was singing 'Kathleen Mavourneen.'"

Laura looked surprised. "My sister's favourite song."

"Oh indeed," said Derrick sharply. He hesitated. "Your sister is also at Westcliff-on-Sea?"

"Are you about to accuse her?" asked Laura disdainfully.

"I accuse no one," replied Derrick, nettled. "I am only trying in all directions to learn facts upon which to build up a theory."

"Then why don't you look for real evidence?"

"Such as what, Miss Mason?"

"Such as the weapon with which this woman was killed."

"We have looked. It cannot be found. The murderer took it away. He would not be such a fool as to leave that lying about. The doctor fancies from the nature of the wound that it must be a long slim dagger—a kind of stiletto."

"Such as a foreigner might use," said Laura involuntarily.

"What do you mean?" asked the inspector sharply.

Laura flushed. "Nothing, nothing," she responded; "but foreigners usually make use of such a weapon, don't they? An Englishman would not kill a person with a stiletto."

"It's not British, certainly," said Derrick, with insular prejudice; "but a woman might use such a thing. Still, we do not know that the assassin is a man or" – he looked straight at her – "a woman."

Laura could not quite understand his meaning, since it never struck her that he meant to incriminate her in the matter. She took no notice, being anxious to learn what Derrick thought. "What is your theory on existing facts?" she asked coldly.

Derrick reflected. "I hardly know what to say. Let us suppose that the woman admitted herself into the house. How she got the latch-key I am not prepared to say. She came to meet some one – possibly the two people who killed her."

"The two people?" interrupted Laura abruptly.

"There was the young man who kept Mulligan in talk," explained the officer, "and the one who presumably killed her. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that this woman met these two men. Seeing a policeman at the gate, Number One goes out to lure him away. Left alone with Number Two, the woman sits at the piano to sing. On the music-stand is 'Kathleen Mavourneen.' She knows that song and sings it. The assassin, standing behind her, watches his opportunity and stabs her. Then he goes."

"You forget that the song was being sung, according to your own account, before Number One left the gate with the policeman."

"Certainly. But the woman might have begun to sing immediately after Number One left."

"Before," insisted Laura. "The policeman listened while Number One was in the room. It was the song that made him stop. I am only going by what you told me. Your theory doesn't fit together."

Derrick frowned. "It is hard to put the pieces of the puzzle together, Miss Mason. Only in detective fiction does the heaven-born genius put this and that together in a flash. I – a mere mortal – am groping in the dark. I may discuss a hundred theories before I hit on the right solution. Nothing more can be done till I see Mr. Fane. As the woman was in his house, he must know –"

"He knows nothing," interrupted Laura imperiously; "he can't know. The man is ill at the seaside and –"

Derrick interrupted in his turn. "I'll wait till I hear what Mr. Fane has to say," he declared abruptly.

He rose to terminate the interview. As he opened the door Tracey entered hurriedly. "My car's found," he burst out.

"Where?" asked Derrick and Laura together.

"Stranded in the yard of Charing Cross Station."

Laura turned quickly on Derrick. "I beg you to observe, Mr. Inspector, that you cannot get to Westcliff-on-Sea from Charing Cross."

"I have not yet accused Mr. Fane," retorted the inspector.

CHAPTER V

PUBLIC OPINION

Naturally there was great excitement over "The White Room Crime," as it soon came to be called. The inhabitants of Troy were shocked, as such a thing had never before happened in their locality. They found their holy quiet invaded by a host of reporters, detectives, policemen, idlers, and morbid folk who wished for new sensations. Mr. and Mrs. Fane left their child at the seaside and came up for the inquest, which was held at a quiet public-house in the neighbourhood. Fane insisted that the body should be taken away from Ajax Villa.

"It should have been removed at once," he declared. "I don't know the woman. I never set eyes on her. My wife doesn't know her, and I can't conceive how she came to die in my place."

"Do you alone own the latch-key?"

It was Derrick who asked this question, and he eyed Fane sharply as the reply came.

"I alone own the latch-key of my house," said Fane; "it is a peculiar lock. No other key but mine will fit it. See!" He produced a long slim key, upon which Derrick, unlocking a drawer, took out of it the key picked up by Mulligan. The two were identical in all respects. "You see," said Derrick in his turn, "a duplicate has been made. I noticed that the strange key was new when Mulligan showed it."

"Where did you get this key?"

"The young man who lured Mulligan away from the gate dropped it."

"Very strange," said Fane in a puzzled tone. "I can't understand. I don't think the locksmith who made me my key can have made two, as I especially agreed with him that he was not to do so."

"Have you his address?"

"Yes. It is at my office in the city. I will give it to you. But I am sure the man is to be trusted. A most respectable tradesman."

"Hum," said Derrick, scratching his chin. "Respectable tradesmen do queer things for money at times."

"But why should this strange woman have been brought to this house-my house-to be murdered?"

"I can't say. That is what we have to find out. You don't know this woman?" asked Derrick doubtfully.

Fane was a smart, cheery-faced fellow with rather a weak mouth. He looked rather haggard, as he had practically risen from a sick-bed to obey the summons of the law. For the moment he appeared puzzled when Derrick spoke. Then he flashed an indignant look on him, and grew red. "Do you mean to insinuate that I did something underhand, Mr. Inspector?" he inquired excitedly.

"Men admire pretty women," said Derrick dryly.

"I do, like all men. At the same time I am faithful to my wife, whom I love very dearly. We are a most attached couple. And if you hint at anything wrong, sir, let me tell you that I was ill with a cold at the seaside when this crime was perpetrated. Also, had I been in town-had I known this woman-I certainly should not have brought her to my own house."

"No! no! quite so," said Derrick soothingly. "I don't mean to hint for a moment that your character is not spotless. But this key, sir. Has it ever been out of your possession?"

"Never! I carry it, as you see, on a steel chain. It comes off at night and goes on in the morning. Only my wife could have had it in her possession. You are not going to accuse her of taking an impression, are you?" asked Fane scathingly.

"Does Mrs. Fane know the woman?" asked Derrick, passing over this ironical speech.

"No. She never set eyes on her. No one knows who the woman is."

"Strange! Strange! I wonder why she should be killed in your house?"

"Don't you know her name?" asked Fane.

"No. There is no mark on her linen; no cards or letters in her pocket. She came out of the darkness into your house, and has been swallowed up by the darkness of the grave. We know no more. At the inquest something may transpire."

"I sincerely hope so," said Fane bluntly. "The whole thing is most disagreeable. I shall have to give up Ajax Villa. My wife is quite upset. The affair will put me to great expense. Good-day."

"One moment. Do you know a young man with a pointed beard?"

"Not that I can recall," replied Fane after a pause. "But of course I may have met such a person."

"Well" – Derrick gave up his questions in despair – "we must wait for the inquest."

But here a fresh disappointment awaited him. Nothing came to light at the inquest likely to throw light on the mystery. Geason proved that the unknown woman had been stabbed from behind and had died almost immediately. He was positive that she had been dead five hours when he was called in. If this were so, the woman who sang the song could not be the dead one. Nor could the young man who entered into conversation with Mulligan have been sent to lure him away so that the murder might take place. When the young man came out of the house the woman must have been dead three hours. The doctor firmly held to this opinion, and thereby perplexed the jury and upset the theories of Derrick.

Various were the opinions given by those present during the interview. Some thought this, some that, and every one had his own pet solution of the mystery. But the evidence was scanty. Both Mr. and Mrs. Fane stated that they knew nothing of the woman. The husband insisted that the latch-key had never been out of his possession, and the wife asserted that he had been sick in bed miles away at the time the crime was committed. Mulligan described his meeting with the strange young man and the conversation which had ensued; also his discovery of the body, and how he had entered the house. All inquiries on the part of the police failed to prove the identity of the dead. Tracey stated how he had missed his motor-car, and evidence was forthcoming to show that it had been left in the Charing Cross yard. But no one seemed to know who had brought it there. The result of this crop of scanty facts was obvious. The jury brought in a verdict against some person or persons unknown.

"It's the only thing to be said," said Derrick to Fane when the crowd dispersed. "The woman is dead, and she must be buried. That cost will fall on the parish."

"No," replied Fane, who did not seem to be an unkindly man. "The poor creature died in my house, so I will charge myself with her burial. I have consulted Mrs. Fane, and she thinks as I do."

"But you know nothing about her."

"That is true. However, if you make inquiries, you may learn."

The inspector shook his head. "I fear not; I don't know where to look. It is a kind thought of you to bury her, Mr. Fane. Not many men would do that in your place after the trouble you have had."

"It's the least I can do, seeing she was murdered under my roof. But you may hear who she is. Why not advertise?"

"That has been done. Handbills have been placed round describing her looks, and with a picture. Orders have been sent throughout London to the police to keep their eyes open. I doubt if anything will come of the hunt though."

"Surely," said Fane, wrinkling his brows, "a woman can't disappear like this in London?"

"London is the very place where people disappear," retorted Derrick. "Those who live in this big city never know how many people vanish yearly and are never heard of again. In this case we have the body of the woman, but who she was, where she came from, and why she was murdered in your house, will probably never be known."

"Well," said Fane, with the air of a man dismissing the subject, "if you do intend to make inquiries, please keep me advised of your discoveries. I should like to know how the woman entered the house. I believe you saw my locksmith?"

"I did. He swears positively that he did not make a duplicate key. More than that, he has not a duplicate of the one he made you."

Fane looked doubtful. "I should have thought he would have retained a copy for trade purposes. Suppose I lost the key—"

"He would not have been able to make you another, Mr. Fane. However, I am keeping an eye on him. He may be lying for his own ends. One never knows, and I always mistrust respectable men."

"From what my sister-in-law told me, Mr. Derrick, you were inclined to mistrust me."

Derrick coughed. "The case is so strange," said he; "but I am now quite sure that you had nothing to do with the matter."

"Thank you for nothing," said Fane dryly. "It is lucky that with the assistance of my wife I was able to prove an alibi."

"Very lucky indeed," replied the inspector cheerfully. "Had you been in town that night, and unable to explain your comings and goings, it might have gone hard with you."

"Do you mean to say—"

"Nothing-absolutely nothing. But see here, Mr. Fane; put yourself in my place, in the place of any man. A woman gains admittance to your house and there is murdered. You alone have the key. On the face of it, does not that look as though you alone killed her, else, why the use of your key to let her enter the house? It is lucky for you, as you say, that in full open court, and in the ears of all men, you were able to prove an alibi, else nine out of ten would have suspected you of knowing more than you stated."

"I said all I knew."

"I am sure of that, sir; and you proved—with the assistance of Mrs. Fane—your innocence. As they say, you leave the court without a stain. All the same, the case is strange. For my part, pending the discovery of the young man who dropped the key, I shall hunt for the woman. In her past life will be found the explanation of her death. I shall let you know how I get on, but I must ask you to also keep me advised of what you see and hear."

Fane shrugged his shoulders and took out a cigar. "I shall take no further steps in the matter. Once this woman is buried, and I have left Ajax Villa, the thing will be relegated to obscurity so far as I am concerned."

"Well," said Derrick, with a side look, "perhaps that's natural."

He then said good-bye to Fane, and went away thoughtfully. Derrick was not a particularly brilliant mortal, as his conduct of the case shows. As the saying goes, he could not see further than his nose. But he certainly wondered in his own mind, if despite the evidence of Mrs. Fane, her husband might not have something to do with the matter. To save his life, to keep him from shame, she might have kept silence. "But it's impossible," said Derrick aloud. "If he was guilty, she would not lie. If the victim had been a man now. But as it was a woman, a jealous creature like Mrs. Fane would certainly not sacrifice herself to save a man who deceived her. No; Fane is guiltless. But who is the culprit? That's the question." And it was a question which Derrick could not answer, though he tried to do so in his blundering way.

So the unknown woman was duly buried. Tracey and Fane went to the funeral, and the body was followed by a large concourse of those who wished to see the last of the victim of this mysterious tragedy. Every one agreed that Fane was behaving very well in thus giving the poor wretch decent burial. Fane looked white and worn when the grave was being filled in, and the rumour went round of how ill he had been, and how he had come up from a sick-bed to see this matter through. Several people shook hands with him as he left the cemetery, and he was congratulated on all hands. Then the gates of the burial-ground were closed, and the grave was left to the rain and the sunshine. For all any one present knew, its secret would not be delivered up until the Judgment-day.

It was the press that said the last word on the subject. The *Daily Budget*, always in search of the sensational, thought the affair strange enough to give it the honour of a leading article. As many

people may remember the perplexity of police and public in connection with this murder, it may not be uninteresting to give an extract or two from the article.

"The inexplicable murder in Troy is one of those crimes which at once startle and shock the public. That a woman should be done to death in this manner is bad enough, but that with our wonderful police organisation, her identity should remain a mystery is nothing less than a scandal and a shame. If the houses of law-abiding citizens are to be made the shambles for unknown assassins, the sooner the police force is reorganised the better. And again, is it not disgraceful that nothing can be found likely to prove who this poor creature is? Have we not newspapers and agents and handbills and all the paraphernalia of civilisation for the detection of the unknown? Search should be made in the most minute manner in order to prove who this dead woman is. Once her name is discovered, in her past life may be found the reason of her untimely and tragic death. This is the opinion of Inspector Derrick, who has handled the case, with all its strange elements of mystery, with but an indifferent degree of success. Not but what we are prepared to admit that the case is remarkably difficult and would tax the intellect of a Vidocq to unravel.

"It would seem that the woman went to the house between eight and nine o'clock, and was murdered shortly after she entered the door. Certainly she was seated at the piano, and certainly the song of 'Kathleen Mavourneen' was open before her. But we are sure that she never sang the song. While waiting for some one-perhaps the assassin who struck her down-she may have played for a time. But the woman who sang the song did so some three hours after the death of the unfortunate creature. Mulligan swore that he heard the song about eleven; the doctor declares that the woman was murdered before nine o'clock. On the face of it, it is impossible to reconcile this conflicting evidence.

"No one saw the woman enter the house, although many people were about Achilles Avenue during the evening. But in the multitude of people-especially on a Saturday night-would lie the chance of the woman not being observed. Few people knew that Mr. Fane and his family-one little girl-were at the seaside; so even if any one had noticed the woman enter the gate of Ajax Villa such a thing would not be fixed in the mind of the observer. All inquiries have been made, but no one appears to have noted the woman's coming. It is therefore impossible to say if she entered the house alone or in the company of the assassin.

"And with regard to the assassin. We are inclined to think he is a man-and that man who spoke to the policeman at eleven o'clock. It might be, that gaining admittance by his latch-key with the woman, he killed her almost immediately he entered, and then watched his chance of escape. That he entered the house with the woman appears clear. We stated above that it is impossible to say if the woman entered the house alone. By this we mean that the man may have come earlier, and may have admitted her before nine o'clock. The poor creature walked into a death-trap. Taking her to the White Room, he lured her to sit down at the piano, which would give him an opportunity of standing behind her to stab her unawares. Then when she was dead, he probably looked out of the window to see how he could escape. Fear evidently kept him within till nearly eleven o'clock. Then he saw the policeman passing, and then he sang the song to make the man believe a woman was singing. Afterwards, when he had lulled any suspicions the policeman may have entertained, he came out and escaped in the manner described. This is our theory. The singer is described by Mulligan-a remarkably intelligent officer-as having a deep contralto voice; so it is probable the assassin sang in falsetto. That the man killed the woman and thus escaped, we are sure; for only he having the latch-key could have admitted her, and only he could have a reason to lure her into the house. What that reason may be, must remain for ever a mystery."

So far the *Daily Budget* with its gimcrack theory. A rival newspaper promptly set to work to pick holes in the case as presented by the paper. This rival journal, the *Star of Morning*, commented as follows:

"Our respected contemporary goes too fast. Evidence was given clearly by Mulligan that the song was being sung while the presumed assassin-in the *Daily Budget's* opinion-was in conversation

with him at the gate. Therefore the young man with the pointed beard could not have sung 'Kathleen Mavourneen' in falsetto. The theory is amusing, but it won't hold water. Our belief is quite different, and we think more real.

"In the first place, we think that the young man was the person who admitted the women into the house. So far we agree with our contemporary. We say 'women,' because we believe there were two people, the victim and another woman. These two women came to the house either in the company of the young man or by themselves. In any case, he admitted them, since, however he obtained it, he alone possessed the latch-key, and was thus enabled to enter the deserted house. Once in the White Room, and the victim lured to the piano-again we agree-she was murdered. The two assassins-for both the man and the woman are equally guilty, though we are not prepared to say who actually struck the blow-then watched their opportunity to escape. It is a marvel that they should have remained three hours in the house, perhaps in the room, after the crime was committed. They arrived unseen along with their victim, so it is natural to think that they would have escaped from the house as soon as possible, positive that they would not be suspected. But guilt makes cowards of every one, and it made cowards of these two. They waited in the room, watching the gradual desertion of Achilles Avenue. About eleven they decided to venture. Then the policeman appears. Doubtless to save appearances, the woman sang. The man looking out, went away to lure the policeman. He did so, and then the woman escaped. She saw Mr. Tracey's motor-car standing unwatched at a gate, and forthwith used it to fly, fearful lest she should be followed. If she went straight to Charing Cross she must have arrived about half-past eleven. In the crowd in the yard on a Saturday night, with cabs and other vehicles coming and going, she would easily be able to draw up her car in a quiet corner. No one seems to have noticed her, and women driving motors is such a common spectacle now that no one would remark on the circumstance. We think that the woman then entered the station and left London. She may have escaped to the continent; she may have gone merely to a suburb. At all events, all trace of her is lost, and the deserted car was noted some hours later.

"This is our theory, and we think it is a more feasible one than that offered by our contemporary. As Mr. Fane is ignorant of the name of the deceased, it is inexplicable how she came to meet with her tragic death in his house. All the servants of Mr. Fane were at the seaside along with their master and mistress, so no blame can possibly be attached to them. Mr. Fane himself was ill in bed at Westcliff-on-Sea, so he can know nothing. He positively asserts that he alone possessed the latch-key, and the locksmith from whom he obtained it, declares that no duplicate was made. This is not the least strange element in this case. One thing we would draw our readers' attention to-the decoration of the room in which the murder was perpetrated. It was all white, and the black dress of the corpse must have formed a strange contrast to the snowy desert around when the poor creature was discovered by Mulligan. Quite a picturesque murder! Mr. Fane seems to be a gentleman with an original turn for furnishing to possess such a room, and the crime adds to its romance. And the secret of this murder will never be discovered. Why the woman should be stabbed, why she should have been lured to that strange room to be killed, how the assassins obtained possession of the latch-key-these things must remain for ever a mystery. But we are convinced that the crime was committed by a man and a woman, and we have given our reason."

To this statement-a purely theoretical one-the *Daily Budget* retorted in a short paragraph.

"We will merely ask our clever contemporary one question. 'If the woman assassin thus invented was singing at the piano before the policeman leaned over the gate, what opportunity had she and the young man to concert their scheme of escape?'"

To this demand there came no reply, and the press ceased to comment on the crime. The murder at Ajax Villa was relegated to the catalogue of unknown crimes for quite two weeks. Then a strange thing came to light.

CHAPTER VI

A STRANGE DISCOVERY

"You will have to make up your mind what you intend to do, my dear," said Mrs. Fane to her sister, "for I may tell you that Walter and I have arranged to make a change."

"In what way?" asked Laura, looking up from her sewing.

Mrs. Fane did not answer directly. She looked round the cosy morning-room, with rather a wistful expression. It was a very charming room, decorated in the fashion of a quaint, old parlour. In such an apartment might Jane Austen's heroines have sat, and the two ladies in modern dresses looked rather out of place. Mrs. Fane was tall and statuesque, with a placid, firm face, beautiful but cold. Her eyes were calm; she had none of those wrinkles which show the indulgence of emotion, and an earthquake would have failed to upset her eternal self-possession. Occupied in knitting a fleecy shawl, she scarcely lifted her eyes as she spoke, but continued to work placidly, never dropping a single stitch. There never was a woman who had herself so much under control as Mrs. Fane. Laura often wondered how she came to marry an excitable, vivacious man like Walter. But perhaps the exception to the law that like draws to like drew them together, and Mrs. Fane found in her husband, whose nature was so totally opposed to her own, the complement of herself.

The sisters resembled one another very little: Mrs. Fane was dark and tall, Laura slight and fair. Laura laughed when she was amused, showed anger when she felt it, and indulged unrestrained in her emotions, though she never exceeded them. She was as open in her disposition as Mrs. Fane was secretive. A glance would reveal Laura's thoughts, but no scrutiny would show what Mrs. Fane had in her mind. Both of them were plainly dressed, but Laura indulged in a few more trimmings than her sister. Mrs. Fane might have been a lady abbess, from the severity of her black garb. And a very good abbess she would have made, only the nuns under her charge would have been controlled with a rod of iron. She had no weaknesses herself, and had no patience with them in others. Not even pain appealed to her, for she had never been ill. Toothache was unknown to her; headaches she had never experienced; and she seemed to move amongst less favoured mortals like a goddess, majestic, unfeeling, and far removed from the engaging weaknesses of human nature. Mrs. Fane, by reason of this abnormal severity, was not popular.

To make a happy marriage, either the man or the woman must rule. If both have strong wills, separation or divorce is the only remedy to avert an unhappy life. If the man is strong, he controls the woman; if the woman has the will, she guides the man; and thus with no divided kingdom, the domestic life can be fairly happy, in some cases completely so.

When Mrs. Fane-Julia Mason she was then-determined to marry Walter, she also determined to have her own way. He was as weak as she was strong, therefore he did exactly as she ordered him. But she always gave him the outward rule, and, so to speak, only instructed him behind the scenes how he was to act on the stage of the world. People said that Mr. and Mrs. Fane were a happy pair, but they never knew the real reason of such happiness. Mrs. Fane concealed the iron hand in a velvet glove. Occasionally Walter proved restive, but she always managed by a quiet determination to bring him again into subjection. It may also be stated that she cherished a secret contempt that he should thus give in to her, although such yielding formed the basis of her ideal marriage. Only Laura knew how Mrs. Fane despised her husband; but since she was living with the pair, she was wise enough to keep this knowledge secret. Otherwise, Mrs. Fane would have made herself disagreeable, and she had a large capacity for rendering the house too hot for any one she disliked. Witness the expulsion of two servants who had served Fane when he was a bachelor, and who were discharged in the most polite way two months after Mrs. Fane came to live at Ajax Villa.

This domestic Boadicea looked round the room vaguely, and then brought her eyes back to the pretty, anxious face of Laura. She had a poor opinion of Laura, and always strove to impose her will on her. But Laura had her own ideas of life, and resented Julia's interference. There was but little love between the sisters, and this was entirely due to Julia's domineering temper. Not that the two ever fought. Mrs. Fane would not fight. She simply held out till she got her own way, and thus was usually successful with Walter. But Laura, made of sterner stuff, managed to hold her own, a firm quality which annoyed Julia, who liked people to grovel at her feet. She was a domestic tyrant of the worst.

Outside the sun was shining, and its rays penetrated even into the room. Mrs. Fane sat in a flood of gold, but was as unwarmed thereby as the statue of a goddess. Even the tragedy which had happened lately left but few traces of annoyance on her placid brow. Now that the unknown woman was buried, and the papers had ceased to interest themselves in the matter, she apparently dismissed it from her mind. Secretly she was annoyed with Laura because the girl had insisted on changing her bedroom. "I am not going to sleep in a room in which that body was laid out," said Laura. And it was on this hint that Mrs. Fane framed her reply.

"I wonder at you asking in what way we intend to make a change," she said in her cold voice, "seeing that you changed your room."

"Oh; you find the villa disagreeable after this tragedy?"

"I do not. So far as I am concerned, I should not mind living here for the rest of my days. I like the house and the neighbourhood, and especially do I like the White Room-"

"The very place where the poor creature was killed" said Laura, with a shudder, which made Mrs. Fane smile.

"My dear, what does that matter? Death is death, however it comes, as you ought to know. If a murder took place in every room in the house I should not mind."

"Would you like it to take place in the nursery?" asked Laura.

Here she touched Mrs. Fane on a raw spot. If there was one thing the self-possessed woman loved it was her little daughter. That she was annoyed showed itself by the slight flush which crimsoned her face.

"You shouldn't say such things, my dear," she said in icy tones; "of course I except the nursery. An atmosphere of crime would not be conducive to the health of Minnie. But as I was saying, Walter wishes to give up the house."

"You said nothing of the sort," said Laura, irritated.

"I say it now, then. Walter wishes to go abroad."

"What about the business?"

Mrs. Fane raised her perfectly marked eyebrows. "Well, what about it, Laura? You know Walter is often away for weeks yachting. Times and seasons make no difference to him, so far as his love of the sea is concerned. Frederick says" – Frederick Mason was her brother-"that Walter is of very little use in the office."

"I wonder he keeps him, then," said Laura.

"There is no question of keeping," replied Mrs. Fane serenely; "you speak of Walter as though he were an office-boy. He is a partner, remember, and I do his business for him."

"I don't quite understand."

"It's very simple, Laura. Walter, as you know, brought very little money into the business. He seems to have spent what he had, or the greater part, in furnishing this house for me."

"It was furnished before you and he became engaged."

"That is true. But I saw what was coming a long time before Walter asked me to be his wife. He hinted that he was furnishing a house here, and how he was spending money on it. I then knew that he intended to make me his wife, and I determined to accept him. Not that I loved him over much," added Mrs. Fane quietly, "but I was anxious to have a say in the business. Frederick is a fool;

and unless the business is looked after, it will go to ruin. As the wife of one of the partners, I am able to take a part in the conduct of the business."

"You could have done so without marrying," said Laura.

Mrs. Fane shook her head.

"No. Father left you an income of five hundred a year, but he left me much more, because he knew that I would make good use of it. The money which came to me, and your principal, were not invested in the business. I asked Frederick to let me become his partner. He refused. Then I engaged myself to Walter, who became a partner with my money. Frederick is willing, seeing that Walter is not a good business man, to let me act for my husband. I dare say he could have permitted this without the marriage, but he would not for some reason. However, you know now why I married Walter. Besides, Walter is a fool, and I wished to have a weak husband, so that I might control him."

"Was there no love at all in the marriage?"

"Well, my dear" – Mrs. Fane laughed – "I must confess that Walter is very good-looking, and that I should be jealous of his attention to any other woman. Are you answered?"

"Yes – so far as the love is concerned. But I don't understand how Walter can go abroad and leave the business."

"He is not much use. I can look after it for him, as I have always done. Do you think I should let Walter go away yachting if I did not like a free hand? He is happy on the sea, and I am happy in the counting-house, so all is well. This villa has become objectionable to Walter on account of the murder, so we intend to give it up. Probably we shall move to a French watering-place or to Switzerland. Walter can enjoy himself in his usual way, and I can run over when needful to attend to the business."

"I understand. But if you make your home in Switzerland, you will be far from London. Also, Walter will not be able to yacht."

"True enough. We shall see. I must be near England, so that I can run across rapidly, and Walter must be near the sea, for his beloved boat. If I allow Frederick to conduct the business without help, I am sure he will ruin it and me too."

"I wonder you like Walter to remain away for so long, Julia."

"My dear, I have perfect confidence in him."

"But if you loved him –"

"I would keep him by me. Well, I do love him in a way, though he is too weak to command my respect. But Walter is one of those demonstrative men who are a nuisance to a woman of my temperament. He wants to kiss and caress all day long. I find that trying, so I prefer him to go away occasionally. And now you know what we intend to do, what about yourself?"

"Am I not to go with you?"

"If you like. But you are getting older, and, I must confess, that as you have an income of your own, I think you should have a home."

"I see" – Laura looked directly at her sister – "you wish to get rid of me."

"Oh no," replied Mrs. Fane in quite a conventional way; "you are a very good companion for Walter, and he is fond of you in his weak way. As you don't trouble me, I shall be pleased to have you with us abroad. But I think it right to give you the choice."

"Of going with you as the fifth wheel on the chariot –"

"Or marrying," said Mrs. Fane calmly – "yes. That is what I mean."

"Suppose I do neither. I have my own money. I might go and live with Gerty Baldwin."

"You might," assented the elder sister, "if you like to live in a pig-sty with that lymphatic woman, who is more like a jelly than a human being."

"There's no harm in her," protested Laura.

"Nor is there in a pig. But I don't care to live with a pig. As to Gerty Baldwin, she is a fast young minx, engaged to a vulgarian."

"Mr. Tracey is a kindhearted man."

"But vulgar. And Gerty?"

"The dearest girl in the world."

Mrs. Fane again lifted her eyebrows.

"I confess I don't care for people of that sort."

"Do you care for any one but yourself?" asked Laura bitterly.

"I care for Minnie, and a little for Walter," said Mrs. Fane, "but the ordinary human being does not seem worthy of being liked."

"You condemn the world as though you were its judge and not its denizen," said Laura, with a curled lip and flashing eyes. "Julia, you were always a hard woman. Your nature is like our father's."

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