

Agatha Christie



**THE MYSTERIOUS
MR. QUIN**

Agatha Christie

The Mysterious Mr Quin

«HarperCollins»

Christie A.

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A mysterious stranger appears at a New Year's Eve party, becoming the enigmatic sleuthing sidekick to the snobbish Mr Satterthwaite... So far, it had been a typical New Year's Eve house party. But Mr Satterthwaite – a keen observer of human nature – sensed that the real drama of the evening was yet to unfold. So it proved when a mysterious stranger arrived after midnight. Who was this Mr Quin? And why did his presence have such a pronounced effect on Eleanor Portal, the woman with the dyed-black hair?

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The Mysterious Mr Quin



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To Harlequin the Invisible

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Foreword

The Mr Quin stories were not written as a series. They were written one at a time at rare intervals. Mr Quin, I consider, is an epicure's taste.

A set of Dresden figures on my mother's mantelpiece fascinated me as a child and afterwards. They represented the Italian commedia dell'arte: Harlequin, Columbine, Pierrot, Pierette, Punchinello, and Punchinella. As a girl I wrote a series of poems about them, and I rather think that one of the poems, Harlequin's Song, was my first appearance in print. It was in the Poetry Review, and I got a guinea for it!

After I turned from poetry and ghost stories to crime, Harlequin finally reappeared; a figure invisible except when he chose, not quite human, yet concerned with the affairs of human beings and particularly of lovers. He is also the advocate for the dead.

Though each story about him is quite separate, yet the collection, written over a considerable period of years, outlines in the end of the story of Harlequin himself.

With Mr Quin there has been created little Mr Satterthwaite, Mr Quin's friend in this mortal world: Mr Satterthwaite, the gossip, the looker-on at life, the little man who without ever touching the depths of joy and sorrow himself, recognizes drama when he sees it, and is conscious that he has a part to play.

Of the Mr Quin stories, my favourite are: World's End, The Man from the Sea, and Harlequin's Lane.

Agatha Christie

Chapter 1

The Coming of Mr Quin

It was New Year's Eve.

The elder members of the house party at Royston were assembled in the big hall.

Mr Satterthwaite was glad that the young people had gone to bed. He was not fond of young people in herds. He thought them uninteresting and crude. They lacked subtlety and as life went on he had become increasingly fond of subtleties.

Mr Satterthwaite was sixty-two—a little bent, dried-up man with a peering face oddly elflike, and an intense and inordinate interest in other people's lives. All his life, so to speak, he had sat in the front row of the stalls watching various dramas of human nature unfold before him. His role had always been that of the onlooker. Only now, with old age holding him in its clutch, he found himself increasingly critical of the drama submitted to him. He demanded now something a little out of the common.

There was no doubt that he had a flair for these things. He knew instinctively when the elements of drama were at hand. Like a war horse, he sniffed the scent. Since his arrival at Royston this afternoon, that strange inner sense of his had stirred and bid him be ready. Something interesting was happening or going to happen.

The house party was not a large one. There was Tom Evesham, their genial good-humoured host, and his serious political wife who had been before her marriage Lady Laura Keene. There was Sir Richard Conway, soldier, traveller and sportsman, there were six or seven young people whose names Mr Satterthwaite had not grasped and there were the Portals.

It was the Portals who interested Mr Satterthwaite.

He had never met Alex Portal before, but he knew all about him. Had known his father and his grandfather. Alex Portal ran pretty true to type. He was a man of close on forty, fair-haired, and blue-eyed like all the Portals, fond of sport, good at games, devoid of imagination. Nothing unusual about Alex Portal. The usual good sound English stock.

But his wife was different. She was, Mr Satterthwaite knew, an Australian. Portal had been out in Australia two years ago, had met her out there and had married her and brought her home. She had never been to England previous to her marriage. All the same, she wasn't at all like any other Australian woman Mr Satterthwaite had met.

He observed her now, covertly. Interesting woman—very. So still, and yet so—alive. Alive! That was just it! Not exactly beautiful—no, you wouldn't call her beautiful, but there was a kind of calamitous magic about her that you couldn't miss—that no man could miss. The masculine side of Mr Satterthwaite spoke there, but the feminine side (for Mr Satterthwaite had a large share of femininity) was equally interested in another question. Why did Mrs Portal dye her hair?

No other man would probably have known that she dyed her hair, but Mr Satterthwaite knew. He knew all those things. And it puzzled him. Many dark women dye their hair blonde; he had never before come across a fair woman who dyed her hair black.

Everything about her intrigued him. In a queer intuitive way, he felt certain that she was either very happy or very unhappy—but he didn't know which, and it annoyed him not to know. Furthermore there was the curious effect she had upon her husband.

'He adores her,' said Mr Satterthwaite to himself, 'but sometimes he's—yes, afraid of her! That's very interesting. That's uncommonly interesting.'

Portal drank too much. That was certain. And he had a curious way of watching his wife when she wasn't looking.

‘Nerves,’ said Mr Satterthwaite. ‘The fellow’s all nerves. She knows it too, but she won’t do anything about it.’

He felt very curious about the pair of them. Something was going on that he couldn’t fathom.

He was roused from his meditations on the subject by the solemn chiming of the big clock in the corner.

‘Twelve o’clock,’ said Evesham. ‘New Year’s Day. Happy New Year—everybody. As a matter of fact that clock’s five minutes fast...I don’t know why the children wouldn’t wait up and see the New Year in?’

‘I don’t suppose for a minute they’ve really gone to bed,’ said his wife placidly. ‘They’re probably putting hairbrushes or something in our beds. That sort of thing does so amuse them. I can’t think why. We should never have been allowed to do such a thing in my young days.’

‘Autre temps, autres moeurs,’ said Conway, smiling.

He was a tall soldierly-looking man. Both he and Evesham were much of the same type—honest upright kindly men with no great pretensions to brains.

‘In my young days we all joined hands in a circle and sang “Auld Lang Syne”,’ continued Lady Laura. ‘“Should auld acquaintance be forgot”—so touching, I always think the words are.’

Evesham moved uneasily.

‘Oh! drop it, Laura,’ he muttered. ‘Not here.’

He strode across the wide hall where they were sitting, and switched on an extra light.

‘Very stupid of me,’ said Lady Laura, sotto voce. ‘Reminds him of poor Mr Capel, of course. My dear, is the fire too hot for you?’

Eleanor Portal made a brusque movement.

‘Thank you. I’ll move my chair back a little.’

What a lovely voice she had—one of those low murmuring echoing voices that stay in your memory, thought Mr Satterthwaite. Her face was in shadow now. What a pity.

From her place in the shadow she spoke again.

‘Mr—Capel?’

‘Yes. The man who originally owned this house. He shot himself you know—oh! very well, Tom dear, I won’t speak of it unless you like. It was a great shock for Tom, of course, because he was here when it happened. So were you, weren’t you, Sir Richard?’

‘Yes, Lady Laura.’

An old grandfather clock in the corner groaned, wheezed, snorted asthmatically, and then struck twelve.

‘Happy New Year, Tom,’ grunted Evesham perfunctorily.

Lady Laura wound up her knitting with some deliberation.

‘Well, we’ve seen the New Year in,’ she observed, and added, looking towards Mrs Portal, ‘What do you think, my dear?’

Eleanor Portal rose quickly to her feet.

‘Bed, by all means,’ she said lightly.

‘She’s very pale,’ thought Mr Satterthwaite, as he too rose, and began busying himself with candlesticks. ‘She’s not usually as pale as that.’

He lighted her candle and handed it to her with a funny little old-fashioned bow. She took it from him with a word of acknowledgment and went slowly up the stairs.

Suddenly a very odd impulse swept over Mr Satterthwaite. He wanted to go after her—to reassure her—he had the strangest feeling that she was in danger of some kind. The impulse died down, and he felt ashamed. He was getting nervy too.

She hadn’t looked at her husband as she went up the stairs, but now she turned her head over her shoulder and gave him a long searching glance which had a queer intensity in it. It affected Mr Satterthwaite very oddly.

He found himself saying goodnight to his hostess in quite a flustered manner.

‘I’m sure I hope it will be a happy New Year,’ Lady Laura was saying. ‘But the political situation seems to me to be fraught with grave uncertainty.’

‘I’m sure it is,’ said Mr Satterthwaite earnestly. ‘I’m sure it is.’

‘I only hope,’ continued Lady Laura, without the least change of manner, ‘that it will be a dark man who first crosses the threshold. You know that superstition, I suppose, Mr Satterthwaite? No? You surprise me. To bring luck to the house it must be a dark man who first steps over the door step on New Year’s Day. Dear me, I hope I shan’t find anything very unpleasant in my bed. I never trust the children. They have such very high spirits.’

Shaking her head in sad foreboding, Lady Laura moved majestically up the staircase.

With the departure of the women, chairs were pulled in closer round the blazing logs on the big open hearth.

‘Say when,’ said Evesham, hospitably, as he held up the whisky decanter.

When everybody had said when, the talk reverted to the subject which had been tabooed before.

‘You knew Derek Capel, didn’t you, Satterthwaite?’ asked Conway.

‘Slightly–yes.’

‘And you, Portal?’

‘No, I never met him.’

So fiercely and defensively did he say it, that Mr Satterthwaite looked up in surprise.

‘I always hate it when Laura brings up the subject,’ said Evesham slowly. ‘After the tragedy, you know, this place was sold to a big manufacturer fellow. He cleared out after a year–didn’t suit him or something. A lot of tommy rot was talked about the place being haunted of course, and it gave the house a bad name. Then, when Laura got me to stand for West Kiddleby, of course it meant living up in these parts, and it wasn’t so easy to find a suitable house. Royston was going cheap, and–well, in the end I bought it. Ghosts are all tommy rot, but all the same one doesn’t exactly care to be reminded that you’re living in a house where one of your own friends shot himself. Poor old Derek–we shall never know why he did it.’

‘He won’t be the first or the last fellow who’s shot himself without being able to give a reason,’ said Alex Portal heavily.

He rose and poured himself out another drink, splashing the whisky in with a liberal hand.

‘There’s something very wrong with him,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, to himself. ‘Very wrong indeed. I wish I knew what it was all about.’

‘Gad!’ said Conway. ‘Listen to the wind. It’s a wild night.’

‘A good night for ghosts to walk,’ said Portal with a reckless laugh. ‘All the devils in Hell are abroad tonight.’

‘According to Lady Laura, even the blackest of them would bring us luck,’ observed Conway, with a laugh. ‘Hark to that!’

The wind rose in another terrific wail, and as it died away there came three loud knocks on the big nailed doorway.

Everyone started.

‘Who on earth can that be at this time of night?’ cried Evesham.

They stared at each other.

‘I will open it,’ said Evesham. ‘The servants have gone to bed.’

He strode across to the door, fumbled a little over the heavy bars, and finally flung it open. An icy blast of wind came sweeping into the hall.

Framed in the doorway stood a man’s figure, tall and slender. To Mr Satterthwaite, watching, he appeared by some curious effect of the stained glass above the door, to be dressed in every colour of the rainbow. Then, as he stepped forward, he showed himself to be a thin dark man dressed in motoring clothes.

‘I must really apologize for this intrusion,’ said the stranger, in a pleasant level voice. ‘But my car broke down. Nothing much, my chauffeur is putting it to rights, but it will take half an hour or so, and it is so confoundedly cold outside—’

He broke off, and Evesham took up the thread quickly.

‘I should think it was. Come in and have a drink. We can’t give you any assistance about the car, can we?’

‘No, thanks. My man knows what to do. By the way, my name is Quin—Harley Quin.’

‘Sit down, Mr Quin,’ said Evesham. ‘Sir Richard Conway, Mr Satterthwaite. My name is Evesham.’

Mr Quin acknowledged the introductions, and dropped into the chair that Evesham had hospitably pulled forward. As he sat, some effect of the firelight threw a bar of shadow across his face which gave almost the impression of a mask.

Evesham threw a couple more logs on the fire.

‘A drink?’

‘Thanks.’

Evesham brought it to him and asked as he did so:

‘So you know this part of the world well, Mr Quin?’

‘I passed through it some years ago.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. This house belonged then to a man called Capel.’

‘Ah! yes,’ said Evesham. ‘Poor Derek Capel. You knew him?’

‘Yes, I knew him.’

Evesham’s manner underwent a faint change, almost imperceptible to one who had not studied the English character. Before, it had contained a subtle reserve, now this was laid aside. Mr Quin had known Derek Capel. He was the friend of a friend, and, as such, was vouched for and fully accredited.

‘Astounding affair, that,’ he said confidentially. ‘We were just talking about it. I can tell you, it went against the grain, buying this place. If there had been anything else suitable, but there wasn’t you see. I was in the house the night he shot himself—so was Conway, and upon my word, I’ve always expected his ghost to walk.’

‘A very inexplicable business,’ said Mr Quin, slowly and deliberately, and he paused with the air of an actor who has just spoken an important cue.

‘You may well say inexplicable,’ burst in Conway. ‘The thing’s a black mystery—always will be.’

‘I wonder,’ said Mr Quin, non-committally. ‘Yes, Sir Richard, you were saying?’

‘Astounding—that’s what it was. Here’s a man in the prime of life, gay, light-hearted, without a care in the world. Five or six old pals staying with him. Top of his spirits at dinner, full of plans for the future. And from the dinner table he goes straight upstairs to his room, takes a revolver from a drawer and shoots himself. Why? Nobody ever knew. Nobody ever will know.’

‘Isn’t that rather a sweeping statement, Sir Richard?’ asked Mr Quin, smiling.

Conway stared at him.

‘What d’you mean? I don’t understand.’

‘A problem is not necessarily unsolvable because it has remained unsolved.’

‘Oh! Come, man, if nothing came out at the time, it’s not likely to come out now—ten years afterwards?’

Mr Quin shook his head gently.

‘I disagree with you. The evidence of history is against you. The contemporary historian never writes such a true history as the historian of a later generation. It is a question of getting the true perspective, of seeing things in proportion. If you like to call it so, it is, like everything else, a question of relativity.’

Alex Portal leant forward, his face twitching painfully.

‘You are right, Mr Quin,’ he cried, ‘you are right. Time does not dispose of a question—it only presents it anew in a different guise.’

Evesham was smiling tolerantly.

‘Then you mean to say, Mr Quin, that if we were to hold, let us say, a Court of Inquiry tonight, into the circumstances of Derek Capel’s death, we are as likely to arrive at the truth as we should have been at the time?’

‘More likely, Mr Evesham. The personal equation has largely dropped out, and you will remember facts as facts without seeking to put your own interpretation upon them.’

Evesham frowned doubtfully.

‘One must have a starting point, of course,’ said Mr Quin in his quiet level voice. ‘A starting point is usually a theory. One of you must have a theory, I am sure. How about you, Sir Richard?’

Conway frowned thoughtfully.

‘Well, of course,’ he said apologetically, ‘we thought—naturally we all thought—that there must be a woman in it somewhere. It’s usually either that or money, isn’t it? And it certainly wasn’t money. No trouble of that description. So—what else could it have been?’

Mr Satterthwaite started. He had leant forward to contribute a small remark of his own and in the act of doing so, he had caught sight of a woman’s figure crouched against the balustrade of the gallery above. She was huddled down against it, invisible from everywhere but where he himself sat, and she was evidently listening with strained attention to what was going on below. So immovable was she that he hardly believed the evidence of his own eyes.

But he recognized the pattern of the dress easily enough—an old-world brocade. It was Eleanor Portal.

And suddenly all the events of the night seemed to fall into pattern—Mr Quin’s arrival, no fortuitous chance, but the appearance of an actor when his cue was given. There was a drama being played in the big hall at Royston tonight—a drama none the less real in that one of the actors was dead. Oh! yes, Derek Capel had a part in the play. Mr Satterthwaite was sure of that.

And, again suddenly, a new illumination came to him. This was Mr Quin’s doing. It was he who was staging the play—was giving the actors their cues. He was at the heart of the mystery pulling the strings, making the puppets work. He knew everything, even to the presence of the woman crouched against the woodwork upstairs. Yes, he knew.

Sitting well back in his chair, secure in his role of audience, Mr Satterthwaite watched the drama unfold before his eyes. Quietly and naturally, Mr Quin was pulling the strings, setting his puppets in motion.

‘A woman—yes,’ he murmured thoughtfully. ‘There was no mention of any woman at dinner?’

‘Why, of course,’ cried Evesham. ‘He announced his engagement. That’s just what made it seem so absolutely mad. Very bucked about it he was. Said it wasn’t to be announced just yet—but gave us the hint that he was in the running for the Benedick stakes.’

‘Of course we all guessed who the lady was,’ said Conway. ‘Marjorie Dilke. Nice girl.’

It seemed to be Mr Quin’s turn to speak, but he did not do so, and something about his silence seemed oddly provocative. It was as though he challenged the last statement. It had the effect of putting Conway in a defensive position.

‘Who else could it have been? Eh, Evesham?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Tom Evesham slowly. ‘What did he say exactly now? Something about being in the running for the Benedick stakes—that he couldn’t tell us the lady’s name till he had her permission—it wasn’t to be announced yet. He said, I remember, that he was a damned lucky fellow. That he wanted his two old friends to know that by that time next year he’d be a happy married man. Of course, we assumed it was Marjorie. They were great friends and he’d been about with her a lot.’

‘The only thing—’ began Conway and stopped.

‘What were you going to say, Dick?’

‘Well, I mean, it was odd in a way, if it were Marjorie, that the engagement shouldn’t be announced at once. I mean, why the secrecy? Sounds more as though it were a married woman—you know, someone whose husband had just died, or who was divorcing him.’

‘That’s true,’ said Evesham. ‘If that were the case, of course, the engagement couldn’t be announced at once. And you know, thinking back about it, I don’t believe he had been seeing much of Marjorie. All that was the year before. I remember thinking things seemed to have cooled off between them.’

‘Curious,’ said Mr Quin.

‘Yes—looked almost as though someone had come between them.’

‘Another woman,’ said Conway thoughtfully.

‘By jove,’ said Evesham. ‘You know, there was something almost indecently hilarious about old Derek that night. He looked almost drunk with happiness. And yet—I can’t quite explain what I mean—but he looked oddly defiant too.’

‘Like a man defying Fate,’ said Alex Portal heavily.

Was it of Derek Capel he was speaking—or was it of himself? Mr Satterthwaite, looking at him, inclined to the latter view. Yes, that was what Alex Portal represented—a man defying Fate.

His imagination, muddled by drink, responded suddenly to that note in the story which recalled his own secret preoccupation.

Mr Satterthwaite looked up. She was still there. Watching, listening—still motionless, frozen—like a dead woman.

‘Perfectly true,’ said Conway. ‘Capel was excited—curiously so. I’d describe him as a man who had staked heavily and won against well nigh overwhelming odds.’

‘Getting up courage, perhaps, for what he’s made up his mind to do?’ suggested Portal.

And as though moved by an association of ideas, he got up and helped himself to another drink.

‘Not a bit of it,’ said Evesham sharply. ‘I’d almost swear nothing of that kind was in his mind. Conway’s right. A successful gambler who has brought off a long shot and can hardly believe in his own good fortune. That was the attitude.’

Conway gave a gesture of discouragement.

‘And yet,’ he said. ‘Ten minutes later—’

They sat in silence. Evesham brought his hand down with a bang on the table.

‘Something must have happened in that ten minutes,’ he cried. ‘It must! But what? Let’s go over it carefully. We were all talking. In the middle of it Capel got up suddenly and left the room—’

‘Why?’ said Mr Quin.

The interruption seemed to disconcert Evesham.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I only said: Why?’ said Mr Quin.

Evesham frowned in an effort of memory.

‘It didn’t seem vital—at the time—Oh! of course—the Post. Don’t you remember that jangling bell, and how excited we were. We’d been snowed up for three days, remember. Biggest snowstorm for years and years. All the roads were impassable. No newspapers, no letters. Capel went out to see if something had come through at last, and got a great pile of things. Newspapers and letters. He opened the paper to see if there was any news, and then went upstairs with his letters. Three minutes afterwards, we heard a shot... Inexplicable—absolutely inexplicable.’

‘That’s not inexplicable,’ said Portal. ‘Of course the fellow got some unexpected news in a letter. Obvious, I should have said.’

‘Oh! Don’t think we missed anything so obvious as that. It was one of the Coroner’s first questions. But Capel never opened one of his letters. The whole pile lay unopened on his dressing-table.’

Portal looked crestfallen.

‘You’re sure he didn’t open just one of them? He might have destroyed it after reading it?’

‘No, I’m quite positive. Of course, that would have been the natural solution. No, every one of the letters was unopened. Nothing burnt—nothing torn up—There was no fire in the room.’

Portal shook his head.

‘Extraordinary.’

‘It was a ghastly business altogether,’ said Evesham in a low voice. ‘Conway and I went up when we heard the shot, and found him—It gave me a shock, I can tell you.’

‘Nothing to be done but telephone for the police, I suppose?’ said Mr Quin.

‘Royston wasn’t on the telephone then. I had it put in when I bought the place. No, luckily enough, the local constable happened to be in the kitchen at the time. One of the dogs—you remember poor old Rover, Conway?—had strayed the day before. A passing carter had found it half buried in a snowdrift and had taken it to the police station. They recognized it as Capel’s, and a dog he was particularly fond of, and the constable came up with it. He’d just arrived a minute before the shot was fired. It saved us some trouble.’

‘Gad, that was a snowstorm,’ said Conway reminiscently. ‘About this time of year, wasn’t it? Early January.’

‘February, I think. Let me see, we went abroad soon afterwards.’

‘I’m pretty sure it was January. My hunter Ned—you remember Ned?—lamed himself the end of January. That was just after this business.’

‘It must have been quite the end of January then. Funny how difficult it is to recall dates after a lapse of years.’

‘One of the most difficult things in the world,’ said Mr Quin, conversationally. ‘Unless you can find a landmark in some big public event—an assassination of a crowned head, or a big murder trial.’

‘Why, of course,’ cried Conway, ‘it was just before the Appleton case.’

‘Just after, wasn’t it?’

‘No, no, don’t you remember—Capel knew the Appletons—he’d stayed with the old man the previous Spring—just a week before he died. He was talking of him one night—what an old curmudgeon he was, and how awful it must have been for a young and beautiful woman like Mrs Appleton to be tied to him. There was no suspicion then that she had done away with him.’

‘By jove, you’re right. I remember reading the paragraph in the paper saying an exhumation order had been granted. It would have been that same day—I remember only seeing it with half my mind, you know, the other half wondering about poor old Derek lying dead upstairs.’

‘A common, but very curious phenomenon, that,’ observed Mr Quin. ‘In moments of great stress, the mind focuses itself upon some quite unimportant matter which is remembered long afterwards with the utmost fidelity, driven in, as it were, by the mental stress of the moment. It may be some quite irrelevant detail, like the pattern of a wallpaper, but it will never be forgotten.’

‘Rather extraordinary, your saying that, Mr Quin,’ said Conway. ‘Just as you were speaking, I suddenly felt myself back in Derek Capel’s room—with Derek lying dead on the floor—I saw as plainly as possible the big tree outside the window, and the shadow it threw upon the snow outside. Yes, the moonlight, the snow, and the shadow of the tree—I can see them again this minute. By Gad, I believe I could draw them, and yet I never realized I was looking at them at the time.’

‘His room was the big one over the porch, was it not?’ asked Mr Quin.

‘Yes, and the tree was the big beech, just at the angle of the drive.’

Mr Quin nodded, as though satisfied. Mr Satterthwaite was curiously thrilled. He was convinced that every word, every inflection of Mr Quin’s voice, was pregnant with purpose. He was driving at something—exactly what Mr Satterthwaite did not know, but he was quite convinced as to whose was the master hand.

There was a momentary pause, and then Evesham reverted to the preceding topic.

‘That Appleton case, I remember it very well now. What a sensation it made. She got off, didn’t she? Pretty woman, very fair—remarkably fair.’

Almost against his will, Mr Satterthwaite’s eyes sought the kneeling figure up above. Was it his fancy, or did he see it shrink a little as though at a blow. Did he see a hand slide upwards to the table cloth—and then pause.

There was a crash of falling glass. Alex Portal, helping himself to whisky, had let the decanter slip.

‘I say—sir, damn’ sorry. Can’t think what came over me.’

Evesham cut short his apologies.

‘Quite all right. Quite all right, my dear fellow. Curious—That smash reminded me. That’s what she did, didn’t she? Mrs Appleton? Smashed the port decanter?’

‘Yes. Old Appleton had his glass of port—only one—each night. The day after his death, one of the servants saw her take the decanter out and smash it deliberately. That set them talking, of course. They all knew she had been perfectly wretched with him. Rumour grew and grew, and in the end, months later, some of his relatives applied for an exhumation order. And sure enough, the old fellow had been poisoned. Arsenic, wasn’t it?’

‘No—strychnine, I think. It doesn’t much matter. Well, of course, there it was. Only one person was likely to have done it. Mrs Appleton stood her trial. She was acquitted more through lack of evidence against her than from any overwhelming proof of innocence. In other words, she was lucky. Yes, I don’t suppose there’s much doubt she did it right enough. What happened to her afterwards?’

‘Went out to Canada, I believe. Or was it Australia? She had an uncle or something of the sort out there who offered her a home. Best thing she could do under the circumstances.’

Mr Satterthwaite was fascinated by Alex Portal’s right hand as it clasped his glass. How tightly he was gripping it.

‘You’ll smash that in a minute or two, if you’re not careful,’ thought Mr Satterthwaite. ‘Dear me, how interesting all this is.’

Evesham rose and helped himself to a drink.

‘Well, we’re not much nearer to knowing why poor Derek Capel shot himself,’ he remarked. ‘The Court of Inquiry hasn’t been a great success, has it, Mr Quin?’

Mr Quin laughed...

It was a strange laugh, mocking—yet sad. It made everyone jump.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘You are still living in the past, Mr Evesham. You are still hampered by your preconceived notion. But I—the man from outside, the stranger passing by, see only—facts!’

‘Facts?’

‘Yes—facts.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Evesham.

‘I see a clear sequence of facts, outlined by yourselves but of which you have not seen the significance. Let us go back ten years and look at what we see—untrammelled by ideas or sentiment.’

Mr Quin had risen. He looked very tall. The fire leaped fitfully behind him. He spoke in a low compelling voice.

‘You are at dinner. Derek Capel announces his engagement. You think then it was to Marjorie Dilke. You are not so sure now. He has the restlessly excited manner of a man who has successfully defied Fate—who, in your own words, has pulled off a big coup against overwhelming odds. Then comes the clanging of the bell. He goes out to get the long overdue mail. He doesn’t open his letters, but you mention yourselves that he opened the paper to glance at the news. It is ten years ago—so we cannot know what the news was that day—a far-off earthquake, a near at hand political crisis? The only thing we do know about the contents of that paper is that it contained one small paragraph—a paragraph stating that the Home Office had given permission to exhume the body of Mr Appleton three days ago.’

‘What?’

Mr Quin went on.

‘Derek Capel goes up to his room, and there he sees something out of the window. Sir Richard Conway has told us that the curtain was not drawn across it and further that it gave on to the drive. What did he see? What could he have seen that forced him to take his life?’

‘What do you mean? What did he see?’

‘I think,’ said Mr Quin, ‘that he saw a policeman. A policeman who had come about a dog—But Derek Capel didn’t know that—he just saw—a policeman.’

There was a long silence—as though it took some time to drive the inference home.

‘My God!’ whispered Evesham at last. ‘You can’t mean that? Appleton? But he wasn’t there at the time Appleton died. The old man was alone with his wife—’

‘But he may have been there a week earlier. Strychnine is not very soluble unless it is in the form of hydrochloride. The greater part of it, put into the port, would be taken in the last glass, perhaps a week after he left.’

Portal sprung forward. His voice was hoarse, his eyes bloodshot.

‘Why did she break the decanter?’ he cried. ‘Why did she break the decanter? Tell me that!’

For the first time that evening, Mr Quin addressed himself to Mr Satterthwaite.

‘You have a wide experience of life, Mr Satterthwaite. Perhaps you can tell us that.’

Mr Satterthwaite’s voice trembled a little. His cue had come at last. He was to speak some of the most important lines in the play. He was an actor now—not a looker-on.

‘As I see it,’ he murmured modestly, ‘she—cared for Derek Capel. She was, I think, a good woman—and she had sent him away. When her husband—died, she suspected the truth. And so, to save the man she loved, she tried to destroy the evidence against him. Later, I think, he persuaded her that her suspicions were unfounded, and she consented to marry him. But even then, she hung back—women, I fancy, have a lot of instinct.’

Mr Satterthwaite had spoken his part.

Suddenly a long trembling sigh filled the air.

‘My God!’ cried Evesham, starting, ‘what was that?’

Mr Satterthwaite could have told him that it was Eleanor Portal in the gallery above, but he was too artistic to spoil a good effect.

Mr Quin was smiling.

‘My car will be ready by now. Thank you for your hospitality, Mr Evesham. I have, I hope, done something for my friend.’

They stared at him in blank amazement.

‘That aspect of the matter has not struck you? He loved this woman, you know. Loved her enough to commit murder for her sake. When retribution overtook him, as he mistakenly thought, he took his own life. But unwittingly, he left her to face the music.’

‘She was acquitted,’ muttered Evesham.

‘Because the case against her could not be proved. I fancy—it may be only a fancy—that she is still—facing the music.’

Portal had sunk into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

Quin turned to Satterthwaite.

‘Goodbye, Mr Satterthwaite. You are interested in the drama, are you not?’

Mr Satterthwaite nodded—surprised.

‘I must recommend the Harlequinade to your attention. It is dying out nowadays—but it repays attention, I assure you. Its symbolism is a little difficult to follow—but the immortals are always immortal, you know. I wish you all goodnight.’

They saw him stride out into the dark. As before, the coloured glass gave the effect of motley...

Mr Satterthwaite went upstairs. He went to draw down his window, for the air was cold. The figure of Mr Quin moved down the drive, and from a side door came a woman's figure, running. For a moment they spoke together, then she retraced her steps to the house. She passed just below the window, and Mr Satterthwaite was struck anew by the vitality of her face. She moved now like a woman in a happy dream.

'Eleanor!'

Alex Portal had joined her.

'Eleanor, forgive me—forgive me—You told me the truth, but God forgive me—I did not quite believe...'

Mr Satterthwaite was intensely interested in other people's affairs, but he was also a gentleman. It was borne in upon him that he must shut the window. He did so.

But he shut it very slowly.

He heard her voice, exquisite and indescribable.

'I know—I know. You have been in hell. So was I once. Loving—yet alternately believing and suspecting—thrusting aside one's doubts and having them spring up again with leering faces... I know, Alex, I know... But there is a worse hell than that, the hell I have lived in with you. I have seen your doubt—your fear of me... poisoning all our love. That man—that chance passer by, saved me. I could bear it no longer, you understand. Tonight—tonight I was going to kill myself... Alex... Alex...'

Chapter 2

The Shadow on the Glass

I

‘Listen to this,’ said Lady Cynthia Drage.

She read aloud from the journal she held in her hand.

‘Mr and Mrs Unkerton are entertaining a party at Greenways House this week. Amongst the guests are Lady Cynthia Drage, Mr and Mrs Richard Scott, Major Porter, D.S.O., Mrs Staverton, Captain Allenson and Mr Satterthwaite.’

‘It’s as well,’ remarked Lady Cynthia, casting away the paper, ‘to know what we’re in for. But they have made a mess of things!’

Her companion, that same Mr Satterthwaite whose name figured at the end of the list of guests, looked at her interrogatively. It had been said that if Mr Satterthwaite were found at the houses of those rich who had newly arrived, it was a sign either that the cooking was unusually good, or that a drama of human life was to be enacted there. Mr Satterthwaite was abnormally interested in the comedies and tragedies of his fellow men.

Lady Cynthia, who was a middle-aged woman, with a hard face and a liberal allowance of make-up, tapped him smartly with the newest thing in parasols which lay rakishly across her knee.

‘Don’t pretend you don’t understand me. You do perfectly. What’s more I believe you’re here on purpose to see the fur fly!’

Mr Satterthwaite protested vigorously. He didn’t know what she was talking about.

‘I’m talking about Richard Scott. Do you pretend you’ve never heard of him?’

‘No, of course not. He’s the Big Game man, isn’t he?’

‘That’s it—“Great big bears and tigers, etc.” as the song says. Of course, he’s a great lion himself just now—the Unkertons would naturally be mad to get hold of him—and the bride! A charming child—oh! quite a charming child—but so naïve, only twenty, you know, and he must be at least forty-five.’

‘Mrs Scott seems to be very charming,’ said Mr Satterthwaite sedately.

‘Yes, poor child.’

‘Why poor child?’

Lady Cynthia cast him a look of reproach, and went on approaching the point at issue in her own manner.

‘Porter’s all right—a dull dog, though—another of these African hunters, all sunburnt and silent. Second fiddle to Richard Scott and always has been—life-long friends and all that sort of thing. When I come to think of it, I believe they were together on that trip—’

‘Which trip?’

‘The trip. The Mrs Staverton trip. You’ll be saying next you’ve never heard of Mrs Staverton.’

‘I have heard of Mrs Staverton,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, almost with unwillingness.

And he and Lady Cynthia exchanged glances.

‘It’s so exactly like the Unkertons,’ wailed the latter, ‘they are absolutely hopeless—socially, I mean. The idea of asking those two together! Of course they’d heard that Mrs Staverton was a sportswoman and a traveller and all that, and about her book. People like the Unkertons don’t even begin to realize what pitfalls there are! I’ve been running them, myself, for the last year, and what I’ve gone through nobody knows. One has to be constantly at their elbow. “Don’t do that! You can’t do this!” Thank goodness, I’m through with it now. Not that we’ve quarrelled—oh! no, I never quarrel, but somebody else can take on the job. As I’ve always said, I can put up with vulgarity, but I can’t stand meanness!’

After this somewhat cryptic utterance, Lady Cynthia was silent for a moment, ruminating on the Unkertons' meanness as displayed to herself.

'If I'd still been running the show for them,' she went on presently, 'I should have said quite firmly and plainly: "You can't ask Mrs Staverton with the Richard Scotts. She and he were once—"'

She stopped eloquently.

'But were they once?' asked Mr Satterthwaite.

'My dear man! It's well known. That trip into the Interior! I'm surprised the woman had the face to accept the invitation.'

'Perhaps she didn't know the others were coming?' suggested Mr Satterthwaite.

'Perhaps she did. That's far more likely.'

'You think—?'

'She's what I call a dangerous woman—the sort of woman who'd stick at nothing. I wouldn't be in Richard Scott's shoes this week-end.'

'And his wife knows nothing, you think?'

'I'm certain of it. But I suppose some kind friend will enlighten her sooner or later. Here's Jimmy Allenson. Such a nice boy. He saved my life in Egypt last winter—I was so bored, you know. Hullo, Jimmy, come here at once.'

Captain Allenson obeyed, dropping down on the turf beside her. He was a handsome young fellow of thirty, with white teeth and an infectious smile.

'I'm glad somebody wants me,' he observed. 'The Scotts are doing the turtle dove stunt, two required, not three, Porter's devouring the Field, and I've been in mortal danger of being entertained by my hostess.'

He laughed. Lady Cynthia laughed with him. Mr Satterthwaite, who was in some ways a little old-fashioned, so much so that he seldom made fun of his host and hostess until after he had left their house, remained grave.

'Poor Jimmy,' said Lady Cynthia.

'Mine not to reason why, mine but to swiftly fly. I had a narrow escape of being told the family ghost story.'

'An Unkerton ghost,' said Lady Cynthia. 'How screaming.'

'Not an Unkerton ghost,' said Mr Satterthwaite. 'A Greenways ghost. They bought it with the house.'

'Of course,' said Lady Cynthia. 'I remember now. But it doesn't clank chains, does it? It's only something to do with a window.'

Jimmy Allenson looked up quickly.

'A window?'

But for the moment Mr Satterthwaite did not answer. He was looking over Jimmy's head at three figures approaching from the direction of the house—a slim girl between two men. There was a superficial resemblance between the men, both were tall and dark with bronzed faces and quick eyes, but looked at more closely the resemblance vanished. Richard Scott, hunter and explorer, was a man of extraordinarily vivid personality. He had a manner that radiated magnetism. John Porter, his friend and fellow hunter, was a man of squarer build with an impassive, rather wooden face, and very thoughtful grey eyes. He was a quiet man, content always to play second fiddle to his friend.

And between these two walked Moira Scott who, until three months ago, had been Moira O'Connell. A slender figure, big wistful brown eyes, and golden red hair that stood out round her small face like a saint's halo.

'That child mustn't be hurt,' said Mr Satterthwaite to himself. 'It would be abominable that a child like that should be hurt.'

Lady Cynthia greeted the newcomers with a wave of the latest thing in parasols.

'Sit down, and don't interrupt,' she said. 'Mr Satterthwaite is telling us a ghost story.'

'I love ghost stories,' said Moira Scott. She dropped down on the grass.

'The ghost of Greenways House?' asked Richard Scott.

'Yes. You know about it?'

Scott nodded.

'I used to stay here in the old days,' he explained. 'Before the Elliots had to sell up. The Watching Cavalier, that's it, isn't it?'

'The Watching Cavalier,' said his wife softly. 'I like that. It sounds interesting. Please go on.'

But Mr Satterthwaite seemed somewhat loath to do so. He assured her that it was not really interesting at all.

'Now you've done it, Satterthwaite,' said Richard Scott sardonically. 'That hint of reluctance clinches it.'

In response to popular clamour, Mr Satterthwaite was forced to speak.

'It's really very uninteresting,' he said apologetically. 'I believe the original story centres round a Cavalier ancestor of the Elliot family. His wife had a Roundhead lover. The husband was killed by the lover in an upstairs room, and the guilty pair fled, but as they fled, they looked back at the house, and saw the face of the dead husband at the window, watching them. That is the legend, but the ghost story is only concerned with a pane of glass in the window of that particular room on which is an irregular stain, almost imperceptible from near at hand, but which from far away certainly gives the effect of a man's face looking out.'

'Which window is it?' asked Mrs Scott, looking up at the house.

'You can't see it from here,' said Mr Satterthwaite. 'It is round the other side but was boarded up from the inside some years ago—forty years ago, I think, to be accurate.'

'What did they do that for? I thought you said the ghost didn't walk.'

'It doesn't,' Mr Satterthwaite assured her. 'I suppose—well, I suppose there grew to be a superstitious feeling about it, that's all.'

Then, deftly enough, he succeeded in turning the conversation. Jimmy Allenson was perfectly ready to hold forth upon Egyptian sand diviners.

'Frauds, most of them. Ready enough to tell you vague things about the past, but won't commit themselves as to the future.'

'I should have thought it was usually the other way about,' remarked John Porter.

'It's illegal to tell the future in this country, isn't it?' said Richard Scott. 'Moira persuaded a gypsy into telling her fortune, but the woman gave her her shilling back, and said there was nothing doing, or words to that effect.'

'Perhaps she saw something so frightful that she didn't like to tell it me,' said Moira.

'Don't pile on the agony, Mrs Scott,' said Allenson lightly. 'I, for one, refuse to believe that an unlucky fate is hanging over you.'

'I wonder,' thought Mr Satterthwaite to himself. 'I wonder...'

Then he looked up sharply. Two women were coming from the house, a short stout woman with black hair, inappropriately dressed in jade green, and a tall slim figure in creamy white. The first woman was his hostess, Mrs Unkerton, the second was a woman he had often heard of, but never met.

'Here's Mrs Staverton,' announced Mrs Unkerton, in a tone of great satisfaction. 'All friends here, I think.'

'These people have an uncanny gift for saying just the most awful things they can,' murmured Lady Cynthia, but Mr Satterthwaite was not listening. He was watching Mrs Staverton.

Very easy—very natural. Her careless 'Hullo! Richard, ages since we met. Sorry I couldn't come to the wedding. Is this your wife? You must be tired of meeting all your husband's weather-beaten old friends.' Moira's response—suitable, rather shy. The elder woman's swift appraising glance that went on lightly to another old friend.

‘Hullo, John!’ The same easy tone, but with a subtle difference in it—a warming quality that had been absent before.

And then that sudden smile. It transformed her. Lady Cynthia had been quite right. A dangerous woman! Very fair—deep blue eyes—not the traditional colouring of the siren—a face almost haggard in repose. A woman with a slow dragging voice and a sudden dazzling smile.

Iris Staverton sat down. She became naturally and inevitably the centre of the group. So you felt it would always be.

Mr Satterthwaite was recalled from his thoughts by Major Porter’s suggesting a stroll. Mr Satterthwaite, who was not as a general rule much given to strolling, acquiesced. The two men sauntered off together across the lawn.

‘Very interesting story of yours just now,’ said the Major.

‘I will show you the window,’ said Mr Satterthwaite.

He led the way round to the west side of the house. Here there was a small formal garden—the Privy Garden, it was always called, and there was some point in the name, for it was surrounded by high holly hedges, and even the entrance to it ran zigzag between the same high prickly hedges.

Once inside, it was very charming with an old-world charm of formal flower beds, flagged paths and a low stone seat, exquisitely carved. When they had reached the centre of the garden, Mr Satterthwaite turned and pointed up at the house. The length of Greenways House ran north and south. In this narrow west wall there was only one window, a window on the first floor, almost overgrown by ivy, with grimy panes, and which you could just see was boarded up on the inside.

‘There you are,’ said Mr Satterthwaite.

Craning his neck a little, Porter looked up.

‘H’m I can see a kind of discolouration on one of the panes, nothing more.’

‘We’re too near,’ said Mr Satterthwaite. ‘There’s a clearing higher up in the woods where you get a really good view.’

He led the way out of the Privy Garden, and turning sharply to the left, struck into the woods. A certain enthusiasm of showmanship possessed him, and he hardly noticed that the man at his side was absent and inattentive.

‘They had, of course, to make another window, when they boarded up this one,’ he explained. ‘The new one faces south overlooking the lawn where we were sitting just now. I rather fancy the Scotts have the room in question. That is why I didn’t want to pursue the subject. Mrs Scott might have felt nervous if she had realized that she was sleeping in what might be called the haunted room.’

‘Yes. I see,’ said Porter.

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him sharply, and realized that the other had not heard a word of what he was saying.

‘Very interesting,’ said Porter. He slashed with his stick at some tall foxgloves, and, frowning, he said: ‘She ought not to have come. She ought never to have come.’

People often spoke after this fashion to Mr Satterthwaite. He seemed to matter so little, to have so negative a personality. He was merely a glorified listener.

‘No,’ said Porter, ‘she ought never to have come.’

Mr Satterthwaite knew instinctively that it was not of Mrs Scott he spoke.

‘You think not?’ he asked.

Porter shook his head as though in foreboding.

‘I was on that trip,’ he said abruptly. ‘The three of us went. Scott and I and Iris. She’s a wonderful woman—and a damned fine shot.’ He paused. ‘What made them ask her?’ he finished abruptly.

Mr Satterthwaite shrugged his shoulders.

‘Ignorance,’ he said.

‘There’s going to be trouble,’ said the other. ‘We must stand by—and do what we can.’

‘But surely Mrs Staverton—?’

‘I’m talking of Scott.’ He paused. ‘You see—there’s Mrs Scott to consider.’

Mr Satterthwaite had been considering her all along, but he did not think it necessary to say so, since the other man had so clearly forgotten her until this minute.

‘How did Scott meet his wife?’ he asked.

‘Last winter, in Cairo. A quick business. They were engaged in three weeks, and married in six.’

‘She seems to me very charming.’

‘She is, no doubt about it. And he adores her—but that will make no difference.’ And again Major Porter repeated to himself, using the pronoun that meant to him one person only: ‘Hang it all, she shouldn’t have come...’

Just then they stepped out upon a high grassy knoll at some little distance from the house. With again something of the pride of the showman, Mr Satterthwaite stretched out his arm.

‘Look,’ he said.

It was fast growing dusk. The window could still be plainly descried, and apparently pressed against one of the panes was a man’s face surmounted by a plumed Cavalier’s hat.

‘Very curious,’ said Porter. ‘Really very curious. What will happen when that pane of glass gets smashed some day?’

Mr Satterthwaite smiled.

‘That is one of the most interesting parts of the story. That pane of glass has been replaced to my certain knowledge at least eleven times, perhaps oftener. The last time was twelve years ago when the then owner of the house determined to destroy the myth. But it’s always the same. The stain reappears—not all at once, the discolouration spreads gradually. It takes a month or two as a rule.’

For the first time, Porter showed signs of real interest. He gave a sudden quick shiver.

‘Damned odd, these things. No accounting for them. What’s the real reason of having the room boarded up inside?’

‘Well, an idea got about that the room was—unlucky. The Eveshams were in it just before the divorce. Then Stanley and his wife were staying here, and had that room when he ran off with his chorus girl.’

Porter raised his eyebrows.

‘I see. Danger, not to life, but to morals.’

‘And now,’ thought Mr Satterthwaite to himself, ‘the Scotts have it...I wonder...’

They retraced their steps in silence to the house. Walking almost noiselessly on the soft turf, each absorbed in his own thoughts, they became unwittingly eavesdroppers.

They were rounding the corner of the holly hedge when they heard Iris Staverton’s voice raised fierce and clear from the depths of the Privy Garden.

‘You shall be sorry—sorry—for this!’

Scott’s voice answered low and uncertain, so that the words could not be distinguished, and then the woman’s voice rose again, speaking words that they were to remember later.

‘Jealousy—it drives one to the Devil—it is the Devil! It can drive one to black murder. Be careful, Richard, for God’s sake, be careful!’

And then on that she had come out of the Privy Garden ahead of them, and on round the corner of the house without seeing them, walking swiftly, almost running, like a woman hag-ridden and pursued.

Mr Satterthwaite thought again of Lady Cynthia’s words. A dangerous woman. For the first time, he had a premonition of tragedy, coming swift and inexorable, not to be gainsaid.

Yet that evening he felt ashamed of his fears. Everything seemed normal and pleasant. Mrs Staverton, with her easy insouciance, showed no sign of strain. Moira Scott was her charming, unaffected self. The two women appeared to be getting on very well. Richard Scott himself seemed to be in boisterous spirits.

The most worried looking person was stout Mrs Unkerton. She confided at length in Mr Satterthwaite.

‘Think it silly or not, as you like, there’s something giving me the creeps. And I’ll tell you frankly, I’ve sent for the glazier unbeknown to Ned.’

‘The glazier?’

‘To put a new pane of glass in that window. It’s all very well. Ned’s proud of it—says it gives the house a tone. I don’t like it. I tell you flat. We’ll have a nice plain modern pane of glass, with no nasty stories attached to it.’

‘You forget,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, ‘or perhaps you don’t know. The stain comes back.’

‘That’s as it may be,’ said Mrs Unkerton. ‘All I can say is if it does, it’s against nature!’

Mr Satterthwaite raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

‘And what if it does?’ pursued Mrs Unkerton defiantly. ‘We’re not so bankrupt, Ned and I, that we can’t afford a new pane of glass every month—or every week if need be for the matter of that.’

Mr Satterthwaite did not meet the challenge. He had seen too many things crumple and fall before the power of money to believe that even a Cavalier ghost could put up a successful fight. Nevertheless, he was interested by Mrs Unkerton’s manifest uneasiness. Even she was not exempt from the tension in the atmosphere—only she attributed it to an attenuated ghost story, not to the clash of personalities amongst her guests.

Mr Satterthwaite was fated to hear yet another scrap of conversation which threw light upon the situation. He was going up the wide staircase to bed, John Porter and Mrs Staverton were sitting together in an alcove of the big hall. She was speaking with a faint irritation in her golden voice.

‘I hadn’t the least idea the Scotts were going to be here. I daresay, if I had known, I shouldn’t have come, but I can assure you, my dear John, that now I am here, I’m not going to run away—’

Mr Satterthwaite passed on up the staircase out of earshot. He thought to himself: ‘I wonder now—How much of that is true? Did she know? I wonder—what’s going to come of it?’

He shook his head.

In the clear light of the morning he felt that he had perhaps been a little melodramatic in his imaginings of the evening before. A moment of strain—yes, certainly—inevitable under the circumstances—but nothing more. People adjusted themselves. His fancy that some great catastrophe was pending was nerves—pure nerves—or possibly liver. Yes, that was it, liver. He was due at Carlsbad in another fortnight.

On his own account he proposed a little stroll that evening just as it was growing dusk. He suggested to Major Porter that they should go up to the clearing and see if Mrs Unkerton had been as good as her word, and had a new pane of glass put in. To himself, he said: ‘Exercise, that’s what I need. Exercise.’

The two men walked slowly through the words. Porter, as usual, was taciturn.

‘I can’t help feeling,’ said Mr Satterthwaite loquaciously, ‘that we were a little foolish in our imaginings yesterday. Expecting—er—trouble, you know. After all, people have to behave themselves—swallow their feelings and that sort of thing.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Porter. After a minute or two he added: ‘Civilized people.’

‘You mean—?’

‘People who’ve lived outside civilization a good deal sometimes go back. Revert. Whatever you call it.’

They emerged on to the grassy knoll. Mr Satterthwaite was breathing rather fast. He never enjoyed going up hill.

He looked towards the window. The face was still there, more life-like than ever.

‘Our hostess has repented, I see.’

Porter threw it only a cursory glance.

‘Unkerton cut up rough, I expect,’ he said indifferently. ‘He’s the sort of man who is willing to be proud of another family’s ghost, and who isn’t going to run the risk of having it driven away when he’s paid spot cash for it.’

He was silent a minute or two, staring, not at the house, but at the thick undergrowth by which they were surrounded.

‘Has it ever struck you,’ he said, ‘that civilization’s damned dangerous?’

‘Dangerous?’ Such a revolutionary remark shocked Mr Satterthwaite to the core.

‘Yes. There are no safety valves, you see.’

He turned abruptly, and they descended the path by which they had come.

‘I really am quite at a loss to understand you,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, pattering along with nimble steps to keep up with the other’s strides. ‘Reasonable people—’

Porter laughed. A short disconcerting laugh. Then he looked at the correct little gentleman by his side.

‘You think it’s all bunkum on my part, Mr Satterthwaite? But there are people, you know, who can tell you when a storm’s coming. They feel it beforehand in the air. And other people can foretell trouble. There’s trouble coming now, Mr Satterthwaite, big trouble. It may come any minute. It may—’

He stopped dead, clutching Mr Satterthwaite’s arm. And in that tense minute of silence it came—the sound of two shots and following them a cry—a cry in a woman’s voice.

‘My god!’ cried Porter, ‘it’s come.’

He raced down the path, Mr Satterthwaite panting behind him. In a minute they came out on to the lawn, close by the hedge of the Privy Garden. At the same time, Richard Scott and Mr Unkerton came round the opposite corner of the house. They halted, facing each other, to left and right of the entrance to the Privy Garden.

‘It—it came from in there,’ said Unkerton, pointing with a flabby hand.

‘We must see,’ said Porter. He led the way into the enclosure. As he rounded the last bend of the holly hedge, he stopped dead. Mr Satterthwaite peered over his shoulder. A loud cry burst from Richard Scott.

There were three people in the Privy Garden. Two of them lay on the grass near the stone seat, a man and a woman. The third was Mrs Staverton. She was standing quite close to them by the holly hedge, gazing with horror-stricken eyes, and holding something in her right hand.

‘Iris,’ cried Porter. ‘Iris. For God’s sake! What’s that you’ve got in your hand?’

She looked down at it then—with a kind of wonder, an unbelievable indifference.

‘It’s a pistol,’ she said wonderingly. And then—after what seemed an interminable time, but was in reality only a few seconds, ‘I—picked it up.’

Mr Satterthwaite had gone forward to where Unkerton and Scott were kneeling on the turf.

‘A doctor,’ the latter was murmuring. ‘We must have a doctor.’

But it was too late for any doctor. Jimmy Allenson who had complained that the sand diviners hedged about the future, and Moira Scott to whom the gypsy had returned a shilling, lay there in the last great stillness.

It was Richard Scott who completed a brief examination. The iron nerve of the man showed in this crisis. After the first cry of agony, he was himself again.

He laid his wife gently down again.

‘Shot from behind,’ he said briefly. ‘The bullet has passed right through her.’

Then he handled Jimmy Allenson. The wound here was in the breast and the bullet was lodged in the body.

John Porter came towards them.

‘Nothing should be touched,’ he said sternly. ‘The police must see it all exactly as it is now.’

‘The police,’ said Richard Scott. His eyes lit up with a sudden flame as he looked at the woman standing by the holly hedge. He made a step in that direction, but at the same time John Porter also

moved, so as to bar his way. For a moment it seemed as though there was a duel of eyes between the two friends.

Porter very quietly shook his head.

‘No, Richard,’ he said. ‘It looks like it—but you’re wrong.’

Richard Scott spoke with difficulty, moistening his dry lips.

‘Then why—has she got that in her hand?’

And again Iris Staverton said in the same lifeless tone: ‘I—picked it up.’

‘The police,’ said Unkerton rising. ‘We must send for the police—at once. You will telephone perhaps, Scott? Someone should stay here—yes, I am sure someone should stay here.’

In his quiet gentlemanly manner, Mr Satterthwaite offered to do so. His host accepted the offer with manifest relief.

‘The ladies,’ he explained. ‘I must break the news to the ladies, Lady Cynthia and my dear wife.’

Mr Satterthwaite stayed in the Privy Garden looking down on the body of that which had once been Moira Scott.

‘Poor child,’ he said to himself. ‘Poor child...’

He quoted to himself the tag about the evil men do living after them. For was not Richard Scott in a way responsible for his innocent wife’s death? They would hang Iris Staverton, he supposed, not that he liked to think of it, but was not it at least a part of the blame he laid at the man’s door? The evil that men do—

And the girl, the innocent girl, had paid.

He looked down at her with a very deep pity. Her small face, so white and wistful, a half smile on the lips still. The ruffled golden hair, the delicate ear. There was a spot of blood on the lobe of it. With an inner feeling of being something of a detective, Mr Satterthwaite deduced an ear-ring, torn away in her fall. He craned his neck forward. Yes, he was right, there was a small pearl drop hanging from the other ear.

Poor child, poor child.

II

‘And now, sir,’ said Inspector Winkfield.

They were in the library. The Inspector, a shrewd-looking forceful man of forty odd, was concluding his investigations. He had questioned most of the guests, and had by now pretty well made up his mind on the case. He was listening to what Major Porter and Mr Satterthwaite had to say. Mr Unkerton sat heavily in a chair, staring with protruding eyes at the opposite wall.

‘As I understand it, gentlemen,’ said the Inspector, ‘you’d been for a walk. You were returning to the house by a path that winds round the left side of what they call the Privy Garden. Is that correct?’

‘Quite correct, Inspector.’

‘You heard two shots, and a woman’s scream?’

‘Yes.’

‘You then ran as fast as you could, emerged from the woods and made your way to the entrance of the Privy Garden. If anybody had left that garden, they could only do so by one entrance. The holly bushes are impassable. If anyone had run out of the garden and turned to the right, he would have been met by Mr Unkerton and Mr Scott. If he had turned to the left, he could not have done so without being seen by you. Is that right?’

‘That is so,’ said Major Porter. His face was very white.

‘That seems to settle it,’ said the Inspector. ‘Mr and Mrs Unkerton and Lady Cynthia Drage were sitting on the lawn, Mr Scott was in the Billiard Room which opens on to that lawn. At ten minutes past six, Mrs Staverton came out of the house, spoke a word or two to those sitting there, and went round the corner of the house towards the Privy Garden. Two minutes later the shots were heard. Mr Scott rushed out of the house and together with Mr Unkerton ran to the Privy Garden. At the same time you and Mr—er—Satterthwaite arrived from the opposite direction. Mrs Staverton was

in the Privy Garden with a pistol in her hand from which two shots had been fired. As I see it, she shot the lady first from behind as she was sitting on the bench. Then Captain Allenson sprang up and went for her, and she shot him in the chest as he came towards her. I understand that there had been a—er—previous attachment between her and Mr Richard Scott—

‘That’s a damned lie,’ said Porter.

His voice rang out hoarse and defiant. The Inspector said nothing, merely shook his head.

‘What is her own story?’ asked Mr Satterthwaite.

‘She says that she went into the Privy Garden to be quiet for a little. Just before she rounded the last hedge, she heard the shots. She came round the corner, saw the pistol lying at her feet, and picked it up. No one passed her, and she saw no one in the garden but the two victims.’ The Inspector gave an eloquent pause. ‘That’s what she says—and although I cautioned her, she insisted on making a statement.’

‘If she said that,’ said Major Porter, and his face was still deadly white, ‘she was speaking the truth. I know Iris Staverton.’

‘Well, sir,’ said the Inspector, ‘there’ll be plenty of time to go into all that later. In the meantime, I’ve got my duty to do.’

With an abrupt movement, Porter turned to Mr Satterthwaite.

‘You! Can’t you help? Can’t you do something?’

Mr Satterthwaite could not help feeling immensely flattered. He had been appealed to, he, most insignificant of men, and by a man like John Porter.

He was just about to flutter out a regretful reply, when the butler, Thompson, entered, with a card upon a salver which he took to his master with an apologetic cough. Mr Unkerton was still sitting huddled up in a chair, taking no part in the proceedings.

‘I told the gentleman you would probably not be able to see him, sir,’ said Thompson. ‘But he insisted that he had an appointment and that it was most urgent.’

Unkerton took the card.

‘Mr Harley Quin,’ he read. ‘I remember, he was to see me about a picture. I did make an appointment, but as things are—’

But Mr Satterthwaite had started forward.

‘Mr Harley Quin, did you say?’ he cried. ‘How extraordinary, how very extraordinary. Major Porter, you asked me if I could help you. I think I can. This Mr Quin is a friend—or I should say, an acquaintance of mine. He is a most remarkable man.’

‘One of these amateur solvers of crime, I suppose,’ remarked the Inspector disparagingly.

‘No,’ said Mr Satterthwaite. ‘He is not that kind of man at all. But he has a power—an almost uncanny power—of showing you what you have seen with your own eyes, of making clear to you what you have heard with your own ears. Let us, at any rate, give him an outline of the case, and hear what he has to say.’

Mr Unkerton glanced at the Inspector, who merely snorted and looked at the ceiling. Then the former gave a short nod to Thompson, who left the room and returned ushering in a tall, slim stranger.

‘Mr Unkerton?’ The stranger shook him by the hand. ‘I am sorry to intrude upon you at such a time. We must leave our little picture chat until another time. Ah! my friend, Mr Satterthwaite. Still as fond of the drama as ever?’

A faint smile played for a minute round the stranger’s lips as he said these last words.

‘Mr Quin,’ said Mr Satterthwaite impressively, ‘we have a drama here, we are in the midst of one, I should like, and my friend, Major Porter, would like, to have your opinion of it.’

Mr Quin sat down. The red-shaded lamp threw a broad band of coloured light over the checked pattern of his overcoat, and left his face in shadow almost as though he wore a mask.

Succinctly, Mr Satterthwaite recited the main points of the tragedy. Then he paused, breathlessly awaiting the words of the oracle.

But Mr Quin merely shook his head.

‘A sad story,’ he said. ‘A very sad and shocking tragedy. The lack of motive makes it very intriguing.’

Unkerton stared at him.

‘You don’t understand,’ he said. ‘Mrs Staverton was heard to threaten Richard Scott. She was bitterly jealous of his wife. Jealousy—’

‘I agree,’ said Mr Quin. ‘Jealousy or Demoniac Possession. It’s all the same. But you misunderstand me. I was not referring to the murder of Mrs Scott, but to that of Captain Allenson.’

‘You’re right,’ cried Porter, springing forward. ‘There’s a flaw there. If Iris had ever contemplated shooting Mrs Scott, she’d have got her alone somewhere. No, we’re on the wrong tack. And I think I see another solution. Only those three people went into the Privy Garden. That is indisputable and I don’t intend to dispute it. But I reconstruct the tragedy differently. Supposing Jimmy Allenson shoots first Mrs Scott and then himself. That’s possible, isn’t it? He flings the pistol from him as he falls—Mrs Staverton finds it lying on the ground and picks it up just as she said. How’s that?’

The Inspector shook his head.

‘Won’t wash, Major Porter. If Captain Allenson had fired that shot close to his body, the cloth would have been singed.’

‘He might have held the pistol at arm’s length.’

‘Why should he? No sense in it. Besides, there’s no motive.’

‘Might have gone off his head suddenly,’ muttered Porter, but without any great conviction. He fell to silence again, suddenly rousing himself to say defiantly: ‘Well, Mr Quin?’

The latter shook his head.

‘I’m not a magician. I’m not even a criminologist. But I will tell you one thing—I believe in the value of impressions. In any time of crisis, there is always one moment that stands out from all the others, one picture that remains when all else has faded. Mr Satterthwaite is, I think, likely to have been the most unprejudiced observer of those present. Will you cast your mind back, Mr Satterthwaite, and tell us the moment that made the strongest impression on you? Was it when you heard the shots? Was it when you first saw the dead bodies? Was it when you first observed the pistol in Mrs Staverton’s hand? Clear your mind of any preconceived standard of values, and tell us.’

Mr Satterthwaite fixed his eyes on Mr Quin’s face, rather as a schoolboy might repeat a lesson of which he was not sure.

‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘It was not any of those. The moment that I shall always remember was when I stood alone by the bodies—afterwards—looking down on Mrs Scott. She was lying on her side. Her hair was ruffled. There was a spot of blood on her little ear.’

And instantly, as he said it, he felt that he had said a terrific, a significant thing.

‘Blood on her ear? Yes, I remember,’ said Unkerton slowly.

‘Her ear-ring must have been torn out when she fell,’ explained Mr Satterthwaite.

But it sounded a little improbable as he said it.

‘She was lying on her left side,’ said Porter. ‘I suppose it was that ear?’

‘No,’ said Mr Satterthwaite quickly. ‘It was her right ear.’

The Inspector coughed.

‘I found this in the grass,’ he vouchsafed. He held up a loop of gold wire.

‘But my God, man,’ cried Porter. ‘The thing can’t have been wrenched to pieces by a mere fall. It’s more as though it had been shot away by a bullet.’

‘So it was,’ cried Mr Satterthwaite. ‘It was a bullet. It must have been.’

‘There were only two shots,’ said the Inspector. ‘A shot can’t have grazed her ear and shot her in the back as well. And if one shot carried away the ear-ring, and the second shot killed her, it can’t

have killed Captain Allenson as well—not unless he was standing close in front of her—very close—facing her as it might be. Oh! no, not even then, unless, that is—

‘Unless she was in his arms, you were going to say,’ said Mr Quin, with a queer little smile. ‘Well, why not?’

Everyone stared at each other. The idea was so vitally strange to them—Allenson and Mrs Scott—Mr Unkerton voiced the same feeling.

‘But they hardly knew each other,’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully. ‘They might have known each other better than we thought. Lady Cynthia said he saved her from being bored in Egypt last winter, and you’—he turned to Porter—‘you told me that Richard Scott met his wife in Cairo last winter. They might have known each other very well indeed out there...’

‘They didn’t seem to be together much,’ said Unkerton.

‘No—they rather avoided each other. It was almost unnatural, now I come to think of it—’

They all looked at Mr Quin, as if a little startled at the conclusions at which they had arrived so unexpectedly.

Mr Quin rose to his feet.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘what Mr Satterthwaite’s impression has done for us.’ He turned to Unkerton. ‘It is your turn now.’

‘Eh? I don’t understand you.’

‘You were very thoughtful when I came into this room. I should like to know exactly what thought it was that obsessed you. Never mind if it has nothing to do with the tragedy. Never mind if it seems to you—superstitious—’ Mr Unkerton started, ever so slightly. ‘Tell us.’

‘I don’t mind telling you,’ said Unkerton. ‘Though it’s nothing to do with the business, and you’ll probably laugh at me into the bargain. I was wishing that my Missus had left well alone and not replaced that pane of glass in the haunted window. I feel as though doing that has maybe brought a curse upon us.’

He was unable to understand why the two men opposite him stared so.

‘But she hasn’t replaced it yet,’ said Mr Satterthwaite at last.

‘Yes, she has. Man came first thing this morning.’

‘My God!’ said Porter, ‘I begin to understand. That room, it’s panelled, I supposed, not papered?’

‘Yes, but what does that—?’

But Porter had swung out of the room. The others followed him. He went straight upstairs to the Scotts’ bedroom. It was a charming room, panelled in cream with two windows facing south. Porter felt with his hands along the panels on the western wall.

‘There’s a spring somewhere—must be. Ah!’ There was a click, and a section of the panelling rolled back. It disclosed the grimy panes of the haunted window. One pane of glass was clean and new. Porter stooped quickly and picked up something. He held it out on the palm of his hand. It was a fragment of ostrich feather. Then he looked at Mr Quin. Mr Quin nodded.

He went across to the hat cupboard in the bedroom. There were several hats in it—the dead woman’s hats. He took out one with a large brim and curling feathers—an elaborate Ascot hat.

Mr Quin began speaking in a gentle, reflective voice.

‘Let us suppose,’ said Mr Quin, ‘a man who is by nature intensely jealous. A man who has stayed here in bygone years and knows the secret of the spring in the panelling. To amuse himself he opens it one day, and looks out over the Privy Garden. There, secure as they think from being overlooked, he sees his wife and another man. There can be no possible doubt in his mind as to the relations between them. He is mad with rage. What shall he do? An idea comes to him. He goes to the cupboard and puts on the hat with the brim and feathers. It is growing dusk, and he remembers the story of the stain on the glass. Anyone looking up at the window will see as they think the Watching Cavalier. Thus secure he watches them, and at the moment they are clasped in each other’s arms, he

shoots. He is a good shot—a wonderful shot. As they fall, he fires once more—that shot carries away the ear-ring. He flings the pistol out of the window into the Privy Garden, rushes downstairs and out through the billiard room.’

Porter took a step towards him.

‘But he let her be accused!’ he cried. ‘He stood by and let her be accused. Why? Why?’

‘I think I know why,’ said Mr Quin. ‘I should guess—it’s only guess-work on my part, mind—that Richard Scott was once madly in love with Iris Staverton—so madly that even meeting her years afterwards stirred up the embers of jealousy again. I should say that Iris Staverton once fancied that she might love him, that she went on a hunting trip with him and another—and that she came back in love with the better man.’

‘The better man,’ muttered Porter, dazed. ‘You mean—?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Quin, with a faint smile. ‘I mean you.’ He paused a minute, and then said: ‘If I were you—I should go to her now.’

‘I will,’ said Porter.

He turned and left the room.

Chapter 3

At the ‘Bells and Motley’

Mr Satterthwaite was annoyed. Altogether it had been an unfortunate day. They had started late, there had been two punctures already, finally they had taken the wrong turning and lost themselves amidst the wilds of Salisbury Plain. Now it was close on eight o'clock, they were still a matter of forty miles from Marswick Manor whither they were bound, and a third puncture had supervened to render matters still more trying.

Mr Satterthwaite, looking like some small bird whose plumage had been ruffled, walked up and down in front of the village garage whilst his chauffeur conversed in hoarse undertones with the local expert.

‘Half an hour at least,’ said that worthy pronouncing judgment.

‘And lucky at that,’ supplemented Masters, the chauffeur. ‘More like three quarters if you ask me.’

‘What is this—place, anyway?’ demanded Mr Satterthwaite fretfully. Being a little gentleman considerate of the feelings of others, he substituted the word ‘place’ for ‘God-forsaken hole’ which had first risen to his lips.

‘Kirtlington Mallet.’

Mr Satterthwaite was not much wiser, and yet a faint familiarity seemed to linger round the name. He looked round him disparagingly. Kirtlington Mallet seemed to consist of one straggling street, the garage and the post office on one side of it balanced by three indeterminate shops on the other side. Farther down the road, however, Mr Satterthwaite perceived something that creaked and swung in the wind, and his spirits rose ever so slightly.

‘There’s an Inn here, I see,’ he remarked.

“‘Bells and Motley”,’ said the garage man. ‘That’s it—yonder.’

‘If I might make a suggestion, sir,’ said Masters, ‘why not try it? They would be able to give you some sort of a meal, no doubt—not, of course, what you are accustomed to.’ He paused apologetically, for Mr Satterthwaite was accustomed to the best cooking of continental chefs, and had in his own service a cordon bleu to whom he paid a fabulous salary.

‘We shan’t be able to take the road again for another three quarters of an hour, sir. I’m sure of that. And it’s already past eight o’clock. You could ring up Sir George Foster, sir, from the Inn, and acquaint him with the cause of our delay.’

‘You seem to think you can arrange everything, Masters,’ said Mr Satterthwaite snappily.

Masters, who did think so, maintained a respectful silence.

Mr Satterthwaite, in spite of his earnest wish to discountenance any suggestion that might possibly be made to him—he was in that mood—nevertheless looked down the road towards the creaking Inn sign with faint inward approval. He was a man of birdlike appetite, an epicure, but even such men can be hungry.

‘The “Bells and Motley”,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘That’s an odd name for an Inn. I don’t know that I ever heard it before.’

‘There’s odd folks come to it by all account,’ said the local man.

He was bending over the wheel, and his voice came muffled and indistinct.

‘Odd folks?’ queried Mr Satterthwaite. ‘Now what do you mean by that?’

The other hardly seemed to know what he meant.

‘Folks that come and go. That kind,’ he said vaguely.

Mr Satterthwaite reflected that people who come to an Inn are almost of necessity those who ‘come and go’. The definition seemed to him to lack precision. But nevertheless his curiosity was

stimulated. Somehow or other he had got to put in three quarters of an hour. The 'Bells and Motley' would be as good as anywhere else.

With his usual small mincing steps he walked away down the road. From afar there came a rumble of thunder. The mechanic looked up and spoke to Masters.

'There's a storm coming over. Thought I could feel it in the air.'

'Crikey,' said Masters. 'And forty miles to go.'

'Ah!' said the other. 'There's no need to be hurrying over this job. You'll not be wanting to take the road till the storm's passed over. That little boss of yours doesn't look as though he'd relish being out in thunder and lightning.'

'Hope they'll do him well at that place,' muttered the chauffeur. 'I'll be pushing along there for a bite myself presently.'

'Billy Jones is all right,' said the garage man. 'Keeps a good table.'

Mr William Jones, a big burly man of fifty and landlord of the 'Bells and Motley', was at this minute beaming ingratiatingly down on little Mr Satterthwaite.

'Can do you a nice steak, sir—and fried potatoes, and as good a cheese as any gentleman could wish for. This way, sir, in the coffee-room. We're not very full at present, the last of the fishing gentlemen just gone. A little later we'll be full again for the hunting. Only one gentleman here at present, name of Quin—'

Mr Satterthwaite stopped dead.

'Quin?' he said excitedly. 'Did you say Quin?'

'That's the name, sir. Friend of yours perhaps?'

'Yes, indeed. Oh! yes, most certainly.' Twittering with excitement, Mr Satterthwaite hardly realized that the world might contain more than one man of that name. He had no doubts at all. In an odd way, the information fitted in with what the man at the garage had said. 'Folks that come and go...' a very apt description of Mr Quin. And the name of the Inn, too, seemed a peculiarly fitting and appropriate one.

'Dear me, dear me,' said Mr Satterthwaite. 'What a very odd thing. That we should meet like this! Mr Harley Quin, is it not?'

'That's right, sir. This is the coffee-room, sir. Ah! here is the gentleman.'

Tall, dark, smiling, the familiar figure of Mr Quin rose from the table at which he was sitting, and the well-remembered voice spoke.

'Ah! Mr Satterthwaite, we meet again. An unexpected meeting!'

Mr Satterthwaite was shaking him warmly by the hand.

'Delighted. Delighted, I'm sure. A lucky breakdown for me. My car, you know. And you are staying here? For long?'

'One night only.'

'Then I am indeed fortunate.'

Mr Satterthwaite sat down opposite his friend with a little sigh of satisfaction, and regarded the dark, smiling face opposite him with a pleasurable expectancy.

The other man shook his head gently.

'I assure you,' he said, 'that I have not a bowl of goldfish or a rabbit to produce from my sleeve.'

'Too bad,' cried Mr Satterthwaite, a little taken aback. 'Yes, I must confess—I do rather adopt that attitude towards you. A man of magic. Ha, ha. That is how I regard you. A man of magic.'

'And yet,' said Mr Quin, 'it is you who do the conjuring tricks, not I.'

'Ah!' said Mr Satterthwaite eagerly. 'But I cannot do them without you. I lack—shall we say—inspiration?'

Mr Quin smilingly shook his head.

'That is too big a word. I speak the cue, that is all.'

The landlord came in at that minute with bread and a slab of yellow butter. As he set the things on the table there was a vivid flash of lightning, and a clap of thunder almost overhead.

‘A wild night, gentlemen.’

‘On such a night—’ began Mr Satterthwaite, and stopped.

‘Funny now,’ said the landlord, unconscious of the question, ‘if those weren’t just the words I was going to use myself. It was just such a night as this when Captain Harwell brought his bride home, the very day before he disappeared for ever.’

‘Ah!’ cried Mr Satterthwaite suddenly. ‘Of course!’

He had got the clue. He knew now why the name Kirtlington Mallet was familiar. Three months before he had read every detail of the astonishing disappearance of Captain Richard Harwell. Like other newspaper readers all over Great Britain he had puzzled over the details of the disappearance, and, also like every other Briton, had evolved his own theories.

‘Of course,’ he repeated. ‘It was at Kirtlington Mallet it happened.’

‘It was at this house he stayed for the hunting last winter,’ said the landlord. ‘Oh! I knew him well. A main handsome young gentleman and not one that you’d think had a care on his mind. He was done away with—that’s my belief. Many’s the time I’ve seen them come riding home together—he and Miss Le Couteau, and all the village saying there’d be a match come of it—and sure enough, so it did. A very beautiful young lady, and well thought of, for all she was a Canadian and a stranger. Ah! there’s some dark mystery there. We’ll never know the rights of it. It broke her heart, it did, sure enough. You’ve heard as she’s sold the place up and gone abroad, couldn’t bear to go on here with everyone staring and pointing after her—through no fault of her own, poor young dear! A black mystery, that’s what it is.’

He shook his head, then suddenly recollecting his duties, hurried from the room.

‘A black mystery,’ said Mr Quin softly.

His voice was provocative in Mr Satterthwaite’s ears.

‘Are you pretending that we can solve the mystery where Scotland Yard failed?’ he asked sharply.

The other made a characteristic gesture.

‘Why not? Time has passed. Three months. That makes a difference.’

‘That is a curious idea of yours,’ said Mr Satterthwaite slowly. ‘That one sees things better afterwards than at the time.’

‘The longer the time that has elapsed, the more things fall into proportion. One sees them in their true relationship to one another.’

There was a silence which lasted for some minutes.

‘I am not sure,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, in a hesitating voice, ‘that I remember the facts clearly by now.’

‘I think you do,’ said Mr Quin quietly.

It was all the encouragement Mr Satterthwaite needed. His general role in life was that of listener and looker-on. Only in the company of Mr Quin was the position reversed. There Mr Quin was the appreciative listener, and Mr Satterthwaite took the centre of the stage.

‘It was just over a year ago,’ he said, ‘that Ashley Grange passed into the possession of Miss Eleanor Le Couteau. It is a beautiful old house, but it had been neglected and allowed to remain empty for many years. It could not have found a better chatelaine. Miss Le Couteau was a French Canadian, her forebears were émigrés from the French Revolution, and had handed down to her a collection of almost priceless French relics and antiques. She was a buyer and a collector also, with a very fine and discriminating taste. So much so, that when she decided to sell Ashley Grange and everything it contained after the tragedy, Mr Cyrus G. Bradburn, the American millionaire, made no bones about paying the fancy price of sixty thousand pounds for the Grange as it stood.’

Mr Satterthwaite paused.

‘I mention these things,’ he said apologetically, ‘not because they are relevant to the story—strictly speaking, they are not—but to convey an atmosphere, the atmosphere of young Mrs Harwell.’

Mr Quin nodded.

‘Atmosphere is always valuable,’ he said gravely.

‘So we get a picture of this girl,’ continued the other. ‘Just twenty-three, dark, beautiful, accomplished, nothing crude and unfinished about her. And rich—we must not forget that. She was an orphan. A Mrs St Clair, a lady of unimpeachable breeding and social standing, lived with her as duenna. But Eleanor Le Couteau had complete control of her own fortune. And fortune-hunters are never hard to seek. At least a dozen impecunious young men were to be found dangling round her on all occasions, in the hunting field, in the ballroom, wherever she went. Young Lord Leccan, the most eligible parti in the country, is reported to have asked her to marry him, but she remained heart free. That is, until the coming of Captain Richard Harwell.’

‘Captain Harwell had put up at the local Inn for the hunting. He was a dashing rider to hounds. A handsome, laughing daredevil of a fellow. You remember the old saying, Mr Quin? “Happy the wooing that’s not long doing.” The adage was carried out at least in part. At the end of two months, Richard Harwell and Eleanor Le Couteau were engaged.’

‘The marriage followed three months afterwards. The happy pair went abroad for a two weeks’ honeymoon, and then returned to take up their residence at Ashley Grange. The landlord has just told us that it was on a night of storm such as this that they returned to their home. An omen, I wonder? Who can tell? Be that as it may, the following morning very early—about half-past seven, Captain Harwell was seen walking in the garden by one of the gardeners, John Mathias. He was bareheaded, and was whistling. We have a picture there, a picture of light-heartedness, of careless happiness. And yet from that minute, as far as we know, no one ever set eyes on Captain Richard Harwell again.’

Mr Satterthwaite paused, pleasantly conscious of a dramatic moment. The admiring glance of Mr Quin gave him the tribute he needed, and he went on.

‘The disappearance was remarkable—unaccountable. It was not till the following day that the distracted wife called in the police. As you know, they have not succeeded in solving the mystery.’

‘There have, I suppose, been theories?’ asked Mr Quin.

‘Oh! theories, I grant you. Theory No. 1, that Captain Harwell had been murdered, done away with. But if so, where was the body? It could hardly have been spirited away. And besides, what motive was there? As far as was known, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world.’

He paused abruptly, as though uncertain. Mr Quin leaned forward.

‘You are thinking,’ he said softly, ‘of young Stephen Grant.’

‘I am,’ admitted Mr Satterthwaite. ‘Stephen Grant, if I remember rightly, had been in charge of Captain Harwell’s horses, and had been discharged by his master for some trifling offence. On the morning after the homecoming, very early, Stephen Grant was seen in the vicinity of Ashley Grange, and could give no good account of his presence there. He was detained by the police as being concerned in the disappearance of Captain Harwell, but nothing could be proved against him, and he was eventually discharged. It is true that he might be supposed to bear a grudge against Captain Harwell for his summary dismissal, but the motive was undeniably of the flimsiest. I suppose the police felt they must do something. You see, as I said just now, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world.’

‘As far as was known,’ said Mr Quin reflectively.

Mr Satterthwaite nodded appreciatively.

‘We are coming to that. What, after all, was known of Captain Harwell? When the police came to look into his antecedents they were confronted with a singular paucity of material. Who was Richard Harwell? Where did he come from? He had appeared, literally out of the blue as it seemed. He was a magnificent rider, and apparently well off. Nobody in Kirtlington Mallet had bothered to inquire further. Miss Le Couteau had had no parents or guardians to make inquiries into the prospects

and standing of her fiancé. She was her own mistress. The police theory at this point was clear enough. A rich girl and an impudent impostor. The old story!

‘But it was not quite that. True, Miss Le Couteau had no parents or guardians, but she had an excellent firm of solicitors in London who acted for her. Their evidence made the mystery deeper. Eleanor Le Couteau had wished to settle a sum outright upon her prospective husband, but he had refused. He himself was well off, he declared. It was proved conclusively that Harwell never had a penny of his wife’s money. Her fortune was absolutely intact.

‘He was, therefore, no common swindler, but was his object a refinement of the art? Did he propose blackmail at some future date if Eleanor Harwell should wish to marry some other man? I will admit that something of that kind seemed to me the most likely solution. It had always seemed so to me—until tonight.’

Mr Quin leaned forward, prompting him.

‘Tonight?’

‘Tonight. I am not satisfied with that. How did he manage to disappear so suddenly and completely—at that hour in the morning, with every labourer bestirring himself and tramping to work? Bareheaded, too.’

‘There is no doubt about the latter point—since the gardener saw him?’

‘Yes—the gardener—John Mathias. Was there anything there, I wonder?’

‘The police would not overlook him,’ said Mr Quin.

‘They questioned him closely. He never wavered in his statement. His wife bore him out. He left his cottage at seven to attend to the greenhouses, he returned at twenty minutes to eight. The servants in the house heard the front door slam at about a quarter after seven. That fixes the time when Captain Harwell left the house. Ah! yes, I know what you are thinking.’

‘Do you, I wonder?’ said Mr Quin.

‘I fancy so. Time enough for Mathias to have made away with his master. But why, man, why? And if so, where did he hide the body?’

The landlord came in bearing a tray.

‘Sorry to have kept you so long, gentlemen.’

He set upon the table a mammoth steak and beside it a dish filled to overflowing with crisp brown potatoes. The odour from the dishes was pleasant to Mr Satterthwaite’s nostrils. He felt gracious.

‘This looks excellent,’ he said. ‘Most excellent. We have been discussing the disappearance of Captain Harwell. What became of the gardener, Mathias?’

‘Took a place in Essex, I believe. Didn’t care to stay hereabouts. There were some as looked askance at him, you understand. Not that I ever believe he had anything to do with it.’

Mr Satterthwaite helped himself to steak. Mr Quin followed suit. The landlord seemed disposed to linger and chat. Mr Satterthwaite had no objection, on the contrary.

‘This Mathias now,’ he said. ‘What kind of a man was he?’

‘Middle-aged chap, must have been a powerful fellow once but bent and crippled with rheumatism. He had that mortal bad, was laid up many a time with it, unable to do any work. For my part, I think it was sheer kindness on Miss Eleanor’s part to keep him on. He’d outgrown his usefulness as a gardener, though his wife managed to make herself useful up at the house. Been a cook she had, and always willing to lend a hand.’

‘What sort of a woman was she?’ asked Mr Satterthwaite, quickly.

The landlord’s answer disappointed him.

‘A plain body. Middle-aged, and dour like in manner. Deaf, too. Not that I ever knew much of them. They’d only been here a month, you understand, when the thing happened. They say he’d been a rare good gardener in his time, though. Wonderful testimonials Miss Eleanor had with him.’

‘Was she interested in gardening?’ asked Mr Quin, softly.

‘No, sir, I couldn’t say that she was, not like some of the ladies round here who pay good money to gardeners and spend the whole of their time grubbing about on their knees as well. Foolishness I call it. You see, Miss Le Couteau wasn’t here very much except in the winter for hunting. The rest of the time she was up in London and away in those foreign seaside places where they say the French ladies don’t so much as put a toe into the water for fear of spoiling their costumes, or so I’ve heard.’

Mr Satterthwaite smiled.

‘There was no—er—woman of any kind mixed up with Captain Harwell?’ he asked.

Though his first theory was disposed of, he nevertheless clung to his idea.

Mr William Jones shook his head.

‘Nothing of that sort. Never a whisper of it. No, it’s a dark mystery, that’s what it is.’

‘And your theory? What do you yourself think?’ persisted Mr Satterthwaite.

‘What do I think?’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t know what to think. It’s my belief as how he was done in, but who by I can’t say. I’ll fetch you gentlemen the cheese.’

He stumped from the room bearing empty dishes. The storm, which had been quiting down, suddenly broke out with redoubled vigour. A flash of forked lightning and a great clap of thunder close upon each other made little Mr Satterthwaite jump, and before the last echoes of the thunder had died away, a girl came into the room carrying the advertised cheese.

She was tall and dark, and handsome in a sullen fashion of her own. Her likeness to the landlord of the ‘Bells and Motley’ was apparent enough to proclaim her his daughter.

‘Good evening, Mary,’ said Mr Quin. ‘A stormy night.’

She nodded.

‘I hate these stormy nights,’ she muttered.

‘You are afraid of thunder, perhaps?’ said Mr Satterthwaite kindly.

‘Afraid of thunder? Not me! There’s little that I’m afraid of. No, but the storm sets them off. Talking, talking, the same thing over and over again, like a lot of parrots. Father begins it. “It reminds me, this does, of the night poor Captain Harwell...” And so on, and so on.’ She turned on Mr Quin. ‘You’ve heard how he goes on. What’s the sense of it? Can’t anyone let past things be?’

‘A thing is only past when it is done with,’ said Mr Quin.

‘Isn’t this done with? Suppose he wanted to disappear? These fine gentlemen do sometimes.’

‘You think he disappeared of his own free will?’

‘Why not? It would make better sense than to suppose a kind-hearted creature like Stephen Grant murdered him. What should he murder him for, I should like to know? Stephen had had a drop too much one day and spoke to him saucy like, and got the sack for it. But what of it? He got another place just as good. Is that a reason to murder a man in cold blood?’

‘But surely,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, ‘the police were quite satisfied of his innocence?’

‘The police! What do the police matter? When Stephen comes into the bar of an evening, every man looks at him queer like. They don’t really believe he murdered Harwell, but they’re not sure, and so they look at him sideways and edge away. Nice life for a man, to see people shrink away from you, as though you were something different from the rest of folks. Why won’t Father hear of our getting married, Stephen and I? “You can take your pigs to a better market, my girl. I’ve nothing against Stephen, but—well, we don’t know, do we?”’

She stopped, her breast heaving with the violence of her resentment.

‘It’s cruel, cruel, that’s what it is,’ she burst out. ‘Stephen, that wouldn’t hurt a fly! And all through life there’ll be people who’ll think he did. It’s turning him queer and bitter like. I don’t wonder, I’m sure. And the more he’s like that, the more people think there must have been something in it.’

Again she stopped. Her eyes were fixed on Mr Quin’s face, as though something in it was drawing this outburst from her.

‘Can nothing be done?’ said Mr Satterthwaite.

He was genuinely distressed. The thing was, he saw, inevitable. The very vagueness and unsatisfactoriness of the evidence against Stephen Grant made it the more difficult for him to disprove the accusation.

The girl whirled round on him.

‘Nothing but the truth can help him,’ she cried. ‘If Captain Harwell were to be found, if he was to come back. If the true rights of it were only known—’

She broke off with something very like a sob, and hurried quickly from the room.

‘A fine-looking girl,’ said Mr Satterthwaite. ‘A sad case altogether. I wish—I very much wish that something could be done about it.’

His kind heart was troubled.

‘We are doing what we can,’ said Mr Quin. ‘There is still nearly half an hour before your car can be ready.’

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him.

‘You think we can come at the truth just by—talking it over like this?’

‘You have seen much of life,’ said Mr Quin gravely. ‘More than most people.’

‘Life has passed me by,’ said Mr Satterthwaite bitterly.

‘But in so doing has sharpened your vision. Where others are blind you can see.’

‘It is true,’ said Mr Satterthwaite. ‘I am a great observer.’

He plumed himself complacently. The moment of bitterness was passed.

‘I look at it like this,’ he said after a minute or two. ‘To get at the cause for a thing, we must study the effect.’

‘Very good,’ said Mr Quin approvingly.

‘The effect in this case is that Miss Le Couteau—Mrs Harwell, I mean, is a wife and yet not a wife. She is not free—she cannot marry again. And look at it as we will, we see Richard Harwell as a sinister figure, a man from nowhere with a mysterious past.’

‘I agree,’ said Mr Quin. ‘You see what all are bound to see, what cannot be missed, Captain Harwell in the limelight, a suspicious figure.’

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him doubtfully. The words seemed somehow to suggest a faintly different picture to his mind.

‘We have studied the effect,’ he said. ‘Or call it the result. We can now pass—’

Mr Quin interrupted him.

‘You have not touched on the result on the strictly material side.’

‘You are right,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, after a moment or two for consideration. ‘One should do the thing thoroughly. Let us say then that the result of the tragedy is that Mrs Harwell is a wife and not a wife, unable to marry again, that Mr Cyrus Bradburn has been able to buy Ashley Grange and its contents for—sixty thousand pounds, was it?—and that somebody in Essex has been able to secure John Mathias as a gardener! For all that we do not suspect “somebody in Essex” or Mr Cyrus Bradburn of having engineered the disappearance of Captain Harwell.’

‘You are sarcastic,’ said Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite looked sharply at him.

‘But surely you agree—?’

‘Oh! I agree,’ said Mr Quin. ‘The idea is absurd. What next?’

‘Let us imagine ourselves back on the fatal day. The disappearance has taken place, let us say, this very morning.’

‘No, no,’ said Mr Quin, smiling. ‘Since, in our imagination, at least, we have power over time, let us turn it the other way. Let us say the disappearance of Captain Harwell took place a hundred years ago. That we, in the year two thousand twenty-five are looking back.’

‘You are a strange man,’ said Mr Satterthwaite slowly. ‘You believe in the past, not the present. Why?’

‘You used, not long ago, the word atmosphere. There is no atmosphere in the present.’

‘That is true, perhaps,’ said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully. ‘Yes, it is true. The present is apt to be—parochial.’

‘A good word,’ said Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite gave a funny little bow.

‘You are too kind,’ he said.

‘Let us take—not this present year, that would be too difficult, but say—last year,’ continued the other. ‘Sum it up for me, you who have the gift of the neat phrase.’

Mr Satterthwaite thought for a minute. He was jealous of his reputation.

‘A hundred years ago we have the age of powder and patches,’ he said. ‘Shall we say that 1924 was the age of Crossword Puzzles and Cat Burglars?’

‘Very good,’ approved Mr Quin. ‘You mean that nationally, not internationally, I presume?’

‘As to Crossword Puzzles, I must confess that I do not know,’ said Mr Satterthwaite. ‘But the Cat Burglar had a great innings on the Continent. You remember that series of famous thefts from French châteaux? It is surmised that one man alone could not have done it. The most miraculous feats were performed to gain admission. There was a theory that a troupe of acrobats were concerned—the Clondinis. I once saw their performance—truly masterly. A mother, son and daughter. They vanished from the stage in a rather mysterious fashion. But we are wandering from our subject.’

‘Not very far,’ said Mr Quin. ‘Only across the Channel.’

‘Where the French ladies will not wet their toes, according to our worthy host,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, laughing.

There was a pause. It seemed somehow significant.

‘Why did he disappear?’ cried Mr Satterthwaite. ‘Why? Why? It is incredible, a kind of conjuring trick.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Quin. ‘A conjuring trick. That describes it exactly. Atmosphere again, you see. And wherein does the essence of a conjuring trick lie?’

‘The quickness of the hand deceives the eye,’ quoted Mr Satterthwaite glibly.

‘That is everything, is it not? To deceive the eye? Sometimes by the quickness of the hand, sometimes—by other means. There are many devices, the pistol shot, the waving of a red handkerchief, something that seems important, but in reality is not. The eye is diverted from the real business, it is caught by the spectacular action that means nothing—nothing at all.’

Mr Satterthwaite leant forward, his eyes shining.

‘There is something in that. It is an idea.’

He went on softly. ‘The pistol shot. What was the pistol shot in the conjuring trick we were discussing? What is the spectacular moment that holds the imagination?’

He drew in his breath sharply.

‘The disappearance,’ breathed Mr Satterthwaite. ‘Take that away, and it leaves nothing.’

‘Nothing? Suppose things took the same course without that dramatic gesture?’

‘You mean—supposing Miss Le Couteau were still to sell Ashley Grange and leave—for no reason?’

‘Well.’

‘Well, why not? It would have aroused talk, I suppose, there would have been a lot of interest displayed in the value of the contents in—Ah! wait!’

He was silent a minute, then burst out.

‘You are right, there is too much limelight, the limelight on Captain Harwell. And because of that, she has been in shadow. Miss Le Couteau! Everyone asking “Who was Captain Harwell? Where did he come from?” But because she is the injured party, no one makes inquiries about her. Was she

really a French Canadian? Were those wonderful heirlooms really handed down to her? You were right when you said just now that we had not wandered far from our subject—only across the Channel. Those so-called heirlooms were stolen from the French châteaux, most of them valuable objets d'art, and in consequence difficult to dispose of. She buys the house—for a mere song, probably. Settles down there and pays a good sum to an irreproachable English woman to chaperone her. Then he comes. The plot is laid beforehand. The marriage, the disappearance and the nine days' wonder! What more natural than that a broken-hearted woman should want to sell everything that reminds her of her past happiness. The American is a connoisseur, the things are genuine and beautiful, some of them beyond price. He makes an offer, she accepts it. She leaves the neighbourhood, a sad and tragic figure. The great coup has come off. The eye of the public has been deceived by the quickness of the hand and the spectacular nature of the trick.'

Mr Satterthwaite paused, flushed with triumph.

'But for you, I should never have seen it,' he said with sudden humility. 'You have a most curious effect upon me. One says things so often without even seeing what they really mean. You have the knack of showing one. But it is still not quite clear to me. It must have been most difficult for Harwell to disappear as he did. After all, the police all over England were looking for him.'

'It would have been simplest to remain hidden at the Grange,' mused Mr Satterthwaite. 'If it could be managed.'

'He was, I think, very near the Grange,' said Mr Quin.

His look of significance was not lost on Mr Satterthwaite.

'Mathias' cottage?' he exclaimed. 'But the police must have searched it?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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