

FLETCHER JOSEPH SMITH

THE HERAPATH PROPERTY

Joseph Fletcher

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J. S. Fletcher

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CHAPTER I

JACOB HERAPATH IS MISSING

This was the third week of Selwood's secretaryship to Jacob Herapath. Herapath was a well-known man in London. He was a Member of Parliament, the owner of a sort of model estate of up-to-date flats, and something of a crank about such matters as ventilation, sanitation, and lighting. He himself, a bachelor, lived in one of the best houses in Portman Square; when he engaged Selwood as his secretary he made him take a convenient set of rooms in Upper Seymour Street, close by. He also caused a telephone communication to be set up between his own house and Selwood's bedroom, so that he could summon his secretary at any hour of the night. Herapath occasionally had notions about things in the small hours, and he was one of those active, restless persons who, if they get a new idea, like to figure on it at once. All the same, during those three weeks he had not once troubled his secretary in this fashion. No call came to Selwood over that telephone until half-past seven one November morning, just as he was thinking of getting out of bed. And the voice which then greeted him was not Herapath's. It was a rather anxious, troubled voice, and it belonged to one Kitteridge, a middle-aged man, who was Herapath's butler.

In the act of summoning Selwood, Kitteridge was evidently interrupted by some person at his elbow; all that Selwood made out was that Kitteridge wanted him to go round at once. He dressed hurriedly, and ran off to Herapath's house; there in the hall, near the door of a room which Herapath used as a study and business room, he found Kitteridge talking to Mountain, Herapath's coachman, who, judging by the state of his attire, had also been called hurriedly from his bed.

"What is it, Kitteridge?" demanded Selwood. "Mr. Herapath ill?"

The butler shook his head and jerked his thumb towards the open door of the study.

"The fact is, we don't know where Mr. Herapath is, sir," he answered. "He hasn't slept in his bed, and he isn't in the house."

"Possibly he didn't come home last night," suggested Selwood. "He may have slept at his club, or at an hotel."

The butler and the coachman looked at each other—then the coachman, a little, sharp-eyed man who was meditatively chewing a bit of straw, opened his tightly-compressed lips.

"He did come home, sir," he said. "I drove him home—as usual. I saw him let himself into the house. One o'clock sharp, that was. Oh, yes, he came home!"

"He came home," repeated Kitteridge. "Look here, sir." He led the way into the study and pointed to a small table set by the side of Herapath's big business desk. "You see that tray, Mr. Selwood? That's always left out, there, on that table, for Mr. Herapath every night. A small decanter of whiskey, a syphon, a few sandwiches, a dry biscuit or two. Well, there you are, sir—he's had a drink out of that glass, he's had a mouthful or so of sandwiches. Oh, yes, he came home, but he's not at home now! Charlesworth—the valet, you know, sir—always goes into Mr. Herapath's room at a quarter past seven every morning; when he went in just now he found that Mr. Herapath wasn't there, and the bed hadn't been slept in. So—that's where things stand."

Selwood looked round the room. The curtains had not yet been drawn aside, and the electric light cast a cold glare on the various well-known objects and fittings. He glanced at the evidences of the supper tray; then at the blotting-pad on Herapath's desk; there he might have left a note for his butler or his secretary. But there was no note to be seen.

“Still, I don’t see that there’s anything to be alarmed about, Kitteridge,” he said. “Mr. Herapath may have wanted to go somewhere by a very early morning train—”

“No, sir, excuse me, that won’t do,” broke in the butler. “I thought of that myself. But if he’d wanted to catch a night train, he’d have taken a travelling coat, and a rug, and a bag of some sort—he’s taken nothing at all in that way. Besides, I’ve been in this house seven years, and I know his habits. If he’d wanted to go away by one of the very early morning trains he’d have kept me and Charlesworth up, making ready for him. No, sir! He came home, and went out again—must have done. And—it’s uncommonly queer. Seven years I’ve been here, as I say, and he never did such a thing before.”

Selwood turned to the coachman.

“You brought Mr. Herapath home at one o’clock?” he said. “Alone?”

“He was alone, sir,” replied the coachman, who had been staring around him as if to seek some solution of the mystery. “I’ll tell you all that happened—I was just beginning to tell Mr. Kitteridge here when you come in. I fetched Mr. Herapath from the House of Commons last night at a quarter past eleven—took him up in Palace Yard at the usual spot, just as the clock was striking. ‘Mountain,’ he says, ‘I want you to drive round to the estate office—I want to call there.’ So I drove there—that’s in Kensington, as you know, sir. When he got out he says, ‘Mountain,’ he says, ‘I shall be three-quarters of an hour or so here—wrap the mare up and walk her about,’ he says. I did as he said, but he was more than three-quarters—it was like an hour. Then at last he came back to the brougham, just said one word, ‘Home!’ and I drove him here, and the clocks were striking one when he got out. He said ‘Good night,’ and I saw him walk up the steps and put his key in the latch as I drove off to our stables. And that’s all I know about it.”

Selwood turned to the butler.

“I suppose no one was up at that time?” he inquired.

“Nobody, sir,” answered Kitteridge. “There never is. Mr. Herapath, as you’ve no doubt observed, is a bit strict in the matter of rules, and it’s one of his rules that everybody in the house must be in bed by eleven-thirty. No one was ever to sit up for him on any occasion. That’s why this supper-tray was always left ready. His usual time for coming in when he’d been at the House was twelve o’clock.”

“Everybody in the house might be in bed,” observed Selwood, “but not everybody might be asleep. Have you made any inquiry as to whether anybody heard Mr. Herapath moving about in the night, or leaving the house? Somebody may have heard the hall door opened and closed, you know.”

“I’ll make inquiry as to that, sir,” responded Kitteridge, “but I’ve heard nothing of the sort so far, and all the servants are aware by now that Mr. Herapath isn’t in the house. If anybody had heard anything—”

Before the butler could say more the study door opened and a girl came into the room. At sight of her Selwood spoke hurriedly to Kitteridge.

“Have you told Miss Wynne?” he whispered. “Does she know?”

“She may have heard from her maid, sir,” replied Kitteridge in low tones. “Of course they’re all talking of it. I was going to ask to see Miss Wynne as soon as she was dressed.”

By that time the girl had advanced towards the three men, and Selwood stepped forward to meet her. He knew her as Herapath’s niece, the daughter of a dead sister of whom Herapath had been very fond; he knew, too, that Herapath had brought her up from infancy and treated her as a daughter. She was at this time a young woman of twenty-one or two, a pretty, eminently likeable young woman, with signs of character and resource in eyes and lips, and Selwood had seen enough of her to feel sure that in any disturbing event she would keep her head. She spoke calmly enough as the secretary met her.

“What’s all this, Mr. Selwood?” she asked. “I understand my uncle is not in the house. But there’s nothing alarming in that, Kitteridge, is there? Mr. Herapath may have gone away during the night, you know.”

“Kitteridge thinks that highly improbable,” replied Selwood. “He says that Mr. Herapath had made no preparation for a sudden journey, has taken no travelling coat or rug, or luggage of any sort.”

“Did he come in from the House?” she asked. “Perhaps not?”

Kitteridge pointed to the supper-tray and then indicated the coachman.

“He came in as usual, miss,” he replied. “Or rather an hour later than usual. Mountain brought him home at one o’clock, and he saw him let himself in with his latch-key.”

Peggie Wynne turned to the coachman.

“You’re sure that he entered the house?” she asked.

“As sure as I could be, miss,” replied Mountain. “He was putting his key in the door when I drove off.”

“He must have come in,” said Kitteridge, pointing to the tray. “He had something after he got in.”

“Well, go and tell the servants not to talk, Kitteridge,” said Peggie. “My uncle, no doubt, had reasons for going out again. Have you said anything to Mr. Tertius?”

“Mr. Tertius isn’t down yet, miss,” answered the butler.

He left the room, followed by the coachman, and Peggie turned to Selwood. “What do you think?” she asked, with a slight show of anxiety. “You don’t know of any reason for this, do you?”

“None,” replied Selwood. “And as to what I think, I don’t know sufficient about Mr. Herapath’s habits to be able to judge.”

“He never did anything like this before,” she remarked. “I know that he sometimes gets up in the middle of the night and comes down here, but I never knew him to go out. If he’d been setting off on a sudden journey he’d surely have let me know. Perhaps—”

She paused suddenly, seeing Selwood lift his eyes from the papers strewn about the desk to the door. She, too, turned in the same direction.

A man had come quietly into the room—a slightly-built, little man, grey-bearded, delicate-looking, whose eyes were obscured by a pair of dark-tinted spectacles. He moved gently and with an air of habitual shyness, and Selwood, who was naturally observant, saw that his lips and his hands were trembling slightly as he came towards them.

“Mr. Tertius,” said Peggie, “do you know anything about Uncle Jacob? He came in during the night—one o’clock—and now he’s disappeared. Did he say anything to you about going away early this morning?”

Mr. Tertius shook his head.

“No—no—nothing!” he answered. “Disappeared! Is it certain he came in?”

“Mountain saw him come in,” she said. “Besides, he had a drink out of that glass, and he ate something from the tray—see!”

Mr. Tertius bent his spectacled eyes over the supper tray and remained looking at what he saw there for a while. Then he looked up, and at Selwood.

“Strange!” he remarked. “And yet, you know, he is a man who does things without saying a word to any one. Have you, now, thought of telephoning to the estate office? He may have gone there.”

Peggie, who had dropped into the chair at Herapath’s desk, immediately jumped up.

“Of course we must do that at once!” she exclaimed. “Come to the telephone, Mr. Selwood—we may hear something.”

She and Selwood left the room together. When they had gone, Mr. Tertius once more bent over the supper tray. He picked up the empty glass, handling it delicately; he held it between himself and the electric light over the desk; he narrowly inspected it, inside and out. Then he turned his attention to the plate of sandwiches. One sandwich had been taken from the plate and bitten into—once. Mr. Tertius took up that sandwich with the tips of his delicately-shaped fingers. He held that, too, nearer the light. And having looked at it he hastily selected an envelope from the stationery cabinet on the desk, carefully placed the sandwich within it, and set off to his own rooms in the upper part of the

house. As he passed through the hall he heard Selwood at the telephone, which was installed in a small apartment at the foot of the stairs—he was evidently already in communication with some one at the Herapath Estate Office.

Mr. Tertius went straight to his room, stayed there a couple of minutes, and went downstairs again. Selwood and Peggie Wynne were just coming away from the telephone; they looked up at him with faces grave with concern.

“We’re wanted at the estate office,” said Selwood. “The caretaker was just going to ring us up when I got through to him. Something is wrong—wrong with Mr. Herapath.”

CHAPTER II

IS IT MURDER?

It struck Selwood, afterwards, as a significant thing that it was neither he nor Mr. Tertius who took the first steps towards immediate action. Even as he spoke, Peggie was summoning the butler, and her orders were clear and precise.

“Kitteridge,” she said quietly, “order Robson to bring the car round at once—as quickly as possible. In the meantime, send some coffee into the breakfast-room—breakfast itself must wait until we return. Make haste, Kitteridge.”

Selwood turned on her with a doubtful look.

“You—you aren’t going down there?” he asked.

“Of course I am!” she answered. “Do you think I should wait here—wondering what had happened? We will all go—come and have some coffee, both of you, while we wait for the car.”

The two followed her into the breakfast-room and silently drank the coffee which she presently poured out for them. She, too, was silent, but when she had left the room to make ready for the drive Mr. Tertius turned to Selwood.

“You heard—what?” he asked.

“Nothing definite,” answered Selwood. “All I heard was that Mr. Herapath was there, and there was something seriously wrong, and would we go down at once.”

Mr. Tertius made no comment. He became thoughtful and abstracted, and remained so during the journey down to Kensington. Peggie, too, said nothing as they sped along; as for Selwood, he was wondering what had happened, and reflecting on this sudden stirring up of mystery. There was mystery within that car—in the person of Mr. Tertius. During his three weeks’ knowledge of the Herapath household Selwood had constantly wondered who Mr. Tertius was, what his exact relationship was, what his position really was. He knew that he lived in Jacob Herapath’s house, but in a sense he was not of the family. He seldom presented himself at Herapath’s table, he was rarely seen about the house; Selwood remembered seeing him occasionally in Herapath’s study or in Peggie Wynne’s drawing-room. He had learnt sufficient to know that Mr. Tertius had rooms of his own in the house; two rooms in some upper region; one room on the ground-floor. Once Selwood had gained a peep into that ground-floor room, and had seen that it was filled with books, and that its table was crowded with papers, and he had formed the notion that Mr. Tertius was some book-worm or antiquary, to whom Jacob Herapath for some reason or other gave house-room. That he was no relation Selwood judged from the way in which he was always addressed by Herapath and by Peggie Wynne. To them as to all the servants he was Mr. Tertius—whether that was his surname or not, Selwood did not know.

There was nothing mysterious or doubtful about the great pile of buildings at which the automobile presently stopped. They were practical and concrete facts. Most people in London knew the famous Herapath Flats—they had aroused public interest from the time that their founder began building them.

Jacob Herapath, a speculator in real estate, had always cherished a notion of building a mass of high-class residential flats on the most modern lines. Nothing of the sort which he contemplated, he said, existed in London—when the opportunity came he would show the building world what could and should be done. The opportunity came when a parcel of land in Kensington fell into the market—Jacob Herapath made haste to purchase it, and he immediately began building on it. The result was a magnificent mass of buildings which possessed every advantage and convenience—to live in a Herapath flat was to live in luxury. Incidentally, no one could live in one who was not prepared to pay a rental of anything from five to fifteen hundred a year. The gross rental of the Herapath Flats was

enormous—the net profits were enough to make even a wealthy man's mouth water. And Selwood, who already knew all this, wondered, as they drove away, where all this wealth would go if anything had really happened to its creator.

The entrance to the Herapath estate office was in an archway which led to one of the inner squares of the great buildings. When the car stopped at it, Selwood saw that there were police within the open doorway. One of them, an inspector, came forward, looking dubiously at Peggie Wynne. Selwood hastened out of the car and made for him.

"I'm Mr. Herapath's secretary—Mr. Selwood," he said, drawing the inspector out of earshot. "Is anything seriously wrong?—better tell me before Miss Wynne hears. He isn't—dead?"

The inspector gave him a warning look.

"That's it, sir," he answered in a low voice. "Found dead by the caretaker in his private office. And it's here—Mr. Selwood, it's either suicide or murder. That's flat!"

Selwood got his two companions inside the building and into a waiting-room. Peggie turned on him at once.

"I see you know," she said. "Tell me at once what it is. Don't be afraid, Mr. Selwood—I'm not likely to faint nor to go into hysterics. Neither is Mr. Tertius. Tell us—is it the worst?"

"Yes," said Selwood. "It is."

"He is dead?" she asked in a low voice. "You are sure? Dead?"

Selwood bent his head by way of answer; when he looked up again the girl had bent hers, but she quickly lifted it, and except that she had grown pale, she showed no outward sign of shock or emotion. As for Mr. Tertius, he, too, was calm—and it was he who first broke the silence.

"How was it?" he asked. "A seizure?"

Selwood hesitated. Then, seeing that he had to deal with two people who were obviously in full control of themselves, he decided to tell the truth.

"I'm afraid you must be prepared to hear some unpleasant news," he said, with a glance at the inspector, who just then quietly entered the room. "The police say it is either a case of suicide or of murder."

Peggie looked sharply from Selwood to the police official, and a sudden flush of colour flamed into her cheeks.

"Suicide?" she exclaimed. "Never! Murder? That may be. Tell me what you have found," she went on eagerly. "Don't keep things back!—don't you see I want to know?"

The inspector closed the door and came nearer to where the three were standing.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you what we do know," he said. "Our station was rung up by the caretaker here at five minutes past eight. He said Mr. Herapath had just been found lying on the floor of his private room, and they were sure something was wrong, and would we come round. I came myself with one of our plain-clothes men who happened to be in, and our surgeon followed us a few minutes later. We found Mr. Herapath lying across the hearthrug in his private room, quite dead. Close by—" He paused and looked dubiously at Peggie. "The details are not pleasant," he said meaningly. "Shall I omit them?"

"No!" answered Peggie with decision. "Please omit nothing. Tell us all."

"There was a revolver lying close by Mr. Herapath's right hand," continued the inspector. "One chamber had been discharged. Mr. Herapath had been shot through the right temple, evidently at close quarters. I should say—and our surgeon says—he had died instantly. And—I think that's all I need say just now."

Peggie, who had listened to this with unmoved countenance, involuntarily stepped towards the door.

"Let us go to him," she said. "I suppose he's still here?"

But there Selwood, just as involuntarily, asserted an uncontrollable instinct. He put himself between the door and the girl.

“No!” he said firmly, wondering at himself for his insistence. “Don’t! There’s no need for that—yet. You mustn’t go. Mr. Tertius—”

“Better not just yet, miss,” broke in the inspector. “The doctor is still here. Afterwards, perhaps. If you would wait here while these gentlemen go with me.”

Peggie hesitated a moment; then she turned away and sat down.

“Very well,” she said.

The inspector silently motioned the two men to follow him; with his hand on the door Selwood turned again to Peggie.

“You will stay here?” he said. “You won’t follow us?”

“I shall stay here,” she answered. “Stop a minute—there’s one thing that should be thought of. My cousin Barthorpe—”

“Mr. Barthorpe Herapath has been sent for, miss—he’ll be here presently,” replied the inspector. “The caretaker’s telephoned to him. Now gentlemen.”

He led the way along a corridor to a room with which Selwood was familiar enough—an apartment of some size which Jacob Herapath used as a business office and kept sacred to himself and his secretary. When he was in it no one ever entered that room except at Herapath’s bidding; now there were strangers in it who had come there unbidden, and Herapath lay in their midst, silent for ever. They had laid the lifeless body on a couch, and Selwood and Mr. Tertius bent over it for a moment before they turned to the other men in the room. The dead face was calm enough; there was no trace of sudden fear on it, no signs of surprise or anger or violent passion.

“If you’ll look here, gentlemen,” said the police-inspector, motioning them towards the broad hearthrug. “This is how things were—nothing had been touched when we arrived. He was lying from there to here—he’d evidently slipped down and sideways out of that chair, and had fallen across the rug. The revolver was lying a few inches from his right hand. Here it is.”

He pulled open a drawer as he spoke and produced a revolver which he carefully handled as he showed it to Selwood and Mr. Tertius.

“Have either of you gentlemen ever seen that before?” he asked. “I mean—do you recognize it as having belonged to—him? You don’t? Never seen it before, either of you? Well, of course he might have kept a revolver in his private desk or in his safe, and nobody would have known. We shall have to make an exhaustive search and see if we can find any cartridges or anything. However, that’s what we found—and, as I said before, one chamber had been discharged. The doctor here says the revolver had been fired at close quarters.”

Mr. Tertius, who had watched and listened with marked attention, turned to the police surgeon.

“The wound may have been self-inflicted?” he asked.

“From the position of the body, and of the revolver, there is strong presumption that it was,” replied the doctor.

“Yet—it may not have been?” suggested Mr. Tertius, mildly.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. It was easy to see what his own opinion was.

“It may not have been—as you say,” he answered. “But if he was shot by some other person—murdered, that is—the murderer must have been standing either close at his side, or immediately behind him. Of this I am certain—he was sitting in that chair, at his desk, when the shot was fired.”

“And—what would the immediate effect be?” asked Mr. Tertius.

“He would probably start violently, make as if to rise, drop forward against the desk and gradually—but quickly—subside to the floor in the position in which he was found,” replied the doctor. “As he fell he would relinquish his grip on the revolver—it is invariably a tight grip in these cases—and it would fall—just where it was found.”

“Still, there is nothing to disprove the theory that the revolver may have been placed—where it was found?” suggested Mr. Tertius.

“Oh, certainly it may have been placed there!” said the doctor, with another shrug of the shoulders. “A cool and calculating murderer may have placed it there, of course.”

“Just so,” agreed Mr. Tertius. He remained silently gazing at the hearthrug for a while; then he turned to the doctor again. “Now, how long do you think Mr. Herapath had been dead when you were called to the body?” he asked.

“Quite eight hours,” answered the doctor promptly.

“Eight hours!” exclaimed Mr. Tertius. “And you first saw him at—”

“A quarter past eight,” said the doctor. “I should say he died just about midnight.”

“Midnight!” murmured Mr. Tertius. “Midnight? Then—”

Before he could say more, a policeman, stationed in the corridor outside, opened the door of the room, and glancing at his inspector, announced the arrival of Mr. Barthorpe Herapath.

CHAPTER III

BARTHORPE TAKES CHARGE

The man who strode into the room as the policeman threw the door open for him immediately made two distinct impressions on the inspector and the doctor, neither of whom had ever seen him before. The first was that he instantly conveyed a sense of alert coolness and self-possession; the second that, allowing for differences of age, he was singularly like the dead man who lay in their midst. Both were tall, well-made men; both were clean-shaven; both were much alike as to feature and appearance. Apart from the fact that Jacob Herapath was a man of sixty and grey-haired, and his nephew one of thirty to thirty-five and dark-haired, they were very much alike—the same mould of nose, mouth, and chin, the same strength of form. The doctor noted this resemblance particularly, and he involuntarily glanced from the living to the dead.

Barthorpe Herapath bent over his dead uncle for no more than a minute. His face was impassive, almost stern as he turned to the others. He nodded slightly to Mr. Tertius and to Selwood; then he gave his attention to the officials.

“Yes?” he said inquiringly and yet with a certain tone of command. “Now tell me all you know of this.”

He stood listening silently, with concentrated attention, as the inspector put him in possession of the facts already known. He made no comment, asked no questions, until the inspector had finished; then he turned to Selwood, almost pointedly ignoring Mr. Tertius.

“What is known of this in Portman Square, Mr. Selwood?” he inquired. “Tell me, briefly.”

Selwood, who had only met Barthorpe Herapath once or twice, and who had formed an instinctive and peculiar dislike to him, for which he could not account, accepted the invitation to be brief. In a few words he told exactly what had happened at Jacob Herapath’s house.

“My cousin is here, then?” exclaimed Barthorpe.

“Miss Wynne is in the larger waiting-room down the corridor,” replied Selwood.

“I will go to her in a minute,” said Barthorpe. “Now, inspector, there are certain things to be done at once. There will, of course, have to be an inquest—your people must give immediate notice to the coroner. Then—the body—that must be properly attended to—that, too, you will see about. Before you go away yourself, I want you to join me in collecting all the evidence we can get on the spot. You have one of your detective staff here?—good. Now, have you searched—him?”

The inspector drew open a drawer in the front desk which occupied the centre of the room, and pointed to some articles which lay within.

“Everything that we found upon him is in there,” he answered. “You see there is not much—watch and chain, pocket articles, a purse, some loose money, a pocket-book, a cigar-case—that’s all. One matter I should have expected to find, we didn’t find.”

“What’s that?” asked Barthorpe quickly.

“Keys,” answered the inspector. “We found no keys on him—not even a latch-key. Yet he must have let himself in here, and I understand from the caretaker that he must have unlocked this door after he’d entered by the outer one.”

Barthorpe made no immediate answer beyond a murmur of perplexity.

“Strange,” he said after a pause, during which he bent over the open drawer. “However, that’s one of the things to be gone into. Close that drawer, lock it up, and for the present keep the key yourself—you and I will examine the contents later. Now for these immediate inquiries. Mr. Selwood, will you please telephone at once to Portman Square and tell Kitteridge to send Mountain, the coachman, here—instantly. Tell Kitteridge to come with him. Inspector, will you see to this

arrangement we spoke of, and also tell the caretaker that we shall want him presently? Now I will go to my cousin.”

He strode off, still alert, composed, almost bustling in his demeanour, to the waiting-room in which they had left Peggie—a moment later, Selwood, following him down the corridor, saw him enter and close the door. And Selwood cursed himself for a fool for hating to think that these two should be closeted together, for disliking the notion that Barthorpe Herapath was Peggie Wynne’s cousin—and now, probably, her guardian protector. For during those three weeks in which he had been Jacob Herapath’s secretary, Selwood had seen a good deal of his employer’s niece, and he was already well over the verge of falling in love with her, and was furious with himself for daring to think of a girl who was surely one of the richest heiresses in London. He was angry with himself, too, for disliking Barthorpe, for he was inclined to cultivate common-sense, and common-sense coldly reminded him that he did not know Barthorpe Herapath well enough to either like or dislike him.

Half an hour passed—affairs suggestive of the tragedy of the night went on in the Herapath Estate Office. Two women in the garb of professional nurses came quietly, and passed into the room where Herapath lay dead. A man arrayed in dismal black came after them, summoned by the police who were busy at the telephone as soon as Selwood had finished with it. Selwood himself, having summoned Kitteridge and Mountain, hung about, waiting. He heard the police talking in undertones of clues and theories, and of a coroner’s inquest, and the like; now and then he looked curiously at Mr. Tertius, who had taken a seat in the hall and was apparently wrapped in meditation. And still Barthorpe Herapath remained closeted with Peggie Wynne.

A taxi drove up and deposited the butler and the coachman at the door. Selwood motioned them inside.

“Mr. Barthorpe Herapath wants both of you,” he said curtly. “I suppose he will ask for you presently.”

Kitteridge let out an anxious inquiry.

“The master, sir?” he exclaimed. “Is—”

“Good heavens!” muttered Selwood. “I—of course, you don’t know. Mr. Herapath is dead.”

The two servants started and stared at each other. Before either could speak Barthorpe Herapath suddenly emerged from the waiting-room and looked round the hall. He beckoned to the inspector, who was talking in low tones with the detective, at a little distance.

“Now, inspector,” he said, “will you and your officer come in? And the caretaker—and you, Kitteridge, and you, Mountain. Mr. Selwood, will you come in, too?”

He stood at the door while those he had invited inside passed into the room where Peggie still sat. And as he stood there, and Selwood wound up the little procession, Mr. Tertius rose and also made as if to join the others. Barthorpe stopped him by intruding himself between him and the door.

“This is a private inquiry of my own, Mr. Tertius,” he said, with a meaning look.

Selwood, turning in sheer surprise at this announcement, so pointed and so unmistakable, saw a faint tinge of colour mount to the elder man’s usually pale cheeks. Mr. Tertius stopped sharply and looked at Barthorpe in genuine surprise.

“You do not wish me to enter—to be present?” he faltered.

“Frankly, I don’t,” said Barthorpe, with aggressive plainness. “There will be a public inquiry—I can’t stop you from attending that.”

Mr. Tertius drew back. He stood for a moment staring hard at Barthorpe; then, with a slight, scarcely perceivable bow, he turned away, crossed the hall, and went out of the front door. And Barthorpe Herapath laughed—a low, sneering laugh—and following the other men into the waiting-room, locked the door upon those assembled there. As if he and they were assembled on some cut-and-dried business matter, he waved them all to chairs, and himself dropped into one at the head of the table, close to that in which Peggie was sitting.

“Now, inspector,” he began, “you and I must get what we may as well call first information about this matter. There will be a vast amount of special and particular investigation later on, but I want us, at the very outset, while facts are fresh in the mind, to get certain happenings clearly before us. And for this reason—I understand that the police-surgeon is of opinion that my uncle committed suicide. With all respect to him—I’m sorry he’s gone before I could talk to him—that theory cannot be held for an instant! My cousin, Miss Wynne, and I knew our uncle far too well to believe that theory for a single moment, and we shall combat it by every means in our power when the inquest is held. No—my uncle was murdered! Now I want to know all I can get to know of his movements last night. And first I think we’ll hear what the caretaker can tell us. Hancock,” he continued, turning to an elderly man who looked like an ex-soldier, “I understand you found my uncle’s body?”

The caretaker, obviously much upset by the affairs of the morning, pulled himself up to attention.

“I did, sir,” he replied.

“What time was that?”

“Just eight o’clock, sir—that’s my usual time for opening the office.”

“Tell us exactly how you found him, Hancock.”

“I opened the door of Mr. Herapath’s private room, sir, to pull up the blinds and open the window. When I walked in I saw him lying across the hearth-rug. Then I noticed the—the revolver.”

“And of course that gave you a turn. What did you do? Go into the room?”

“No, sir! I shut the door again, went straight to the telephone and rang up the police-station. Then I waited at the front door till the inspector there came along.”

“Was the front door fastened as usual when you went to it at that time?”

“It was fastened as it always is, sir, by the latch. It was Mr. Herapath’s particular orders that it never should be fastened any other way at night, because he sometimes came in at night, with his latch-key.”

“Just so. Now these offices are quite apart and distinct from the rest of the building—mark that, inspector! There’s no way out of them into the building, nor any way out of the building into them. In fact, the only entrance into these offices is by the front door. Isn’t that so, Hancock?”

“That’s quite so, sir—only that one door.”

“No area entrance or side-door?”

“None, sir—nothing but that.”

“And the only tenants in here—these offices—at night are you and your wife, Hancock?”

“That’s all, sir.”

“Now, where are your rooms?”

“We’ve two rooms in the basement, sir—living-room and kitchen—and two rooms on the top floor—a bedroom and a bathroom.”

“On the top-floor. How many floors are there?”

“Well, sir, there’s the basement—then there’s this—then there’s two floors that’s used by the clerks—then there’s ours.”

“That’s to say there are two floors between your bedroom and this ground floor?”

“Yes, sir—two.”

“Very well. Now, about last night. What time did you and your wife go to bed?”

“Eleven o’clock, sir—half an hour later than usual.”

“You’d previously looked round, I suppose?”

“Been all round, sir—I always look into every room in the place last thing at night—thoroughly.”

“Are you and your wife sound sleepers?”

“Yes, sir—both of us. Good sleepers.”

“You heard no sound after you got to bed?”

“Nothing, sir—neither of us.”

“No recollection of hearing a revolver shot?—not even as if it were a long way off?”

“No, sir—we never heard anything—nothing unusual, at any rate.”

“You heard no sound of doors opening or being shut, nor of any conveyance coming to the door?”

“No, sir, nothing at all.”

“Well, one or two more questions, Hancock. You didn’t go into the room after first catching sight of the body? Just so—but you’d notice things, even in a hurried glance. Did you notice any sign of a struggle—overturned chair or anything?”

“No, sir. I did notice that Mr. Herapath’s elbow chair, that he always sat in at his desk, was pushed back a bit, and was a bit on one side as it were. That was all.”

“And the light—the electric light? Was that on?”

“No, sir.”

“Then all you can tell us comes to this—that you never heard anything, and had no notion of what was happening, or had happened, until you came down in the morning?”

“Just so, sir. If I’d known what was going on, or had gone on, I should have been down at once.”

Barthorpe nodded and turned to the coachman.

“Now, Mountain,” he said. “We want to hear your story. Be careful about your facts—what you can tell us is probably of the utmost importance.”

CHAPTER IV

THE PRESSMAN

The coachman, thus admonished, unconsciously edged his chair a little nearer to the table at which Barthorpe Herapath sat, and looked anxiously at his interrogator. He was a little, shrewd-eyed fellow, and it seemed to Selwood, who had watched him carefully during the informal examination to which Barthorpe had subjected the caretaker, that he had begun to think deeply over some new presentiment of this mystery which was slowly shaping itself in his mind.

"I understand, Mountain, that you fetched Mr. Herapath from the House of Commons last night?" began Barthorpe. "You fetched him in the brougham, I believe?"

"Yes, sir," answered the coachman. "Mr. Herapath always had the brougham at night—and most times, too, sir. Never took kindly to the motor, sir."

"Where did you meet him, Mountain?"

"Usual place, sir—in Palace Yard—just outside the Hall."

"What time was that?"

"Quarter past eleven, exactly, sir—the clock was just chiming the quarter as he came out."

"Was Mr. Herapath alone when he came out?"

"No sir. He came out with another gentleman—a stranger to me, sir. The two of 'em stood talking a bit a yard or two away from the brougham."

"Did you hear anything they said?"

"Just a word or two from Mr. Herapath, sir, as him and the other gentleman parted."

"What were they?—tell us the words, as near as you can remember."

"Mr. Herapath said, 'Have it ready for me tomorrow, and I'll look in at your place about noon.' That's all, sir."

"What happened then?"

"The other gentleman went off across the Yard, sir, and Mr. Herapath came to the brougham, and told me to drive him to the estate office—here, sir."

"You drove him up to this door, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Mr. Herapath never was driven up to the door—he always got out of the brougham in the road outside and walked up the archway. He did that last night."

"From where you pulled up could you see if there was any light in these offices?"

"No, sir—I pulled up just short of the entrance to the archway."

"Did Mr. Herapath say anything to you when he got out?"

"Yes, sir. He said he should most likely be three-quarters of an hour here, and that I'd better put a rug over the mare and walk her about."

"Then I suppose he went up the archway. Now, did you see anybody about the entrance? Did you see any person waiting as if to meet him? Did he meet anybody?"

"I saw no one, sir. As soon as he'd gone up the archway I threw a rug over the mare and walked her round and round the square across the road."

"You heard and saw nothing of him until he came out again?"

"Nothing, sir."

"And how long was he away from you?"

"Nearer an hour than three-quarters, sir."

"Were you in full view of the entrance all that time?"

"No, sir, I wasn't. Some of the time I was—some of it I'd my back to it."

"You never saw any one enter the archway during the time Mr. Herapath was in the office?"

"No, sir."

“All the same, some one could have come here during that time without your seeing him?”

“Oh, yes, sir!”

“Well, at last Mr. Herapath came out. Where did he rejoin you?”

“In the middle of the road, sir—right opposite that statue in the Square gardens.”

“Did he say anything particular then?”

“No, sir. He walked sharply across, opened the door, said ‘Home’ and jumped in.”

“You didn’t notice anything unusual about him?”

“Nothing, sir—unless it was that he hung his head down rather as he came across—same as if he was thinking hard, sir.”

“You drove straight home to Portman Square, then. What time did you get there?”

“Exactly one o’clock, sir.”

“You’re certain about that time?”

“Certain, sir. It was just five minutes past one when I drove into our mews.”

“Now, then, be careful about this, Mountain. I want to know exactly what happened when you drove up to the house. Tell us in your own way.”

The coachman looked round amongst the listeners as if he were a little perplexed. “Why, sir,” he answered, turning back to Barthorpe, “there was nothing happened! At least, I mean to say, there was nothing happened that didn’t always happen on such occasions—Mr. Herapath got out of the brougham, shut the door, said ‘Good night,’ and went up the steps, taking his latch-key out of his pocket as he crossed the pavement, sir. That was all, sir.”

“Did you actually see him enter the house?”

“No, sir,” replied Mountain, with a decisive shake of the head. “I couldn’t say that I did that. I saw him just putting the key in the latch as I drove off.”

“And that’s all you know?”

“That’s all I know, sir—all.”

Barthorpe, after a moment’s hesitation, turned to the police-inspector.

“Is there anything that occurs to you?” he asked.

“One or two things occur to me,” answered the inspector. “But I’m not going to ask any questions now. I suppose all you want at present is to get a rough notion of how things were last night?”

“Just so,” assented Barthorpe. “A rough notion—that’s it. Well, Kitteridge, it’s your turn. Who found out that Mr. Herapath wasn’t in the house this morning?”

“Charlesworth, sir—Mr. Herapath’s valet,” replied the butler. “He always called Mr. Herapath at a quarter past seven every morning. When he went into the bedroom this morning Mr. Herapath wasn’t there, and the bed hadn’t been slept in. Then Charlesworth came and told me, sir, and of course I went to the study at once, and then I saw that, wherever Mr. Herapath might be then, he certainly had been home.”

“You judged that from—what?” asked Barthorpe.

“Well, sir, it’s been the rule to leave a supper-tray out for Mr. Herapath. Not much, sir—whisky and soda, a sandwich or two, a dry biscuit. I saw that he’d had something, sir.”

“Somebody else might have had it—eh?”

“Yes, sir, but then you see, I’d had Mountain fetched by that time, and he told me that he’d seen Mr. Herapath letting himself in at one o’clock. So of course I knew the master had been in.”

Barthorpe hesitated, seemed to ponder matters for a moment, and then rose. “I don’t think we need go into things any further just now,” he said. “You, Kitteridge, and you, Mountain, can go home. Don’t talk—that is, don’t talk any more than is necessary. I suppose,” he went on, turning to the inspector when the two servants and the caretaker had left the room. “I suppose you’ll see to all the arrangements we spoke of?”

“They’re being carried out already,” answered the inspector. “Of course,” he added, drawing closer to Barthorpe and speaking in lower tones, “when the body’s been removed, you’ll join me in

making a thorough inspection of the room? We haven't done that yet, you know, and it should be done. Wouldn't it be best," he continued with a glance at Peggie and a further lowering of his voice, "if the young lady went back to Portman Square?"

"Just so, just so—I'll see to it," answered Barthorpe. "You go and keep people out of the way for a few minutes, and I'll get her off." He turned to his cousin when the two officers had left the room and motioned her to rise. "Now, Peggie," he said, "you must go home. I shall come along there myself in an hour or two—there are things to be done which you and I must do together. Mr. Selwood—will you take Miss Wynne out to the car? And then, please, come back to me—I want your assistance for a while."

Peggie walked out of the room and to the car without demur or comment. But as she was about to take her seat she turned to Selwood.

"Why didn't Mr. Tertius come into the room just now?" she demanded.

Selwood hesitated. Until then he had thought that Peggie had heard the brief exchange of words between Barthorpe and Mr. Tertius at the door.

"Didn't you hear what was said at the door when we were all coming in?" he asked suddenly, looking attentively at her.

"I heard my cousin and Mr. Tertius talking, but I couldn't catch what was said," she replied. "If you did, tell me—I want to know."

"Mr. Barthorpe Herapath refused to admit Mr. Tertius," said Selwood.

"Refused?" she exclaimed. "Refused?"

"Refused," repeated Selwood. "That's all I know."

Peggie sat down and gave him an enigmatic look.

"You, of course, will come back to the house when—when you've finished here?" she said.

"I don't know—I suppose—really, I don't know," answered Selwood. "You see, I—I, of course, don't know exactly where I am, now. I suppose I must take my orders from—your cousin."

Peggie gave him another look, more enigmatic than the other.

"That's nonsense!" she said sharply. "Of course, you'll come. Do whatever it is that Barthorpe wants just now, but come on to Portman Square as soon as you've done it—I want you. Go straight home, Robson," she went on, turning to the chauffeur.

Selwood turned slowly and unwillingly back to the office door as the car moved off. And as he set his foot on the first step a young man came running up the entry—not hurrying but running—and caught him up and hailed him.

"Mr. Selwood?" he said, pantingly. "You'll excuse me—you're Mr. Herapath's secretary, aren't you?—I've seen you with him. I'm Mr. Triffitt, of the *Argus*—I happened to call in at the police-station just now, and they told me of what had happened here, so I rushed along. Will you tell me all about it, Mr. Selwood?—it'll be a real scoop for me—I'll hustle down to the office with it at once, and we'll have a special out in no time. And whether you know it or not, that'll help the police. Give me the facts, Mr. Selwood!"

Selwood stared at the ardent collector of news; then he motioned him to follow, and led him into the hall to where Barthorpe Herapath was standing with the police-inspector.

"This is a newspaper man," he said laconically, looking at Barthorpe. "Mr. Triffitt, of the *Argus*. He wants the facts of this affair."

Barthorpe turned and looked the new-comer up and down. Triffitt, who had almost recovered his breath, pulled out a card and presented it with a bow. And Barthorpe suddenly seemed to form a conclusion.

"All right!" he said. "Mr. Selwood, you know all the facts. Take Mr. Triffitt into that room we've just left, and give him a résumé of them. And—listen! we can make use of the press. Mention two matters, which seem to me to be of importance. Tell of the man who came out of the House of Commons with my uncle last night—ask him if he'll come forward. And, as my uncle must

have returned to this office after he'd been home, and as he certainly wouldn't walk here, ask for information as to who drove him down to Kensington from Portman Square. Don't tell this man too much—give him the bare outlines on how matters stand.”

The reporter wrote at lightning speed while Selwood, who had some experience of condensation, gave him the news he wanted. Finding that he was getting a first-class story, Triffitt asked no questions and made no interruptions. But when Selwood was through with the account, he looked across the table with a queer glance of the eye.

“I say!” he said. “This is a strange case!”

“Why so strange?” asked Selwood.

“Why? Great Scott!—I reckon it's an uncommonly strange case,” exclaimed Triffitt. “It's about a dead certainty that Herapath was in his own house at Portman Square at one o'clock, isn't it?”

“Well?” said Selwood.

“And yet according to the doctor who examined him at eight o'clock he'd been dead quite eight hours!” said Triffitt. “That means he died at twelve o'clock—an hour before he's supposed to have been at his house! Queer! But all the queerer, all the better—for me! Now I'm off—for the present. This'll be on the streets in an hour, Mr. Selwood. Nothing like the press, sir!”

Therewith he fled, and the secretary suddenly found himself confronting a new idea. If the doctor was right and Jacob Herapath had been shot dead at midnight, how on earth could he possibly have been in Portman Square at one o'clock, an hour later?

CHAPTER V

THE GLASS AND THE SANDWICH

Mr. Tertius, dismissed in such cavalier fashion by Barthorpe Herapath, walked out of the estate office with downcast head—a superficial observer might have said that he was thoroughly crestfallen and brow-beaten. But by the time he had reached the road outside, the two faint spots of colour which had flushed his cheeks when Barthorpe turned him away had vanished, and he was calm and collected enough when, seeing a disengaged taxi-cab passing by, he put up his hand and hailed it. The voice which bade the driver go to Portman Square was calm enough, too—Mr. Tertius had too much serious work immediately in prospect to allow himself to be disturbed by a rudeness.

He thought deeply about that work as the taxi-cab whirled him along; he was still thinking about it when he walked into the big house in Portman Square. In there everything was very quiet. The butler was away at Kensington; the other servants were busily discussing the mystery of their master in their own regions. No one was aware that Mr. Tertius had returned, for he let himself into the house with his own latch-key, and went straight into Herapath's study. There, if possible, everything was still quieter—the gloom of the dull November morning seemed to be doubly accentuated in the nooks and corners; there was a sense of solitude which was well in keeping with Mr. Tertius's knowledge of what had happened. He looked at the vacant chair in which he had so often seen Jacob Herapath sitting, hard at work, active, bustling, intent on getting all he could out of every minute of his working day, and he sighed deeply.

But in the moment of sighing Mr. Tertius reflected that there was no time for regret. It was a time—his time—for action; there was a thing to do which he wanted to do while he had the room to himself. Therefore he went to work, carefully and methodically. For a second or two he stood reflectively looking at the supper tray which still stood on the little table near the desk. With a light, delicate touch he picked up the glass which had been used and held it up to the light. He put it down again presently, went quietly out of the study to the dining-room across the hall, and returned at once with another glass precisely similar in make and pattern to the one which he had placed aside. Into that clear glass he poured some whisky, afterwards mixing with it some soda-water from the syphon—this mixture he poured away into the soil of a flower-pot which stood in the window. And that done he placed the second glass on the tray in the place where the first had stood, and picking up the first, in the same light, gingerly fashion, he went upstairs to his own rooms at the top of the house.

Five minutes later Mr. Tertius emerged from his rooms. He then carried in his hand a small, square bag, and he took great care to handle it very carefully as he went downstairs and into the square. At the corner of Orchard Street he got another taxi-cab and bade the driver go to Endsleigh Gardens. And during the drive he took the greatest pains to nurse the little bag on his knee, thereby preserving the equilibrium of the glass inside it.

Ringling the bell of one of the houses in Endsleigh Gardens, Mr. Tertius was presently confronted by a trim parlourmaid, whose smile was ample proof that the caller was well-known to her.

“Is the Professor in, Mary?” asked Mr. Tertius. “And if he is, is he engaged?”

The trim parlourmaid replied that the Professor was in, and that she hadn't heard that he was particularly engaged, and she immediately preceded the visitor up a flight or two of stairs to a door, which in addition to being thickly covered with green felt, was set in flanges of rubber—these precautions being taken, of course, to ensure silence in the apartment within. An electric bell was set in the door; a moment or two elapsed before any response was made to the parlourmaid's ring. Then the door automatically opened, the parlourmaid smiled at Mr. Tertius and retired; Mr. Tertius walked in; the door closed softly behind him.

The room in which the visitor found himself was a large and lofty one, lighted from the roof, from which it was also ventilated by a patent arrangement of electric fans. Everything that met the view betokened science, order, and method. The walls, destitute of picture or ornament, were of a smooth neutral tinted plaster; where they met the floor the corners were all carefully rounded off so that no dust could gather in cracks and crevices; the floor, too, was of smooth cement; there was no spot in which a speck of dust could settle in improper peace. A series of benches ran round the room, and gave harbourings to a collection of scientific instruments of strange appearance and shape; two large tables, one at either end of the room, were similarly equipped. And at a desk placed between them, and just then occupied in writing in a note-book, sat a large man, whose big muscular body was enveloped in a brown holland blouse or overall, fashioned something like a smock-frock of the old-fashioned rural labourer. He lifted a colossal, mop-like head and a huge hand as Mr. Tertius stepped across the threshold, and his spectacled eyes twinkled as their glance fell on the bag which the visitor carried so gingerly.

“Hullo, Tertius!” exclaimed the big man, in a deep, rich voice. “What have you got there? Specimens?”

Mr. Tertius looked round for a quite empty space on the adjacent bench, and at last seeing one, set his bag down upon it, and sighed with relief.

“My dear Cox-Raythwaite!” he said, mopping his forehead with a bandanna handkerchief which he drew from the tail of his coat. “I am thankful to have got these things here in—I devoutly trust!—safety. Specimens? Well, not exactly; though, to be sure, they may be specimens of—I don’t quite know what villainy yet. Objects?—certainly! Perhaps, my dear Professor, you will come and look at them.”

The Professor slowly lifted his six feet of muscle and sinew out of his chair, picked up a briar pipe which lay on his desk, puffed a great cloud of smoke out of it, and lounged weightily across the room to his visitor.

“Something alive?” he asked laconically. “Likely to bite?”

“Er—no!” replied Mr. Tertius. “No—they won’t bite. The fact is,” he went on, gingerly opening the bag, “this—er—this, or these are they.”

Professor Cox-Raythwaite bent his massive head and shoulders over the little bag and peered narrowly into its obscurity. Then he started.

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed. “A glass tumbler! And—is it a sandwich? Why, what on earth—”

He made as if to pull the glass out of the bag, and Mr. Tertius hastily seized the great hand in an agony of apprehension.

“My dear Cox-Raythwaite!” he said. “Pray don’t! Allow me—presently. When either of these objects is touched it must be in the most, quite the most, delicate fashion. Of course, I know you have a fairy-like gentleness of touch—but don’t touch these things yet. Let me explain. Shall we—suppose we sit down. Give me—yes—give me one of your cigars.”

The Professor, plainly mystified, silently pointed to a cigar box which stood on a corner of his desk, and took another look into the bag.

“A sandwich—and a glass!” he murmured reflectively. “Um! Well?” he continued, going back to his chair and dropping heavily into it. “And what’s it all about, Tertius? Some mystery, eh?”

Mr. Tertius drew a whiff or two of fragrant Havana before he replied. Then he too dropped into a chair and pulled it close to his friend’s desk.

“My dear Professor!” he said, in a low, thrilling voice, suggestive of vast importance, “I don’t know whether the secret of one of the most astounding crimes of our day may not lie in that innocent-looking bag—or, rather, in its present contents. Fact! But I’ll tell you—you must listen with your usual meticulous care for small details. The truth is—Jacob Herapath has, I am sure, been murdered!”

“Murdered!” exclaimed the Professor. “Herapath? Murder—eh? Now then, slow and steady, Tertius—leave out nothing!”

“Nothing!” repeated Mr. Tertius solemnly. “Nothing! You shall hear all. And this it is—point by point, from last night until—until the present moment. That is—so far as I know. There may have been developments—somewhere else. But this is what I know.”

When Mr. Tertius had finished a detailed and thorough-going account of the recent startling discovery and subsequent proceedings, to all of which Professor Cox-Raythwaite listened in profound silence, he rose, and tip-toeing towards the bag, motioned his friend to follow him.

“Now, my dear sir,” he said, whispering in his excitement as if he feared lest the very retorts and crucibles and pneumatic troughs should hear him, “Now, my dear sir, I wish you to see for yourself. First of all, the glass. I will take it out myself—I know exactly how I put it in. I take it out—thus! I place it on this vacant space—thus. Look for yourself, my dear fellow. What do you see?”

The Professor, watching Mr. Tertius’s movements with undisguised interest, took off his spectacles, picked up a reading-glass, bent down and carefully examined the tumbler.

“Yes,” he said, after a while, “yes, Tertius, I certainly see distinct thumb and finger-marks round the upper part of this glass. Oh, yes—no doubt of that!”

“Allow me to take one of your clean specimen slides,” observed Mr. Tertius, picking up a square of highly polished glass. “There! I place this slide here and upon it I deposit this sandwich. Now, my dear Cox-Raythwaite, favour me by examining the sandwich even more closely than you did the glass—if necessary.”

But the Professor shook his head. He clapped Mr. Tertius on the shoulder.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed. “Good! Pooh!—no need for care there. The thing’s as plain as—as I am. Good, Tertius, good!”

“You see it?” said Mr. Tertius, delightedly.

“See it! Good Lord, why, who could help see it?” answered the Professor. “Needs no great amount of care or perception to see that, as I said. Of course, I see it. Glad you did, too!”

“But we must take the greatest care of it,” urged Mr. Tertius. “The most particular care. That’s why I came to you. Now, what can we do? How preserve this sandwich—just as it is?”

“Nothing easier,” replied the Professor. “We’ll soon fix that. We’ll put it in such safety that it will still be a fresh thing if it remains untouched until London Bridge falls down from sheer decay.”

He moved off to another part of the laboratory, and presently returned with two objects, one oblong and shallow, the other deep and square, which on being set down before Mr. Tertius proved to be glass boxes, wonderfully and delicately made, with removable lids that fitted into perfectly adjusted grooves.

“There, my dear fellow,” he said. “Presently I will deposit the glass in that, and the sandwich in this. Then I shall adjust and seal the lids in such a fashion that no air can enter these little chambers. Then through those tiny orifices I shall extract whatever air is in them—to the most infinitesimal remnant of it. Then I shall seal those orifices—and there you are. Whoever wants to see that sandwich or that glass will find both a year hence—ten years hence—a century hence!—in precisely the same condition in which we now see them. And that reminds me,” he continued, as he turned away to his desk and picked up his pipe, “that reminds me, Tertius—what are you going to do about these things being seen? They’ll have to be seen, you know. Have you thought of the police—the detectives?”

“I have certainly thought of both,” replied Mr. Tertius. “But—I think not yet, in either case. I think one had better await the result of the inquest. Something may come out, you know.”

“Coroners and juries,” observed the Professor oracularly, “are good at finding the obvious. Whether they get at the mysteries and the secrets—”

“Just so—just so!” said Mr. Tertius. “I quite apprehend you. All the same, I think we will see what is put before the coroner. Now, what point suggests itself to you, Cox-Raythwaite?”

“One in particular,” answered the Professor. “Whatever medical evidence is called ought to show without reasonable doubt what time Herapath actually met his death.”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Tertius gravely. “If that’s once established—”

“Then, of course, your own investigation, or suggestion, or theory about that sandwich will be vastly simplified,” replied the Professor. “Meanwhile, you will no doubt take some means of observing—eh?”

“I shall use every means to observe,” said Mr. Tertius with a significant smile, which was almost a wink. “Of that you may be—dead certain!”

Then he left Professor Cox-Raythwaite to hermetically seal up the glass and the sandwich, and quitting the house, walked slowly back to Portman Square. As he turned out of Oxford Street into Orchard Street the newsboys suddenly came rushing along with the *Argus* special.

CHAPTER VI

THE TAXI-CAB DRIVER

Mr. Tertius bought a copy of the newspaper, and standing aside on the pavement, read with much interest and surprise the story which Triffitt's keen appetite for news and ready craftsmanship in writing had so quickly put together. Happening to glance up from the paper in the course of his reading, he observed that several other people were similarly employed. The truth was that Triffitt had headed his column: "Mysterious Death of Mr. Herapath, M.P. Is It Suicide or Murder?"—and as this also appeared in great staring letters on the contents bills which the newsboys were carrying about with them, and as Herapath had been well known in that district, there was a vast amount of interest aroused thereabouts by the news. Indeed, people were beginning to chatter on the sidewalks, and at the doors of the shops. And as Mr. Tertius turned away in the direction of Portman Square, he heard one excited bystander express a candid opinion.

"Suicide?" exclaimed this man, thrusting his paper into the hands of a companion. "Not much! Catch old Jacob Herapath at that game—he was a deuced deal too fond of life and money! Murder, sir—murder!—that's the ticket—murder!"

Mr. Tertius went slowly homeward, head bent and eyes moody. He let himself into the house; at the sound of his step in the hall Peggie Wynne looked out of the study. She retreated into it at sight of Mr. Tertius, and he followed her and closed the door. Looking narrowly at her, he saw that the girl had been shedding tears, and he laid his hand shyly yet sympathetically on her arm. "Yes," he said quietly, "I've been feeling like that ever since—since I heard about things. But I don't know—I suppose we shall feel it more when—when we realize it more, eh? Just now there's the other thing to think about, isn't there?"

Peggie mopped her eyes and looked at him. He was such a quiet, unobtrusive, inoffensive old gentleman that she wondered more than ever why Barthorpe had refused to admit him to the informal conference.

"What other thing?" she asked.

Mr. Tertius looked round the room—strangely empty now that Jacob Herapath's bustling and strenuous presence was no longer in it—and shook his head.

"There's one thought you mustn't permit yourself to harbour for a moment, my dear," he answered. "Don't even for a fraction of time allow yourself to think that my old friend took his own life! That's—impossible."

"I don't," said Peggie. "I never did think so. It is, as you say, impossible. I knew him too well to believe that. So, of course, it's—"

"Murder," assented Mr. Tertius. "Murder! I heard a man in the street voice the same opinion just now. Of course! It's the only opinion. Yet in the newspaper they're asking which it was. But I suppose the newspapers must be—sensational."

"You don't mean to say it's in the newspapers already?" exclaimed Peggie.

Mr. Tertius handed to her the *Argus* special, which he had carried crumpled up in his hand.

"Everybody's reading it out there in the streets," he said. "It's extraordinary, now, how these affairs seem to fascinate people. Yes—it's all there. That is, of course, as far as it's gone."

"How did the paper people come to know all this?" asked Peggie, glancing rapidly over Triffitt's leaded lines.

"I suppose they got it from the police," replied Mr. Tertius. "I don't know much about such matters, but I believe the police and the Press are in constant touch. Of course, it's well they should be—it attracts public notice. And in cases like this, public notice is an excellent thing. We shall have to hear—and find out—a good deal before we get at the truth in this case, my dear."

Peggie suddenly flung down the newspaper and looked inquiringly at the old man.

“Mr. Tertius,” she said abruptly, “why wouldn’t Barthorpe let you come into that room down there at the office this morning?”

Mr. Tertius did not answer this direct question at once. He walked away to the window and stood looking out into the square for a while. When at last he spoke his voice was singularly even and colourless. He might have been discussing a question on which it was impossible to feel any emotion.

“I really cannot positively say, my dear,” he replied. “I have known, of course, for some time that Mr. Barthorpe Herapath is not well disposed towards me. I have observed a certain coldness, a contempt, on his part. I have been aware that he has resented my presence in this house. And I suppose he felt that as I am not a member of the family, I had no right to sit in council with him and with you.”

“Not a member of the family!” exclaimed Peggie. “Why, you came here soon after I came—all those years ago!”

“I have dwelt under Jacob Herapath’s roof, in this house, fifteen years,” said Mr. Tertius, reflectively. “Fifteen years!—yes. Yes—Jacob and I were—good friends.”

As he spoke the last word a tear trickled from beneath Mr. Tertius’s spectacles and ran down into his beard, and Peggie, catching sight of it, impulsively jumped from her seat and kissed him affectionately.

“Never mind, Mr. Tertius!” she said, patting his shoulders. “You and I are friends, too, anyway. I don’t like Barthorpe when he’s like that—I hate that side of him. And anyhow, Barthorpe doesn’t matter—to me. I don’t suppose he matters to anything—except himself.”

Mr. Tertius gravely shook his head.

“Mr. Barthorpe Herapath may matter a great deal, my dear,” he remarked. “He is a very forceful person. I do not know what provision my poor friend may have made, but Barthorpe, you will remember, is his nephew, and, I believe, his only male relative. And in that case—”

Mr. Tertius was just then interrupted by the entrance of a footman who came in and looked inquiringly at Peggie.

“There’s a taxi-cab driver at the door, miss,” he announced. “He says he would like to speak to some one about the news in the paper about—about the master, miss.”

Peggie looked at Mr. Tertius. And Mr. Tertius quickly made a sign to the footman.

“Bring the man in at once,” he commanded. And, as if to lose no time, he followed the footman into the hall, and at once returned, conducting a young man who carried a copy of the *Argus* in his hand. “Yes?” he said, closing the door behind them and motioning the man to a seat. “You wish to tell us something! This lady is Miss Wynne—Mr. Herapath’s niece. You can tell us anything you think of importance. Do you know anything, then?”

The taxi-cab driver lifted the *Argus*.

“This here newspaper, sir,” he answered. “I’ve just been reading of it—about Mr. Herapath, sir.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Tertius gently. “Yes?”

“Well, sir—strikes me as how I drove him, sir, this morning,” answered the driver. “Gentleman of his appearance, anyway, sir—that’s a fact!”

Mr. Tertius glanced at Peggie, who was intently watching the caller.

“Ah!” he said, turning again to the driver, “you think you drove either Mr. Herapath or a gentleman of his appearance this morning. You did not know Mr. Herapath by sight, then?”

“No, sir. I’ve only just come into this part—came for the first time yesterday. But I’m as certain—”

“Just tell us all about it,” said Mr. Tertius, interrupting him. “Tell us in your own way. Everything, you know.”

“Ain’t so much to tell, sir,” responded the driver. “All the same, soon’s I’d seen this piece in the paper just now I said to myself, ‘I’d best go round to Portman Square and tell what I do know,’ I says.

And it's like this, sir—I come on this part yesterday—last night it was. My taxi belongs to a man as keeps half a dozen, and he put me on to night work, this end of Oxford Street. Well, it 'ud be just about a quarter to two this morning when a tall, well-built gentleman comes out of Orchard Street and made for my cab. I jumps down and opens the door for him. 'You know St. Mary Abbot's Church, Kensington?' he says as he got in. 'Drive me down there and pull up at the gate.' So, of course, I ran him down, and there he got out, give me five bob, and off he went. That's it, sir."

"And when he got out, which way did he go?" asked Mr. Tertius.

"West, sir—along the High Street, past the Town Hall," promptly answered the driver. "And there he crossed the road. I see him cross, because I stopped there a minute or two after he'd got out, tinkering at my engine."

"Can you tell us what this gentleman was like in appearance?" asked Mr. Tertius.

"Well, sir, not so much as regards his face," answered the driver. "I didn't look at him, not particular, in that way—besides, he was wearing one of them overcoats with a big fur collar to it, and he'd the collar turned high up about his neck and cheeks, and his hat—one of them slouched, soft hats, like so many gentlemen wears nowadays sir—was well pulled down. But from what bit I see of him, sir, I should say he was a fresh-coloured gentleman."

"Tall and well built, you say?" observed Mr. Tertius.

"Yes, sir—fine-made gentleman—pretty near six feet, I should have called him," replied the driver. "Little bit inclined to stoutness, like."

Mr. Tertius turned to Peggie.

"I believe you have some recent photographs of Mr. Herapath," he said. "You might fetch them and let me see if our friend here can recognize them. You didn't notice anything else about your fare?" he went on, after Peggie had left the room. "Anything that excited your attention, eh?"

The driver, after examining the pattern of the carpet for one minute and studying the ceiling for another, slowly shook his head. But he then suddenly started into something like activity.

"Yes, there was, sir, now I come to think of it!" he exclaimed. "I hadn't thought of it until now, but now you mention it, there was. I noticed he'd a particularly handsome diamond ring on his left hand—an extra fine one, too, it was."

"Ah!" said Mr. Tertius. "A very fine diamond ring on his left hand? Now, how did you come to see that?"

"He rested that hand on the side of the door as he was getting in, sir, and I noticed how it flashed," answered the driver. "There was a lamp right against us, you see, sir."

"I see," said Mr. Tertius. "He wasn't wearing gloves, then?"

"He hadn't a glove on that hand, sir. He was carrying some papers in it—a sort of little roll of papers."

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Tertius. "A diamond ring—and a little roll of papers." He got up from his chair and put a hand in his pocket. "Now, my friend," he went on, chinking some coins as he withdrew it, "you haven't told this to any one else, I suppose?"

"No, sir," answered the driver. "Came straight here, sir."

"There's a couple of sovereigns for your trouble," said Mr. Tertius, "and there'll be more for you if you do what I tell you to do. At present—that is, until I give you leave—don't say a word of this to a soul. Not even to the police—yet. In fact, not a word to them until I say you may. Keep your mouth shut until I tell you to open it—I shall know where to find you. If you want me, keep an eye open for me in the square outside, or in the street. When the young lady comes back with the photographs, don't mention the ring to her. This is a very queer business, and I don't want too much said just yet. Do as I tell you, and I'll see you're all right. Understand?"

The driver pocketed his sovereigns, and touched his forehead with a knowing look.

"All right, sir," he said. "I understand. Depend on me, sir—I shan't say a word without your leave."

Peggie came in just then with a half a dozen cabinet photographs in her hand. One by one she exhibited them to the driver.

“Do you recognize any of these?” she asked.

The driver shook his head doubtingly until Peggie showed him a half-length of her uncle in outdoor costume. Then his eyes lighted up.

“Couldn’t swear as to the features, miss,” he exclaimed. “But I’d take my ’davy about the coat and the hat! That’s what the gentleman was wearing as I drove this morning—take my Gospel oath on it.”

“He recognizes the furred overcoat and the soft hat,” murmured Mr. Tertius. “Very good—very good! All right, my man—we are much obliged to you.”

He went out into the hall with the driver, and had another word in secret with him before the footman opened the door. As the door closed Mr. Tertius turned slowly back to the study. And as he turned he muttered a word or two and smiled cynically.

“A diamond ring!” he said. “Jacob Herapath never wore a diamond ring in his life!”

CHAPTER VII

IS THERE A WILL?

When Triffitt hurried off with his precious budget of news Selwood lingered on the step of the office watching his retreating figure, and wondering about the new idea which the reporter had put into his mind. It was one of those ideas which instantly arouse all sorts of vague, sinister possibilities, but Selwood found himself unable to formulate anything definite out of any of them. Certainly, if Mr. Herapath died at, or before, twelve o'clock midnight, he could not have been in Portman Square at one o'clock in the morning! Yet, according to all the evidence, he had been there, in his own house, in his own study. His coachman had seen him in the act of entering the house; there was proof that he had eaten food and drunk liquor in the house. The doctor must have made a mistake—and yet, Selwood remembered, he had spoken very positively. But if he had not made a mistake?—what then? How could Jacob Herapath be lying dead in his office at Kensington and nibbling at a sandwich in Portman Square at one and the same hour? Clearly there was something wrong, something deeply mysterious, something—

At that point of his surmisings and questionings Selwood heard himself called by Barthorpe Herapath, and he turned to see that gentleman standing in the hall dangling a bunch of keys, which Selwood instantly recognized.

“We have just found these keys,” said Barthorpe. “You remember the inspector said he found no keys in my uncle’s pockets? We found these pushed away under some loose papers on the desk. It looks as if he’d put them on the desk when he sat down, and had displaced them when he fell out of his chair. Of course, they’re his—perhaps you recognize them?”

“Yes,” answered Selwood, abruptly. “They’re his.”

“I want you to come with me while I open his private safe,” continued Barthorpe. “At junctures like these there are always things that have got to be done. Now, did you ever hear my uncle speak of his will—whether he’d made one, and, if so, where he’d put it? Hear anything?”

“Nothing,” replied Selwood. “I never heard him mention such a thing.”

“Well, between ourselves,” said Barthorpe, “neither did I. I’ve done all his legal work for him for a great many years—ever since I began to practice, in fact—and so far as I know, he never made a will. More than once I’ve suggested that he should make one, but like most men who are in good health and spirits, he always put it off. However, we must look over his papers both here and at Portman Square.”

Selwood made no comment. He silently followed Barthorpe into the private room in which his late employer had so strangely met his death. The body had been removed by that time, and everything bore its usual aspect, save for the presence of the police inspector and the detective, who were peering about them in the mysterious fashion associated with their calling. The inspector was looking narrowly at the fastenings of the two windows and apparently debating the chances of entrance and exit from them; the detective, armed with a magnifying glass, was examining the edges of the door, the smooth backs of chairs, even the surface of the desk, presumably for finger-marks.

“I shan’t disturb you,” said Barthorpe, genially. “Mr. Selwood and I merely wish to investigate the contents of this safe. There’s no likelihood of finding what I’m particularly looking for in any of his drawers in that desk,” he continued, turning to Selwood. “I knew enough of his habits to know that anything that’s in there will be of a purely business nature—referring to the estate. If he did keep anything that’s personal here, it’ll be in that safe. Now, which is the key? Do you know?”

He handed the bunch of keys to Selwood. And Selwood, who was feeling strangely apathetic about the present proceedings, took them mechanically and glanced carelessly at them. Then he started.

“There’s a key missing!” he exclaimed, suddenly waking into interest. “I know these keys well enough—Mr. Herapath was constantly handing them to me. There ought to be six keys here—the key of this safe, the key of the safe at Portman Square, the latch-key for this office, the key of this room, the latch-key of the house, and a key of a safe at the Alpha Safe Deposit place. That one—the Safe Deposit key—is missing.”

Barthorpe knitted his forehead, and the two police officials paused in their tasks and drew near the desk at which Selwood was standing.

“Are you certain of that?” asked Barthorpe.

“Sure!” answered Selwood. “As I say, I’ve been handling these keys every day since I came to Mr. Herapath.”

“When did you handle them last?”

“Yesterday afternoon: not so very long before Mr. Herapath went down to the House. That was in Portman Square. He gave them to me to get some papers out of the safe there.”

“Was that Safe Deposit key there at that time?”

“They were all there—all six. I’m certain of it,” asserted Selwood. “This is the key of this safe,” he went on, selecting one.

“Open the safe, then,” said Barthorpe. “Another safe at the Alpha, eh?” he continued, musingly. “I never knew he had a safe there. Did you ever know him to use it?”

“I’ve been to it myself,” answered Selwood. “I took some documents there and deposited them, two days ago. There’s not very much in this safe,” he went on, throwing open the door. “It’s not long since I tidied it out—at his request. So far as I know, there are no private papers of any note there. He never made much use of this safe—in my presence, at any rate.”

“Well, we’ll see what there is, anyhow,” remarked Barthorpe. He began to examine the contents of the safe methodically, taking the various papers and documents out one by one and laying them in order on a small table which Selwood wheeled up to his side. Within twenty minutes he had gone through everything, and he began to put the papers back.

“No will there,” he murmured. “We’ll go on to Portman Square now, Mr. Selwood. After all, it’s much more likely that he’d keep his will in the safe at his own house—if he made one. But I don’t believe he ever made a will.”

Mr. Tertius and Peggie Wynne were still in the study when Barthorpe and Selwood drove up to the house. The driver of the taxi-cab had just gone away, and Mr. Tertius was discussing his information with Peggie. Hearing Barthorpe’s voice in the hall he gave her a warning glance.

“Quick!” he said hurriedly. “Attend to what I say! Not a word to your cousin about the man who has just left us. At present I don’t want Mr. Barthorpe Herapath to know what he told us. Be careful, my dear—not a word! I’ll tell you why later on—but at present, silence—strict silence!”

Barthorpe Herapath came bustling into the room, followed by Selwood, who, as it seemed to Peggie, looked utterly unwilling for whatever task might lay before him. At sight of Mr. Tertius, Barthorpe came to a sudden halt and frowned.

“I don’t want to discuss matters further, Mr. Tertius,” he said coldly. “I thought I had given you a hint already. My cousin and I have private matters to attend to, and I shall be obliged if you’ll withdraw. You’ve got private rooms of your own in this house, I believe—at any rate, until things are settled—and it will be best if you keep to them.”

Mr. Tertius, who had listened to this unmoved, turned to Peggie.

“Do you wish me to go away?” he asked quietly.

Barthorpe turned on him with an angry scowl.

“It’s not a question of what Miss Wynne wishes, but of what I order,” he burst out. “If you’ve any sense of fitness, you’ll know that until my uncle’s will is found and his wishes ascertained I’m master here, Mr. Tertius, and—”

"You're not my master, Barthorpe," exclaimed Peggie, with a sudden flash of spirit. "I know what my uncle's wishes were as regards Mr. Tertius, and I intend to respect them. I've always been mistress of this house since my uncle brought me to it, and I intend to be until I find I've no right to be. Mr. Tertius, you'll please to stop where you are!"

"I intend to," said Mr. Tertius, calmly. "I never had any other intention. Mr. Barthorpe Herapath, I believe, will hardly use force to compel me to leave the room."

Barthorpe bit his lips as he glanced from one to the other.

"Oh!" he said. "So that's how things are? Very good, Mr. Tertius. No, I shan't use physical force. But mind I don't use a little moral force—a slight modicum of that would be enough for you, I'm thinking!"

"Do I understand that you are using threatening language to me?" asked Mr. Tertius, mildly.

Barthorpe sneered, and turned to Selwood.

"We'll open this safe now," he said. "You know which is the key, I suppose," he went on, glaring at Peggie, who had retreated to the hearthrug and was evidently considerably put out by her cousin's behaviour. "I suppose you never heard my uncle mention a will? We've searched his private safe at the office and there's nothing there. Personally, I don't believe he ever made a will—I never heard of it. And I think he'd have told me if—"

Mr. Tertius broke in upon Barthorpe's opinions with a dry cough.

"It may save some unnecessary trouble if I speak at this juncture," he said. "There is a will."

Barthorpe's ruddy cheeks paled in spite of his determined effort to appear unconcerned. He twisted round on Mr. Tertius with a startled eye and twitching lips.

"You—you say there is a will!" he exclaimed. "You say—what do you know about it?"

"When it was made, where it was made, where it now is," answered Mr. Tertius.

"Where it now is!" repeated Barthorpe. "Where it now—is! And where is it, I should like to know?"

Mr. Tertius, who had gone up to Peggie, laid his hand reassuringly on her arm.

"Don't be afraid, my dear," he whispered. "Perhaps," he continued, glancing at Barthorpe, "I had better tell you when and where it was made. About six months ago—in this room. One day Mr. Herapath called me in here. He had his then secretary, Mr. Burchill, with him. He took a document out of a drawer, told us that it was his will, signed it in our joint presence, and we witnessed his signature in each other's presence. He then placed the will in an envelope, which he sealed. I do not know the terms of the will—but I know where the will is."

Barthorpe's voice sounded strangely husky as he got out one word:

"Where?"

Mr. Tertius took Peggie by the elbow and led her across the room to a recess in which stood an ancient oak bureau.

"This old desk," he said, "belonged, so he always told me, to Jacob's great-grandfather. There is a secret drawer in it. Here it is—concealed behind another drawer. You put this drawer out—so—and here is the secret one. And here—where I saw Jacob Herapath put it—is the will."

Barthorpe, who had followed these proceedings with almost irrepressible eagerness, thrust forward a shaking hand. But Mr. Tertius quietly handed the sealed envelope to Peggie.

"This envelope," he remarked, "is addressed to Miss Wynne."

Barthorpe made an effort and controlled himself.

"Open it!" he said hoarsely. "Open it!"

Peggie fumbled with the seal of the envelope and then, with a sudden impulse, passed it to Selwood.

"Mr. Selwood!" she exclaimed imploringly. "You—I can't. You open it, and—"

"And let him read it," added Mr. Tertius.

Selwood, whose nerves had been strung to a high pitch of excitement by this scene, hastily slit open the envelope, and drew out a folded sheet of foolscap paper. He saw at a glance that there was very little to read. His voice trembled slightly as he began a recital of the contents.

“This is the last will of me, Jacob Herapath, of 500, Portman Square, London, in the County of Middlesex. I give, devise, and bequeath everything of which I die possessed, whether in real or personal estate, absolutely to my niece, Margaret Wynne, now resident with me at the above address, and I appoint the said Margaret Wynne the sole executor of this my will. And I revoke all former wills and codicils. Dated this eighteenth day of April, 1912.

“Jacob Herapath.”

Selwood paused there, and a sudden silence fell—to be as suddenly broken by a sharp question from Barthorpe.

“The Witnesses?” he said. “The witnesses!”

Selwood glanced at the further paragraph which he had not thought it necessary to read.

“Oh, yes!” he said. “It’s witnessed all right.” And he went on reading.

“Signed by the testator in the presence of us both present at the same time who in his presence and in the presence of each other have hereunto set our names as witnesses.

“John Christopher Tertius, of 500, Portman Square, London: Gentleman.

“Frank Burchill, of 331, Upper Seymour Street, London: Secretary.”

As Selwood finished, he handed the will to Peggie, who in her turn hastily gave it to Mr. Tertius. For a moment nobody spoke. Then Barthorpe made a step forward.

“Let me see that!” he said, in a strangely quiet voice. “I don’t want to handle it—hold it up!”

For another moment he stood gazing steadily, intently, at the signatures at the foot of the document. Then, without a word or look, he twisted sharply on his heel, and walked swiftly out of the room and the house.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND WITNESS

If any close observer had walked away with Barthorpe Herapath from the house in Portman Square and had watched his face and noted his manner, that observer would have said that his companion looked like a man who was either lost in a profound day-dream or had just received a shock that had temporarily deprived him of all but the mechanical faculties. And in point of strict fact, Barthorpe was both stunned by the news he had just received and plunged into deep speculation by a certain feature of it. He hurried along, scarcely knowing where he was going—but he was thinking all the same. And suddenly he pulled himself up and found that he had turned down Portman Street and was already in the thick of Oxford Street's busy crowds. A passer-by into whom he jostled in his absent-mindedness snarled angrily, bidding him look where he was going—that pulled Barthorpe together and he collected his wits, asking himself what he wanted. The first thing that met his gaze on this recovery was a little Italian restaurant and he straightway made for the door.

"This is what I want," he muttered. "Some place in which to sit down and think calmly."

He slipped into a quiet corner as soon as he had entered the restaurant, summoned a waiter with a glance, and for a moment concentrated his attention on the bill of fare which the man put before him. That slight mental exercise restored him; when the waiter had taken his simple order and gone away, Barthorpe was fully himself again. And finding himself in as satisfactory a state of privacy as he could desire, with none to overlook or spy on him, he drew from an inner pocket a letter-case which he had taken from Jacob Herapath's private safe at the estate office and into which he had cast a hurried glance before leaving Kensington for Portman Square.

From this letter-case he now drew a letter, and as he unfolded it he muttered a word or two.

"Frank Burchill, 331, Upper Seymour Street," he said. "Um—but not Upper Seymour Street any longer, I think. Now let's see what it all is—what it all means I've got to find out."

The sheet of paper which he was handling was of the sort used by typists, but the letter itself was written by hand, and Barthorpe recognized the penmanship as that of his uncle's ex-secretary, Burchill, second witness to the will which had just been exhibited to him. Then he read, slowly and carefully, what Burchill had written to Jacob Herapath—written, evidently, only a few days previously. For there was the date, plain enough.

"35c, Calengrove Mansions,

"Maida Vale, W.

"*November 11th*, 19—.

"Dear Sir,

"I don't know that I am particularly surprised that you have up to now entirely ignored my letters of the 1st and the 5th instant. You probably think that I am not a person about whom any one need take much trouble; a mean cur, perhaps, who can do no more than snap at a mastiff's heels. I am very well aware (having had the benefit of a year's experience of your character and temperament) that you have very little respect for unmoneyed people and are contemptuous of their ability to interfere with the moneyed. But in that matter you are mistaken. And to put matters plainly, it will pay you far better to keep me a friend than to transform me into an enemy. Therefore I ask you to consider well and deeply the next sentence of this letter—which I will underline.

"I am in full possession of the secret which you have taken such vast pains to keep for fifteen years.

“I think you are quite competent to read my meaning, and I now confidently expect to hear that you will take pleasure in obliging me in the way which I indicated to you in my previous letters.

“Yours faithfully,

“Frank Burchill.”

Barthorpe read this communication three times, pausing over every sentence, seeking to read the meanings, the implications, the subtly veiled threat. When he folded the square sheet and replaced it in the letter-case he half spoke one word:

“Blackmail!”

Then, staring in apparent idleness about the little restaurant, with its gilt-framed mirrors, its red, plush-covered seats, its suggestion of foreign atmosphere and custom, he idly drummed the tips of his fingers on the table, and thought. Naturally, he thought of the writer of the letter. Of course, he said to himself, of course he knew Burchill. Burchill had been Jacob Herapath’s private secretary for rather more than a year, and it was now about six months since Jacob had got rid of him. He, Barthorpe, remembered very well why Jacob had quietly dismissed Burchill. One day Jacob had said to him, with a dry chuckle:

“I’m getting rid of that secretary of mine—it won’t do.”

“What won’t do?” Barthorpe had asked.

“He’s beginning to make eyes at Peggie,” Jacob had answered with another chuckle, “and though Peggie’s a girl of sense, that fellow’s too good looking to have about a house. I never ought to have had him. However—he goes.”

Barthorpe, as he ate the cutlets and sipped the half-bottle of claret which the waiter presently brought him, speculated on these facts and memories. He was not very sure about Burchill’s antecedents: he believed he was a young man of good credentials and high respectability—personally, he had always wondered why old Jacob Herapath, a practical business man, should have taken as a private secretary a fellow who looked, dressed, spoke, and behaved like a play-actor. As it all came within the scope of things he mused on Burchill and his personal appearance, calling up the ex-secretary’s graceful and slender figure, his oval, olive-tinted face, his large, dark, lustrous eyes, his dark, curling hair, his somewhat affected dress, his tall, wide-brimmed hats, his taper fingers, his big, wide-ended cravats. It had once amused Barthorpe—and many other people—to see Jacob Herapath and his secretary together; nevertheless, Jacob had always spoken of Burchill as being thoroughly capable, painstaking, thorough and diligent. His airs and graces Jacob put down as a young man’s affectations—yet there came the time when they suited Jacob no longer.

“I catch him talking too much to Peggie,” he had added, in that conversation of which Barthorpe was thinking. “Better get rid of him before they pass the too-much stage.”

So Burchill had gone, and Barthorpe had heard no more of him until now. But what he had heard now was a revelation. Burchill had witnessed a will of Jacob Herapath’s, which, if good and valid and the only will in existence, would leave him, Barthorpe, a ruined man. Burchill had written a letter to Jacob Herapath asking for some favour, reward, compensation, as the price of his silence about a secret. What secret? Barthorpe could not even guess at it—but Burchill had said, evidently knowing what he was talking about, that Jacob Herapath had taken vast pains to keep it for fifteen years.

By the time Barthorpe had finished his lunch he had come to the conclusion that there was only one thing for him to do. He must go straight to Calengrove Mansions and interview Mr. Frank Burchill. In one way or another he must make sure of him, or, rather—though it was really the same thing—sure of what he could tell. And on the way there he would make sure of something else—in order to do which he presently commissioned a taxi-cab and bade its driver go first to 331, Upper Seymour Street.

The domestic who answered Barthorpe's double knock at that house shook her head when he designedly asked for Mr. Frank Burchill. Nobody of that name, she said. But on being assured that there once had been a lodger of that name in residence there, she observed that she would fetch her mistress, and disappeared to return with an elderly lady who also shook her head at sight of the caller.

"Mr. Burchill left here some time ago," she said. "Nearly six months. I don't know where he is."

"Did he leave no address to which his letters were to be sent?" asked Barthorpe, affecting surprise.

"He said there'd be no letters coming—and there haven't been," answered the landlady. "And I've neither seen nor heard of him since he went."

Something in her manner suggested to Barthorpe that she had no desire to renew acquaintance with her former lodger. This sent Barthorpe away well satisfied. It was precisely what he wanted. The three people whom he had left in Portman Square in all probability knew no other address than this at which to seek for Burchill when he was wanted; they would seek him there eventually and get no news. Luckily for himself, Barthorpe knew where he was to be found, and he went straight off up Edgware Road to find him.

Calengrove Mansions proved to be a new block of flats in the dip of Maida Vale; 35c was a top flat in a wing which up to that stage of its existence did not appear to be much sought after by would-be tenants. It was some time before Barthorpe succeeded in getting an answer to his ring and knock; when at last the door was opened Burchill himself looked out upon him, yawning, and in a dressing-gown. And narrowly and searchingly as Barthorpe glanced at Burchill he could not see a trace of unusual surprise or embarrassment in his face. He looked just as any man might look who receives an unexpected caller.

"Oh!" he said. "Mr. Barthorpe Herapath! Come in—do. I'm a bit late—a good bit late, in fact. You see, I'm doing dramatic criticism now, and there was an important *première* last night at the Hyperion, and I had to do a full column, and so—but that doesn't interest you. Come in, pray."

He led the way into a small sitting-room, drew forward an easy-chair, and reaching down a box of cigarettes from the mantelpiece offered its contents to his visitor. Barthorpe, secretly wondering if all this unconcerned behaviour was natural or merely a bit of acting, took a cigarette and dropped into the chair.

"I don't suppose you thought of seeing me when you opened your door, Burchill?" he remarked good-humouredly, as he took the match which his host had struck for him. "Last man in the world you thought of seeing, eh?"

Burchill calmly lighted a cigarette for himself before he answered.

"Well," he said at last, "I don't know—you never know who's going to turn up. But to be candid, I didn't expect to see you, and I don't know why you've come."

Barthorpe slowly produced the letter-case from his pocket, took Burchill's letter from it, and held it before him.

"That's what brought me here," he said significantly. "That! Of course, you recognize it."

Burchill glanced at the letter without turning a hair. If he was merely acting, thought Barthorpe, he was doing it splendidly, and instead of writing dramatic criticism he ought to put on the sock and buskins himself. But somehow he began to believe that Burchill was not acting. And he was presently sure of it when Burchill laughed—contemptuously.

"Oh!" said Burchill. "Ah! So Mr. Jacob Herapath employs legal assistance—your assistance—in answering me? Foolish—foolish! Or, since that is, perhaps, too strong a word—indiscreet. Indiscreet—and unnecessary. Say so, pray, to Mr. Jacob Herapath."

Barthorpe remained silent a moment; then he put the letter back in the case and gave Burchill a sharp steady look.

"Good gracious, man!" he said quietly. "Are you pretending? Or—haven't you heard? Say—that—to Jacob Herapath? Jacob Herapath is dead!"

Burchill certainly started at that. What was more he dropped his cigarette, and when he straightened himself from picking it up his face was flushed a little.

“Upon my honour!” he exclaimed. “I didn’t know. Dead! When? It must have been sudden.”

“Sudden!” said Barthorpe. “Sudden? He was murdered!”

There was no doubt that this surprised Burchill. At any rate, he showed all the genuine signs of surprise. He stood staring at Barthorpe for a full minute of silence, and when he spoke his voice had lost something of its usual affectation.

“Murdered?” he said. “Murdered! Are you sure of that? You are? Good heavens!—no, I’ve heard nothing. But I’ve not been out since two o’clock this morning, so how could I hear? Murdered—” he broke off sharply and stared at his visitor. “And you came to me—why?”

“I came to ask you if you remember witnessing my uncle’s will,” replied Barthorpe promptly. “Give me a plain answer. Do you remember?”

CHAPTER IX

GREEK AGAINST GREEK

At this direct question, Burchill, who had been standing on the hearthrug since Barthorpe entered the room, turned away and took a seat in the corner of a lounge opposite his visitor. He gave Barthorpe a peculiarly searching look before he spoke, and as soon as he replied Barthorpe knew that here was a man who was not readily to be drawn.

“Oh,” said Burchill, “so I am supposed to have witnessed a will made by Mr. Jacob Herapath, am I?”

Barthorpe made a gesture of impatience.

“Don’t talk rot!” he said testily. “A man either knows that he witnessed a will or knows that he didn’t witness a will.”

“Excuse me,” returned Burchill, “I don’t agree with that proposition. I can imagine it quite possible that a man may think he has witnessed a will when he has done nothing of the sort. I can also imagine it just as possible that a man may have really witnessed a will when he thought he was signing some much less important document. Of course, you’re a lawyer, and I’m not. But I believe that what I have just said is much more in accordance with what we may call the truth of life than what you’ve said.”

“If a man sees another man sign a document and witnesses the signature together with a third man who had been present throughout, what would you say was being done?” asked Barthorpe, sneeringly. “Come, now?”

“I quite apprehend your meaning,” replied Burchill. “You put it very cleverly.”

“Then why don’t you answer my question?” demanded Barthorpe.

Burchill laughed softly.

“Why not answer mine?” he said. “However, I’ll ask it in another and more direct form. Have you seen my signature as witness to a will made by Jacob Herapath?”

“Yes,” replied Barthorpe.

“Are you sure it was my signature?” asked Burchill.

Barthorpe lifted his eyes and looked searchingly at his questioner. But Burchill’s face told him nothing. What was more, he was beginning to feel that he was not going to get anything out of Burchill that Burchill did not want to tell. He remained silent, and again Burchill laughed.

“You see,” he said, “I can suppose all sorts of things. I can suppose, for example, that there’s such a thing as forging a signature—two signatures—three signatures to a will—or, indeed, to any other document. Don’t you think that instead of asking me a direct question like this that you’d better wait until this will comes before the—is it the Probate Court?—and then let some of the legal gentlemen ask me if that—that!—is my signature? I’m only putting it to you, you know. But perhaps you’d like to tell me—all about it?” He paused, looking carefully at Barthorpe, and as Barthorpe made no immediate answer, he went on speaking in a lower, softer tone. “All about it,” he repeated insinuatingly. “Ah!”

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