Tracy Louis

The Strange Case of Mortimer Fenley

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
The Water Nymphs

Does an evil deed cast a shadow in advance? Does premeditated crime spread a baleful aura which affects certain highly-strung temperaments just as the sensation of a wave of cold air rising from the spine to the head may be a forewarning of epilepsy or hysteria? John Trenholme had cause to think so one bright June morning in 1912, and he has never ceased to believe it, though the events which made him an outstanding figure in the "Strange Case of Mortimer Fenley," as the murder of a prominent man in the City of London came to be known, have long since been swept into oblivion by nearly five years of war. Even the sun became a prime agent of the occult that morning. It found a chink in a blind and threw a bar of vivid light across the face of a young man lying asleep in the front bedroom of the "White Horse Inn" at Roxton. It crept onward from a firm, well-molded chin to lips now tight set, though not lacking signs that they would open readily in a smile and perhaps reveal two rows of strong, white, even teeth. Indeed, when that strip of sunshine touched and warmed them, the smile came; so the sleeper was dreaming, and pleasantly.

But the earth stays not for men, no matter what their dreams. In a few minutes the radiant line reached the sleeper's eyes, and he awoke. Naturally, he stared straight at the disturber of his slumbers; and being a mere man, who emulated not the ways of eagles, was routed at the first glance.

More than that, he was thoroughly aroused, and sprang out of bed with a celerity that would have given many another young man a headache during the remainder of the day.

But John Trenholme, artist by profession, was somewhat of a light-hearted vagabond by instinct; if the artist was ready to be annoyed because of an imaginary loss of precious daylight, the vagabond laughed cheerily when he blinked at a clock and learned that the hour still lacked some minutes of half past five in the morning.

"By gad," he grinned, pulling up the blind, "I was scared stiff. I thought the blessed alarm had missed fire, and that I had been lying here like a hog during the best part of the finest day England has seen this year."

Evidently he was still young enough to deal in superlatives, for there had been other fine days that Summer; moreover, in likening himself to a pig, he was ridiculously unfair to six feet of athletic symmetry in which it would be difficult to detect any marked resemblance to the animal whose name is a synonym for laziness.

On the way to the bathroom he stopped to listen for sounds of an aroused household, but the inmates of the White Horse Inn were still taking life easily.

"Eliza vows she can hear that alarm in her room," he communed. "Well, suppose we assist nature, always a laudable thing in itself, and peculiarly excellent when breakfast is thereby advanced a quarter of an hour."

Eliza was the inn's stout and voluble cook-housekeeper, and her attic lay directly above Trenholme's room. He went back for the clock, crept swiftly upstairs, opened a door a few inches, and put the infernal machine inside, close to the wall. He was splashing in the bath when a harsh and penetrating din jarred through the house, and a slight scream showed that Eliza had been duly "alarmed."

A few minutes later came a heavy thump on the bathroom door.

"All right, Mr. Trenholme!" cried an irate female voice. "You've been up to your tricks, have you? It'll be my turn when I make your coffee; I'll pepper an' salt it!"

"Why, what's the matter, Eliza?" he shouted.

"Matter! Frightenin' a body like that! I thought a lot o' suffrigettes were smashin' the windows of the snug."

Eliza was still touchy when Trenholme ventured to peep into the kitchen.

"I don't know how you dare show your face," she cried wrathfully. "The impidence of men nowadays! Just fancy you comin' an' openin' my door!"

"But, *chérie*, what have I done?" he inquired, his brown eyes wide with astonishment.

"I'm not your cherry, nor your peach, neither. Who put that clock in my room?"

"What clock, *ma belle*?"

Eliza picked up an egg, and bent so fiery a glance on the intruder that he dodged out of sight for a second.

"Listen, *carissima*," he pleaded, peering round the jamb of the door again. "If the alarm found its way upstairs I must have been walking in my sleep. While you were dreaming of suffragettes I may have been dreaming of you."

"Stop there a bit longer, chatterin' and callin' me names, an' your bacon will be frizzled to a cinder," she retorted.

"But I really hoped to save you some trouble by carrying in the breakfast tray myself. I hate to see a jolly, good-tempered woman of your splendid physique working yourself to a shadow."

Eliza squared her elbows as a preliminary to another outburst, when the stairs creaked. Mary, the "help," was arriving hurriedly, in curl papers.

"Oh, *you*'ve condescended to get up, have you?" was the greeting Mary received.

"Why, it's on'y ten minutes to six!" cried the astonished girl, gazing at a grandfather's clock as if it were bewitched.

"You've never had such a shock since you were born," went on the sarcastic Eliza. "But don't thank *me*, my girl. Thank Mr. Trenholme, the gentleman stannin' there grinnin' like a Cheshire cat. Talk to him nicely, an' p'raps he'll paint your picter, an' then your special butcher boy will see how beautiful you reelly are."

"Jim don't need tellin' anything about that," said the girl, smiling, for Eliza's bark was notoriously worse than her bite.

"Jim!" came the snorting comment. "The first man who ever axed me to marry him was called Jim, an' when, like a wise woman, I said 'No,' he went away an' 'listed in the Royal Artillery an' lost his leg in a war – that's what Jim did."

"What a piece of luck you didn't accept him!" put on Trenholme.

"An' why, I'd like to know?"

"Because he began by losing his head over you. If a leg was missing, too, there wasn't much of Jim left, was there?"

Mary giggled, and Eliza seized the egg again; so Trenholme ran to his sitting-room. Within half an hour he was passing through the High Street, bidding an affable "Good morning" to such early risers as he met, and evidently well content with himself and the world in general. His artist's kit revealed his profession even to the uncritical eye, but no student of men could have failed to guess his bent were he habited in the garb of a costermonger. The painter and the poet are the last of the Bohemians, and John Trenholme was a Bohemian to the tips of his fingers.

He carried himself like a cavalier, but the divine flame of art kindled in his eye. He had learned how to paint in Julien's studio, and that same school had taught him to despise convention. He looked on nature as a series of exquisite pictures, and regarded men and women in the mass as creatures that occasionally fitted into the landscape. He was heart whole and fancy free. At twenty-five he had already exhibited three times in the Salon, and was spoken of by the critics as a painter of much

promise, which is the critical method of waiting to see how the cat jumps when an artist of genius and originality arrests attention.

He had peculiarly luminous brown eyes set well apart in a face which won the prompt confidence of women, children and dogs. He was splendidly built for an out-door life, and moved with a long, supple stride, a gait which people mistook for lounging until they walked with him, and found that the pace was something over four miles an hour. Add to these personal traits the fact that he had dwelt in Roxton exactly two days and a half, and was already on speaking terms with most of the inhabitants, and you have a fair notion of John Trenholme's appearance and ways.

There remains but to add that he was commissioned by a magazine to visit this old-world Hertfordshire village and depict some of its beauties before a projected railway introduced the jerry-builder and a sewerage scheme, and his presence in the White Horse Inn is explained. He had sketched the straggling High Street, the green, the inn itself, boasting a license six hundred years old, the undulating common, the church with its lych gate, the ivy-clad ruin known as "The Castle," with its square Norman keep still frowning at an English countryside, and there was left only an Elizabethan mansion, curiously misnamed "The Towers," to be transferred to his portfolio. Here, oddly enough, he had been rebuffed. A note to the owner, Mortimer Fenley, banker and super City man, asking permission to enter the park of an afternoon, had met with a curt refusal.

Trenholme, of course, was surprised, since he was paying the man a rare compliment; he had expressed in the inn his full and free opinion concerning all money grubbers, and the Fenley species thereof in particular; whereupon the stout Eliza, who classed the Fenley family as "rubbish," informed him that there was a right of way through the park, and that from a certain point near a lake he could sketch the grand old manor house to his heart's content, let the Fenleys and their keepers scowl as they chose.

The village barber, too, bore out Eliza's statement.

"A rare old row there was in Roxton twenty year ago, when Fenley fust kem here, an' tried to close the path," said the barber. "But we beat him, we did, an' well he knows it. Not many folk use it nowadays, 'coss the artful ole dodger opened a new road to the station; but some of us makes a point of strollin' that way on a Sunday afternoon, just to look at the pheasants an' rabbits, an' it's a treat to see the head keeper's face when we go through the lodge gates at the Easton end, for that is the line the path takes."

Here followed a detailed description, for the Roxton barber, like every other barber, could chatter like a magpie; it was in this wise that Trenholme was able to defy the laws forbidding trespass, and score off the seemingly uncivil owner of a historical dwelling.

He little imagined, that glorious June morning, that he was entering on a road of strange adventure. He had chosen an early hour purposely. Not only were the lights and shadows perfect for water color, but it was highly probable that he would be able to come and go without attracting attention. He had no wish to annoy Fenley, or quarrel with the man's myrmidons. Indeed, he would not have visited the estate at all if the magazine editor had not specially stipulated for a full-page drawing of the house.

Now, all would have been well had the barber's directions proved as bald in spirit as they were in letter.

"After passin' 'The Waggoner's Rest,' you'll come to a pair of iron gates on the right," he had said. "On one side there's a swing gate. Go through, an' make straight for a clump of cedars on top of a little hill. There mayn't be much of a path, but that's it. It's reelly a short cut to the Easton gate on the London road."

Yet who could guess what a snare for an artist's feet lay in those few words? How could Trenholme realize that "a pair of iron gates" would prove to be an almost perfect example of Christopher Wren's genius as a designer of wrought iron? Trenholme's eyes sparkled when he beheld this prize, with its acanthus leaves and roses beaten out with wonderful freedom and beauty of curve.

A careful drawing was the result. Another result, uncounted by him, but of singular importance in its outcome was the delay of forty minutes thus entailed.

He crossed an undulating park, and had no difficulty in tracing an almost disused path in certain grass-grown furrows leading past the group of cedars. On reaching this point he obtained a fair view of the mansion; but the sun was directly behind him, as the house faced southeast, and he decided to encroach some few yards on private property. A brier-laden slope fell from the other side of the trees to a delightful-looking lake fed by a tiny cascade on the east side. An ideal spot, he thought.

This, then, was the stage setting: Trenholme, screened by black cedars and luxuriant brushwood, was seated about fifty feet above the level of the lake and some forty yards from its nearest sedges. The lake itself, largely artificial, lay at the foot of the waterfall, which gurgled and splashed down a miniature precipice of moss-covered bowlders. Here and there a rock, a copper beech, a silver larch, or a few flowering shrubs cast strong shadows on the dark, pellucid mirror beneath. On a cunningly contrived promontory of brown rock stood a white marble statue of Venus Aphrodite, and the ripples from the cascade seemed to endow with life the shimmering reflection of the goddess.

Beyond the lake a smooth lawn, dotted with fine old oaks and chestnuts, rose gently for a quarter of a mile to the Italian gardens in front of the house. To the left, the park was bounded by woods. To the right was another wood, partly concealing a series of ravines and disused quarries. Altogether a charming setting for an Elizabethan manor, pastoral, peaceful, quite English, and seeming on that placid June morning so remote from the crowded mart that it was hard to believe the nearest milestone, with its "London, 30 miles."

Had Trenholme glanced at his watch he would have discovered that the hour was now half past seven, or nearly an hour later than he had planned. But Art, which is long-lived, recks little of Time, an evanescent thing. He was enthusiastic over his subject. He would make not one sketch, but two. That lake, like the gates, was worthy of immortality. Of course, the house must come first. He unpacked a canvas hold-all, and soon was busy.

He worked with the speed and assured confidence of a master. By years of patient industry he had wrested from Nature the secrets of her tints and tone values. Quickly there grew into being an exquisitely bright and well balanced drawing, impressionist, but true; a harmony of color and atmosphere. Leaving subtleties to the quiet thought of the studio, he turned to the lake. Here the lights and shadows were bolder. They demanded the accurate appraisement of the half closed eye. He was so absorbed in his task that he was blithely unconscious of the approach of a girl from the house, and his first glimpse of her was forthcoming when she crossed the last spread of velvet sward which separated a cluster of rhododendrons in the middle distance from the farther edge of the lake.

It was not altogether surprising that he had not seen her earlier. She wore a green coat and skirt and a most curiously shaped hat of the same hue, so that her colors blended with the landscape. Moreover, she was walking rapidly, and had covered the intervening quarter of a mile in four minutes or less.

He thought at first that she was heading straight for his lofty perch, and was perhaps bent on questioning his right to be there at all. But he was promptly undeceived. Her mind was set on one object, and her eyes did not travel beyond it. She no more suspected that an artist was lurking in the shade of the cedars than she did that the man in the moon was gazing blandly at her above their close-packed foliage. She came on with rapid, graceful strides, stood for a moment by the side of the Venus, and then, while Trenholme literally gasped for breath, shed coat, skirt and shoes, revealing a slim form clad in a dark blue bathing costume, and dived into the lake.

Trenholme had never felt more surprised. The change of costume was so unexpected, the girl's complete ignorance of his presence so obvious, that he regarded himself as a confessed intruder, somewhat akin to Peeping Tom of Coventry. He was utterly at a loss how to act. If he stood up and essayed a hurried retreat, the girl might be frightened, and would unquestionably be annoyed. It was impossible to creep away unseen. He was well below the crest of the slope crowned by the trees,

and the nymph now disporting in the lake could hardly fail to discover him, no matter how deftly he crouched and twisted.

At this crisis, the artistic instinct triumphed. He became aware that the one element lacking hitherto, the element that lent magic to the beauty of the lake and its vivid environment of color, was the touch of life brought by the swimmer. He caught the flash of her limbs as they moved rhythmically through the dark, clear water, and it seemed almost as if the gods had striven to be kind in sending this naiad to complete a perfect setting. With stealthy hands he drew forth a small canvas. Oil, not mild water color, was the fitting medium to portray this Eden. Shrinking back under cover of a leafy brier, he began a third sketch in which the dominant note was the contrast between the living woman and the marble Venus.

For fifteen minutes the girl disported herself like a dolphin. Evidently she was a practiced swimmer, and had at her command all the resources of the art. At last she climbed out, and stood dripping on the sun-laved rock beside the statue. Trenholme had foreseen this attitude – had, in fact, painted with feverish energy in anticipation of it. The comparison was too striking to be missed by an artist. Were it not for the tightly clinging garments, the pair would have provided a charming representation of Galatea in stone and Galatea after Pygmalion's frenzy had warmed her into life.

Trenholme was absolutely deaf now to any consideration save that of artistic endeavor. With a swift accuracy that was nearly marvelous he put on the canvas the sheen of faultless limbs and slender neck. He even secured the spun-gold glint of hair tightly coifed under a bathing cap – a species of head-dress which had puzzled him at the first glance – and there was more than a suggestion of a veritable portrait of the regular, lively and delicately beautiful features which belonged to a type differing in every essential from the cold, classic loveliness of the statue, yet vastly more appealing in its sheer femininity.

Then the spell was broken. The girl slipped on her shoes, dressed herself in a few seconds, and was hurrying back to the house, almost before Trenholme dared to breathe normally.

"Well," he muttered, watching the swaying of the green skirt as its owner traversed the park, "this is something like an adventure! By Jove, I've been lucky this morning! I've got my picture for next year's Salon!"

He had got far more, if only he were gifted to peer into the future; but that is a privilege denied to men, even to artists. Soon, when he was calmer, and the embryo sketch had assumed its requisite color notes for subsequent elaboration, he smiled a trifle dubiously.

"If that girl's temperament is as attractive as her looks I'd throw over the Salon for the sake of meeting her," he mused. "But that's frankly impossible, I suppose. At the best, she would not forgive me if she knew I had watched her in this thievish way. I could never explain it, never! She wouldn't even listen. Well, it's better to have dreamed and lost than never to have dreamed at all."

And yet he dreamed. His eyes followed the fair unknown while she entered the garden through a gateway of dense yews, and sped lightly up the steps of a terrace adorned with other statues in marble and bronze. No doorway broke the pleasing uniformity of the south front, but she disappeared through an open window, swinging herself lightly over the low sill. He went with her in imagination. Now she was crossing a pretty drawing-room, now running upstairs to her room, now dressing, possibly in white muslin, which, if Trenholme had the choosing of it, would be powdered with tiny *fleurs de lys*, now arranging her hair with keen eye for effect, and now tripping down again in obedience to a gong summoning the household to breakfast.

He sighed.

"If I had the luck of a decent French poodle, this plutocrat Fenley would eke have invited me to lunch," he grumbled.

Then his eyes sought the sketch, and he forgot the girl in her counterfeit. By Jove, this *would* be a picture! "The Water Nymphs." But he must change the composition a little – losing none of its character; only altering its accessories to such an extent that none would recognize the exact setting.

"Luck!" he chortled, with mercurial rise of spirits. "I'm the luckiest dog in England today. Happy chance has beaten all the tricks of the studio. O ye goddesses, inspire me to heights worthy of you!"

His visions were rudely dispelled by a gunshot, sharp, insistent, a tocsin of death in that sylvan solitude. A host of rooks arose from some tall elms near the house; a couple of cock pheasants flew with startled chuckling out of the wood on the right; the white tails of rabbits previously unseen revealed their owners' whereabouts as they scampered to cover. But Trenholme was sportsman enough to realize that the weapon fired was a rifle; no toy, but of high velocity, and he wondered how any one dared risk its dangerous use in such a locality. He fixed the sound definitely as coming from the wood to the right – the cover quitted so hurriedly by the pheasants – and instinctively his glance turned to the house, in the half formed thought that some one there might hear the shot, and look out.

The ground floor window by which the girl had entered still remained open, but now another window, the most easterly one on the first floor, had been raised slightly. The light was peculiarly strong and the air so clear that even at the distance he fancied he could distinguish some one gesticulating, or so it seemed, behind the glass. This went on for a minute or more. Then the window was closed. At the same time he noticed a sparkling of glass and brasswork behind the clipped yew hedge which extended beyond the east wing. After some puzzling, he made out that a motor car was waiting there.

That was all. The clamor of the rooks soon subsided. A couple of rabbits skipped from the bushes to resume an interrupted meal on tender grass shoots. A robin trilled a roundelay from some neighboring branch. Trenholme looked at his watch. Half past nine! Why, he must have been mooning there a good half hour!

He gathered his traps, and as the result of seeing the automobile, which had not moved yet, determined to forego his earlier project of walking out of the park by the Easton gate.

He had just emerged from the trees when a gruff voice hailed him.

"Hi!" it cried. "Who're you, an' what are you doin' here!"

A man, carrying a shotgun and accompanied by a dog, strode up with determined air.

Trenholme explained civilly, since the keeper was clearly within his rights. Moreover, the stranger was so patently a gentleman that Velveteens adopted a less imperative tone.

"Did you hear a shot fired somewhere?" he asked.

"Yes. Among those trees." And Trenholme pointed. "It was a rifle, too," he added, with an eye at the twelve-bore.

"So *I* thought," agreed the keeper.

"Rather risky, isn't it, firing bullets in a place like this?"

"I just want to find out who the ijiot is that did it. Excuse me, sir, I must be off." And man and dog hurried away.

And Trenholme, not knowing that death had answered the shot, took his own departure, singing as he walked, his thoughts altogether on life, and more especially on life as revealed by the limbs of a girl gleaming in the dark waters of a pool.

CHAPTER II
"Who Hath Done This Thing?"

Trenholme's baritone was strong and tuneful – for the Muses, if kind, are often lavish of their gifts – so the final refrain of an impassioned love song traveled far that placid morning. Thus, when he reached the iron gates, he found the Roxton policeman standing there, grinning.

"Hello!" said the artist cheerily. Of course he knew the policeman. In a week he would have known every man and dog in the village by name.

"Good mornin', sir," said the Law, which was nibbling its chin strap and had both thumbs stuck in its belt. "That's a fine thing you was singin'. May I arsk wot it was? I do a bit in that line meself."

"It's the *cantabile* from Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*," replied Trenholme. "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix!"

"Is it now? An' wot may that be, sir?"

The policeman's humor was infectious. Trenholme laughed, too. Realizing that the words and accent of Paris had no great vogue in Hertfordshire, he explained, and added that he possessed a copy of the song, which was at the service of the force. The man thanked him warmly, and promised to call at the inn during the afternoon.

"By the way, sir," he added, when Trenholme had passed through the wicket, "did you hear a shot fired while you was in the park?"

"Yes."

"Jer see anybody?"

"A keeper, who seemed rather annoyed about the shooting. Some one had fired a rifle."

"It sounded like that to me, sir, and it's an unusual thing at this time of the year."

"A heavy-caliber rifle must sound unusual at any time of the year in an enclosed estate near London," commented Trenholme.

"My idee exactly," said the policeman. "I think I'll go that way. I may meet Bates."

"If Bates is a bandy-legged person with suspicious eyes, a red tie, many pockets, brown leggings, and a yellow dog, you'll find him searching the wood beyond the lake, which is the direction the shot came from."

The policeman laughed.

"That's Bates, to a tick," he said. "If he was 'wanted,' your description would do for the *Police Gazette*."

They parted. Since Trenholme's subsequent history is bound up more closely with the policeman's movements during the next hour than with his own unhindered return to the White Horse Inn, it is well to trace the exact course of events as they presented themselves to the ken of a music-loving member of the Hertfordshire constabulary.

Police Constable Farrow did not hurry. Why should he? A gunshot in a gentleman's park at half past nine on a June morning might be, as he had put it, "unusual," but it was obviously a matter capable of the simplest explanation. Such a sound heard at midnight would be sinister, ominous, replete with those elements of mystery and dread which cause even a policeman's heart to beat faster than the regulation pace. Under the conditions, when he met Bates, he would probably be told that Jenkins, underkeeper and Territorial lance corporal, had resolved to end the vicious career of a hoodie crow, and had not scrupled to reach the wily robber with a bullet.

So Police Constable Farrow took fifteen minutes to cover the ground which Trenholme's longer stride had traversed in ten. Allow another fifteen for the artist's packing of his sketching materials, his conversation with gamekeeper and policeman, and the leisurely progress of the latter through the

wood, and it will be found that Farrow reached the long straight avenue leading from the lodge at Easton to the main entrance of the house about forty minutes after the firing of the shot.

He halted on the grass by the side of the well-kept drive, and looked at the waiting motor car. The chauffeur was not visible. He had seen neither Bates nor Jenkins. His passing among the trees had not disturbed even a pheasant, though the estate was alive with game. The door of The Towers was open, but no stately manservant was stationed there. A yellow dog sat in the sunshine. Farrow and the dog exchanged long-range glances: the policeman consulted his watch, bit his chin strap, and dug his thumbs into his belt.

"Mr. Fenley is late today," he said to himself. "He catches the nine forty-five. As a rule, he's as reliable as Greenwich. I'll wait here till he passes, an' then call round an' see Smith."

Now, Smith was the head gardener; evidently Police Constable Farrow was not only well acquainted with the various inmates of the mansion, but could have prepared a list of the out-door employees as well. He stood there, calm and impassive as Fate, and, without knowing it, represented Fate in her most inexorable mood; for had he betaken himself elsewhere, the shrewdest brains of Scotland Yard might have been defeated by the enigma they were asked to solve before Mortimer Fenley's murderer was discovered.

Indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that if chance had not brought the village constable to that identical spot, and at that very hour, the precise method of the crime might never have been revealed. Moreover, Farrow himself may climb slowly to an inspectorship, and pass into the dignified ease of a pension, without being aware of the part he played in a tragedy that morning. Of course, in his own estimation, he filled a highly important rôle as soon as the hue and cry began, but a great deal of water would flow under London Bridge before the true effect of his walk through the wood and emergence into sight in the avenue began to dawn on other minds.

His appearance there was a vital fact. It changed the trend of circumstances much as the path of a comet is deflected by encountering a heavy planet. Presumably, neither comet nor planet is aware of the disturbance. That deduction is left to the brooding eye of science.

Be that as it may, Police Constable Farrow's serenity was not disturbed until a doctor's motor car panted along the avenue from Easton and pulled up with a jerk in front of him. The doctor, frowning with anxiety, looked out, and recognition was mutual.

"Have you got the man?" he asked, and the words were jerked out rather than spoken.

"What man, sir?" inquired Farrows, saluting.

"The man who shot Mr. Fenley."

"The man who shot Mr. Fenley!" Farrow could only repeat each word in a crescendo of amazement. Being a singer, he understood the use of a crescendo, and gave full scope to it.

"Good Heavens!" cried the doctor. "Haven't you been told? Why are you here? Mr. Fenley was shot dead on his own doorstep nearly an hour ago. At least that is the message telephoned by his son. Unfortunately I was out. Right ahead, Tom!"

The chauffeur threw in the clutch, and the car darted on again. Farrow followed, a quite alert and horrified policeman now. But it was not ordained that he should enter the house. He was distant yet a hundred yards, or more, when three men came through the doorway. They were Bates, the keeper, Tomlinson, the butler, and Mr. Hilton Fenley, elder son of the man now reported dead. All were bareheaded. The arrival of the doctor, at the instant alighting from his car, prevented them from noticing Farrow's rapid approach. When Hilton Fenley saw the doctor he threw up his hands with the gesture of one who has plumbed the depths of misery. Farrow could, and did, fit in the accompanying words quite accurately.

"Nothing can be done, Stern! My father is dead!"

The two clasped each other's hand, and Hilton Fenley staggered slightly. He was overcome with emotion. The shock of a terrible crime had taxed his self-control to its uttermost bounds. He placed a hand over his eyes and said brokenly to the butler:

"You take Dr. Stern inside, Tomlinson. I'll join you in a few minutes. I must have a breath of air, or I'll choke!"

Doctor and butler hurried into the house; then, but not until then, Hilton Fenley and the keeper became aware of Farrow, now within a few yards. At sight of him, Fenley seemed to recover his faculties; the mere possibility of taking some definite action brought a tinge of color to a pallid and somewhat sallow face.

"Ah! Here is the constable," he cried. "Go with him, Bates, and have that artist fellow arrested!"

"Meaning Mr. Trenholme, sir?" inquired the policeman, startled anew by this unexpected reference to the man he had parted from so recently.

"I don't know his name; but Bates met him in the park, near the lake, just after the shot was fired that killed my father."

"But I met him, too, sir. He didn't fire any shot. He hadn't a gun. In fact, he spoke about the shootin', and was surprised at it."

"Look here, Farrow, I am incapable of thinking clearly; so you must act for the best. Some one fired that bullet. It nearly tore my father to pieces. I never saw anything like it. It was ghastly – oh, ghastly! The murderer must be found. Why are you losing time? Jump into the car, and Brodie will take you anywhere you want to go. The roads, the railway stations, must be scoured, searched. Oh, do something, or I shall go mad!"

Hilton Fenley did, indeed, wear the semblance of a man distraught. Horror stared from his deep-set eyes and lurked in the corners of his mouth. His father had been struck dead within a few seconds after they had separated in the entrance hall, both having quitted the breakfast room together, and the awful discovery which followed the cry of an alarmed servant had almost shaken the son's reason.

Farrow was hardly fitted to deal with a crisis of such magnitude, but he acted promptly and with fixed purpose – qualities which form the greater part of generalship.

"Bates," he said, turning a determined eye on the keeper, "where was you when you heard the shot?"

"In the kennels, back of the lodge," came the instant answer.

"And you kem this way at once?"

"Straight. Didn't lose 'arf a minute."

"So no one could have left by the Easton gate without meeting you?"

"That's right."

"And you found Mr. Trenholme – where?"

"Comin' away from the cedars, above the lake."

"What did he say?"

"Tole me about the shot, an' pointed out the Quarry Wood as the place it kem from."

"Was he upset at all in his manner?"

"Not a bit. Spoke quite nateral-like."

"Well, between the three of us, you an' me an' Mr. Trenholme, we account for both gates an' the best part of two miles of park. Where is Jenkins?"

"I left him at the kennels."

"Ah!"

The policeman was momentarily nonplussed. He had formed a theory in which Jenkins, that young Territorial spark, figured either as a fool or a criminal.

"What's the use of holding a sort of inquiry on the doorstep?" broke in Hilton Fenley shrilly. His utterance was nearly hysterical. Farrow's judicial calm appeared to stir him to frenzy. He clamored for action, for zealous scouting, and this orderly investigation by mere words was absolutely maddening.

"I'm not wastin' time, sir," said Farrow respectfully. "It's as certain as anything can be that the murderer, if murder has been done, has not got away by either of the gates."

"If murder has been done!" cried Fenley. "What do you mean? Go and look at my poor father's corpse – "

"Of course, Mr. Fenley is dead, sir, an' sorry I am to hear of it; but the affair may turn out to be an accident."

"Accident! Farrow, you're talking like an idiot. A man is shot dead at his own front door, in a house standing in the midst of a big estate, and you tell me it's an accident!"

"No, sir. I on'y mentioned that on the off chance. Queer things do happen, an' one shouldn't lose sight of that fact just because it's unusual. Now, sir, with your permission, I want Brodie, an' Smith, an' all the men servants you can spare for the next half hour."

"Why?"

"Brodie can motor to the Inspector's office, an' tell him wot he knows, stoppin' on the way to send Jenkins here. Some of us must search the woods thoroughly, while others watch the open park, to make sure no one escapes without bein' seen. It's my firm belief that the man who fired that rifle is still hidin' among those trees. He may be sneakin' off now, but we'd see him if we're quick in reachin' the other side. Will you do as I ask, sir?"

Farrow was already in motion when Fenley's dazed mind recalled something the policeman ought to know.

"I've telephoned to Scotland Yard half an hour ago," he said.

"That's all right, sir. The main thing now is to search every inch of the woods. If nothing else, we may find footprints."

"And make plenty of new ones."

"Not if the helpers do as I tell 'em, sir."

"I can't argue. I'm not fit for it. Still, some instinct warns me you are not adopting the best course. I think you ought to go in the car and put the police into combined action."

"What are they to do, sir? The murderer won't carry a rifle through the village, or along the open road. I fancy we'll come across the weapon itself in the wood. Besides, the Inspector will do all that is necessary when Brodie sees him. Reelly, sir, I *know* I'm right."

"But should that artist be questioned?"

"Of course he will, sir. He won't run away. If he does, we'll soon nab him. He's been stayin' at the White Horse Inn the last two days, an' is quite a nice-spoken young gentleman. Why should *he* want to shoot Mr. Fenley?"

"He is annoyed with my father, for one thing."

"Eh? Wot, sir?"

Farrow, hitherto eager to be off on the hunt, stopped as if he heard a statement of real importance.

Hilton Fenley pressed a hand to his eyes.

"It was nothing to speak of," he muttered. "He wrote asking permission to sketch the house, and my father refused – just why I don't know; some business matter had vexed him that day, I fancy, and he dashed off the refusal on the spur of the moment. But a man does not commit a terrible crime for so slight a cause… Oh, if only my head would cease throbbing!.. Do as you like. Bates, see that every assistance is given."

Fenley walked a few paces unsteadily. Obviously he was incapable of lucid thought, and the mere effort at sustained conversation was a torture. He turned through a yew arch into the Italian garden, and threw himself wearily into a seat.

"Poor young fellow! He's fair off his nut," whispered Bates.

"What can one expect?" said Farrow. "But we must get busy. Where's Brodie? Do go an' find him."

Bates jerked a thumb toward the house.

"He's in there," he said. "He helped to carry in the Gov'nor. Hasn't left him since."

"He must come at once. He can't do any good now, an' we've lost nearly an hour as it is."

The chauffeur appeared, red-eyed and white-faced. But he understood the urgency of his mission, and soon had the car in movement. Others came – the butler, some gardeners, and men engaged in stables and garage, for the dead banker maintained a large establishment. Farrow explained his plan. They would beat the woods methodically, and the searcher who noted anything "unusual" – the word was often on the policeman's lips – was not to touch or disturb the object or sign in any way, but its whereabouts should be marked by a broken branch stuck in the ground. Of course, if a stranger was seen, an alarm should be raised instantly.

The little party was making for the Quarry Wood, when Jenkins arrived on a bicycle. The first intimation he had received of the murder was the chauffeur's message. There was a telephone between house and lodge, but no one had thought of using it.

"Now, Bates," said Farrow, when the squad of men had spread out in line, "you an' me will take the likeliest line. You ought to know every spot in the covert where it's possible to aim a gun at any one stannin' on top of the steps at The Towers. There can't be many such places. Is there even one? I don't suppose the barefaced scoundrel would dare come out into the open drive. Brodie said Mr. Fenley was shot through the right side while facin' the car, so he bears out both your notion an' Mr. Trenholme's that the bullet kem from the Quarry Wood. What's *your* idea about it? Have you one, or are you just as much in the dark as the rest of us?"

Bates was sour-faced with perplexity. The killing of his employer was already crystallizing in his thoughts into an irrevocable thing, for the butler had lifted aside the dead man's coat and waistcoat, and this had shown him the ghastly evidences of a wound which must have been instantly fatal. Now, a shrewd if narrow intelligence was concentrated on the one tremendous question, "Who hath done this thing?" He looked so worried that the yellow dog, watching him, and quick to interpret his moods, slouched warily at heel; and Farrow, though agog with excitement, saw that his crony was ill at ease because of some twinge of fear or suspicion.

"Speak out, Jim," he urged, dropping his voice to a confidential pitch, lest one of the others might overhear. "Gimme the straight tip, if you can. It need never be known that it kem from you."

"I've a good berth here," muttered the keeper, with seeming irrelevance.

"Tell me something fresh," said Farrow, quickening with grateful memories of many a pheasant and brace of rabbits reposing a brief space in his modest larder.

"So, if I tell you things in confidence like – "

"I've heard 'em from any one but you."

Bates drew a deep breath, only to expel it fiercely between puffed lips.

"It's this way," he growled. "Mr. Robert an' the ol' man didn't hit off, an' there was a deuce of a row between 'em the other day, Saturday it was. My niece, Mary, was a-dustin' the banisters when the two kem out from breakfast, an' she heerd the Gov'nor say: 'That's my last word on the subjec'. I mean to be obeyed this time.'

"'But, look here, pater,' said Mr. Robert – he always calls his father pater, ye know – 'I reelly can't arrange matters in that offhand way. You must give me time.' 'Not another minute,' said Mr. Fenley. 'Oh, dash it all,' said Mr. Robert, 'you're enough to drive a fellow crazy. At times I almost forget that I'm your son. Some fellows would be tempted to blow their brains out, an' yours, too.'

"At that, Tomlinson broke in, an' grabbed Mr. Robert's arm, an' the Gov'nor went off in the car in a fine ol' temper. Mr. Robert left The Towers on his motor bike soon afterward, an' he hasn't been back since."

Although the fount of information temporarily ran dry, Farrow felt that there was more to come if its secret springs were tapped.

"Did Mary drop a hint as to what the row was about?" he inquired.

"She guessed it had something to do with Miss Sylvia."

"Why Miss Sylvia?"

"She an' Mr. Robert are pretty good friends, you see."

"I see." The policeman saw little, but each scrap of news might fit into its place presently.

"Is that all?" he went on. They were nearing that part of the wood where care must be exercised, and he wanted Bates to talk while in the vein.

"No, not by a long way," burst out the keeper, seemingly unable to contain any longer the deadly knowledge weighing on his conscience. "Don't you try an' hold me to it, Farrow, or I'll swear black an' blue I never said it; but I knew the ring of the shot that killed my poor ol' guv'nor. It was fired from an express rifle, an' there's on'y one of the sort in Roxton, so far as *I've* ever seen. An' it is, or ought to be, in Mr. Robert's sittin'-room at this very minute. There! Now you've got it. Do as you like. Get Tomlinson to talk, or anybody else, but keep me out of it – d'ye hear?"

"I hear," said Farrow, thrilling with the consciousness that when some dandy detective arrived from the "Yard," he would receive an eye-opener from a certain humble member of the Hertfordshire constabulary. Not that he quite brought himself to believe Robert Fenley his father's murderer. That was going rather far. That would, indeed, be a monstrous assumption as matters stood. But as clues the quarrel and the rifle were excellent, and Scotland Yard must recognize them in that light.

Certainly, this *was* an unusual case; most unusual. He was well aware of the reputation attached to Robert Fenley, the banker's younger son, who differed from his brother in every essential. Hilton was steady-going, business-like, his father's secretary and right hand in affairs, both in the bank and in matters affecting the estate. Robert, almost unmanageable as a youth, had grown into an exceedingly rapid young man about town. But Roxton folk feared Hilton and liked Robert; and local gossip had deplored Robert's wildness, which might erect an insurmountable barrier against an obviously suitable match between him and Mr. Mortimer Fenley's ward, the rich and beautiful Sylvia Manning.

These things were vivid in the policeman's mind, and he was wondering how the puzzle would explain itself in the long run, when an exclamation from Bates brought his vagrom speculations sharply back to the problem of the moment.

The keeper, of course, as Farrow had said, was making straight for the one place in the Quarry Wood which commanded a clear view of the entrance to the mansion. The two men were skirting the disused quarry, now a rabbit warren, which gave the locality its name; they followed the rising edge of the excavation, treading on a broad strip of turf, purposely freed of encroaching briers lest any wandering stranger might plunge headlong into the pit. Near the highest part of the rock wall there was a slight depression in the ground; and here, except during the height of a phenomenally dry Summer, the surface was always moist.

Bates, who was leading, had halted suddenly. He pointed to three well marked footprints.

"Who's been here, an' not so long ago, neither?" he said, darting ferret eyes now at the telltale marks and now into the quarry beneath or through the solemn aisle of trees.

"Stick in some twigs, an' let's hurry on," said Farrow. "Footprints are first rate, but they'll keep for an hour or two."

Thirty yards away, and somewhat to the right, a hump of rock formed the Mont Blanc of that tiny Alp. From its summit, and from no other part of the wood, they could see the east front of The Towers. In fact, while perched there, having climbed its shoulder with great care lest certain definite tokens of a recent intruder should be obliterated, they discovered a dusty motor car ranged between the doctor's runabout and the Fenley limousine, which had returned.

The doctor and Miss Sylvia Manning were standing on the broad mosaic which adorned the landing above the steps, standing exactly where Mortimer Fenley had stood when he was stricken to death. With them were two strangers: one tall, burly and official-looking; the other a shrunken little man, whose straw hat, short jacket, and clean-shaven face conveyed, at the distance, a curiously juvenile aspect.

Halfway down the steps were Hilton Fenley and Brodie, and all were gazing fixedly at that part of the wood where the keeper and the policeman had popped into view.

"Hello!" said Bates. "Who is that little lot?"

Clearly, he meant the big man and his diminutive companion. Farrow coughed importantly.

"That's Scotland Yard," he said.

"Who?"

"Detectives from the Yard. Mr. Hilton telephoned for 'em. An' wot's more, they're signalin' to us."

"They want us to go back," said Bates.

"Mebbe."

"There can't be any doubt about it." And, indeed, only a blind man could have been skeptical as to the wishes of the group near the door.

"I'm goin' through this wood first," announced Farrow firmly. "Mind how you get down. Them marks may be useful. I'm almost sure the scoundrel fired from this very spot."

"Looks like it," agreed Bates, and they descended.

Five minutes later they were in the open park, where their assistant scouts awaited them. None of the others had found any indication of a stranger's presence, and Farrow led them to the house in Indian file, by a path.

"Scotland Yard is on the job," he announced. "Now we'll be told just wot we reelly ought to have done!"

He did not even exchange a furtive glance with Bates, but, for the life of him he could not restrain a note of triumph from creeping into his voice. He noticed, too, that Tomlinson, the butler, not only looked white and shaken, which was natural under the circumstances, but had the haggard aspect of a stout man who may soon become thin by stress of fearsome imaginings.

Farrow did not put it that way.

"Bates is right," he said to himself. "Tomlinson has something on his chest. By jingo, this affair *is* a one-er an' no mistake!"

At any rate, local talent had no intention of kowtowing too deeply before the majesty of the "Yard," for the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department himself could have achieved no more in the time than Police Constable Farrow.

CHAPTER III
THE HOUNDS

Superintendent James Leander Winter, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard, had just opened the morning's letters, and was virtuously resisting the placid charms of an open box of cigars, when the telephone bell rang. The speaker was the Assistant Commissioner.

"Leave everything else, and motor to Roxton," said the calm voice of authority. "Mr. Mortimer Fenley, a private banker in the City, was shot dead about nine thirty at his own front door. His place is The Towers, which stands in a park between the villages of Roxton and Easton, in Hertfordshire. His son, who has just telephoned here, believes that a rifle was fired from a neighboring wood, but several minutes elapsed before any one realized that the banker was shot, the first impression of the servants who ran to his assistance when he staggered and fell being that he was suffering from apoplexy. By the time the cause of death was discovered the murderer could have escaped, so no immediate search was organized. Mr. Hilton Fenley, a son, who spoke with difficulty, explained that he thought it best to 'phone here after summoning a doctor. The dead man is of some importance in the City, so I want you to take personal charge of the inquiry."

The voice ceased. Mr. Winter, while listening, had glanced at a clock.

"Nine thirty this morning, sir?" he inquired.

"Yes. The son lost no time. The affair happened a quarter of an hour ago."

"I'll start in five minutes."

"Good. By the way, who will go with you?"

"Mr. Furneaux."

"Excellent. I leave matters in your hands, Superintendent. Let me hear the facts if you return to town before six."

Evidently the Roxton murder was one of the year's big events. It loomed large already in the official mind. Winter called up various departments in quick succession, gave a series of orders, sorted his letters hastily, thrusting some into a drawer and others into a basket on the table, and was lighting a cigar when the door opened and his trusted aide, Detective Inspector Furneaux, entered.

"Ha!" cackled the newcomer; for Winter had confided to him, only the day before, certain reasons why the habit of smoking to excess was injurious, and his (Winter's) resolve to cut down the day's cigars to three, one after each principal meal.

"Circumstances alter cases," said the Superintendent blandly, scrutinizing the Havana to make sure that the outer leaf was burning evenly. "You and I are off for a jaunt in the country, Charles, and the sternest disciplinarian unbends during holiday time."

"Scotland Yard, as well as the other place, is paved with good intentions," said Furneaux.

Winter stooped, and took a couple of automatic pistols from a drawer in the desk at which he was seated.

"Put one of those in your pocket," he said.

Again did his colleague smile derisively.

"So it is only a 'bus driver's holiday?" he cried.

"One never knows. Some prominent banker, name of Fenley, has been shot. There may be more shooting."

"Fenley? Not Mortimer Fenley?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Better than I know you; because you often puzzle me, whereas he struck me as a respectable swindler. Don't you remember those bonds which disappeared so mysteriously two months ago

from the safe of the Mortgage and Discount Bank, and were all sold in Paris before the loss was discovered?"

"By Jove! Is that the Fenley?"

"None other. Of course, you were hob-nobbing with royalty at the time, so such a trifle as the theft of ten thousand pounds' worth of negotiable securities didn't trouble you a bit. I see you're wearing the pin today."

"So would you wear it, if an Emperor deigned to take notice of such a shrimp."

"Shrimp you call me! Imagine a lobster sticking rubies and diamonds into a heliotrope tie!"

Winter winked solemnly.

"I picked up some wrinkles in color blends at the Futurist Exhibition," he said. "But here's Johnston to tell us the car is ready."

The oddly assorted pair followed the constable in uniform, now hurrying ahead to ring for the elevator. The big, bluff, bullet-headed Superintendent was physically well fitted for his responsible position, though he combined with the official demeanor some of the easy-going characteristics of a country squire; but Charles François Furneaux was so unlike the detective of romance and the stage that he often found it difficult to persuade strangers that he was really the famous detective inspector they had heard of in connection with many a celebrated trial.

On the other hand, if one were told that he hailed from the Comédie Française, the legend would be accepted without demur. He had the clean-shaven, wrinkled face of the comedian; his black eyes sparkled with an active intelligence; an expressive mouth bespoke clear and fluent speech; his quick, alert movements were those of the mimetic actor. Winter stood six feet in height, and weighed two hundred and ten pounds; Furneaux was six inches shorter and eighty pounds lighter. The one was a typical John Bull, the other a Channel Islander of pure French descent, and never did more curiously assorted couple follow the trail of a criminal.

Yet, if noteworthy when acting apart, they were almost infallible in combination. More than one eminent scoundrel had either blown out his brains or given himself up to the law when he knew that the Big 'Un and Little 'Un of the Yard were hot on his track. Winter seldom failed to arrive at the only sound conclusion from ascertained facts, whereas Furneaux had an almost uncanny knowledge of the kinks and obliquities of the criminal mind. In the phraseology of logic, Winter applied the deductive method and Furneaux the inductive; when both fastened on to the same "suspect" the unlucky wight was in parlous state.

It may be taken for granted, therefore, that the Assistant Commissioner knew what he was about in uttering his satisfaction at the Superintendent's choice of an assistant. Possibly he had the earlier bond robbery in mind, and expected now that another "mystery" would be solved. Scotland Yard guards many secrets which shirk the glare of publicity. Some may never be explained; but by far the larger proportion are cleared up unexpectedly by incidents which may occur months or years afterward, and whose connection with the original crime is indiscernible until some chance discovery lays bare the hidden clue.

One queer feature of the partnership between the two was their habit of chaffing and bickering at each other during the early stages of a joint hunt. They were like hounds giving tongue joyously when laid on the scent; dangerous then, they became mute and deadly when the quarry was in sight. In private life they were firm friends; officially, Furneaux was Winter's subordinate, but that fact neither silenced the Jersey man's sarcastic tongue nor stopped Winter from roasting his assistant unmercifully if an opportunity offered.

Their chauffeur took the line through the parks to the Edgware Road, and they talked of anything save "shop" until the speed limit was off and the car was responding gayly to the accelerator. Then Winter threw away the last inch of a good cigar, involuntarily put his hand to a well-filled case for its successor, sighed, and dropped his hand again.

"Force of habit," he said, finding Furneaux's eye on him.

"I didn't even think evil," was the reply.

"I really mustn't smoke so much," said Winter plaintively.

"Oh, for goodness' sake light up and be happy. If you sit there nursing your self-righteousness you'll be like a bear with a sore head before we pass Stanmore. Besides, consider me. I like the smell of tobacco, though my finer nervous system will not endure its use."

"Finer fiddlesticks," said Winter, cutting the end off a fresh Havana. "Now tell me about Fenley and the ten thousand. What's his other name? I forget – Alexander, is it?"

"No, nor Xenophon. Just Mortimer. He ran a private bank in Bishopsgate Street, and that, as you know, generally hides a company promoter. Frankly, I was bothered by Fenley at first. I believe he lost the bonds right enough, for he gave the numbers, and was horribly upset when it was found they had been sold in Paris. But, to my idea, he either stole them himself and was relieved of them later or was victimized by one of his sons.

"The only other person who could have taken them was the cashier, a hoary-headed old boy who resides at Epping, and has not changed his method of living since he first wore a silk hat and caught the eight-forty to the City one morning fifty years ago. I followed him home on a Saturday afternoon. The bookstall clerk at Liverpool Street handed him *The Amateur Gardener*, and the old boy read it in the train. Five minutes after he had reached his house he was out on the lawn with a daisy fork. No; the cashier didn't arrange the Paris sale."

"What of the sons?"

"The elder, Hilton Fenley, is a neurotic, like myself, so he would shine with equal luster as a saint, or a detective, or a dyed-in-the-wool thief. The younger, Robert, ought to be an explorer, or a steeplechase jockey, or an airman. In reality, he is a first-rate wastrel. In my distress I harked back to the old man, to whom the loss of the bonds represented something considerably less than a year's expenditure. He is mixed up in all sorts of enterprises – rubber, tea, picture palaces, breweries and automobile finance. He lent fifty thousand pounds on five per cent. first mortgage bonds to one firm at Coventry, and half that amount to a rival show in West London. So he has the stuff, and plenty of it. Yet – "

Winter nodded.

"I know the sort of man. Dealing in millions today; tomorrow in the dock at the Old Bailey."

"The point is that Fenley has never dealt in millions, and has kept his head high for twenty years. Just twenty years, by the way. Before that he was unknown. He began by the amalgamation of some tea plantations in Assam. Fine word, 'amalgamation.' It means money, all the time. Can't we amalgamate something, or somebody?"

"In Fenley's case it led to assassination."

"Perhaps. I have a feeling in my bones that if I knew who touched the proceeds of those bonds I might understand why some one shot Fenley this morning."

"I'll soon tell you a trivial thing like that," said Winter, affecting a close interest in the landscape.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if you did," said Furneaux. "You have the luck of a Carnegie. Look at the way you bungled that affair of Lady Morris's diamonds, until you happened to see her maid meeting Gentleman George at the White City."

Winter smoked complacently.

"Smartest thing I ever did," he chortled. "Fixed on the thief within half an hour, and never lost touch till I knew how she had worked the job."

"The Bow Street method."

"Why didn't you try something of the sort with regard to Fenley's bonds?"

"I couldn't be crude, even with a City financier. I put it gently that the money was in the family; he blinked at me like an owl, said that he would give thought to the suggestion, and shut down the inquiry by telephone before I reached the Yard from his office."

"Oh, he did, did he? It seems to me you've made a pretty good guess in associating the bonds and the murder. You've seen both sons, of course?"

"Yes, often."

"Are there other members of the family?"

"An invalid wife, never away from The Towers; and a young lady, Miss Sylvia Manning – a ward, and worth a pile. By the way, she's twenty. Mortimer Fenley, had he lived, was appointed her guardian and trustee till she reached twenty-one."

"Twenty!" mused Winter.

"Yes, twice ten," snapped Furneaux.

"And Fenley has cut a figure in the City for twenty years."

"I was sure your gray matter would be stimulated by its favorite poison."

"Charles, this should be an easy thing."

"I'm not so sure. Dead men tell no tales, and Fenley himself could probably supply many chapters of an exciting story. They will be missing. Look at the repeated failures of eminent authors to complete 'Edwin Drood.' How would they have fared if asked to produce the beginning?"

"Still, I'm glad you attended to those bonds. Who had charge of the Paris end?"

"Jacques Faure."

"Ah, a good man."

"Pretty fair, for a Frenchman."

Winter laughed.

"You born frog!" he cried… "Hello, there's a Roxton sign post. Now let's compose our features. We are near The Towers."

The estate figured on the county map, so the chauffeur pulled up at the right gate. A woman came from the lodge to inquire their business, and admitted the car when told that its occupants had been summoned by Mr. Hilton Fenley.

"By the way," said Furneaux carelessly, "is Mr. Robert at home?"

"No, sir."

"When did he leave?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir."

Mrs. Bates knew quite well, and Furneaux knew that she knew.

"The country domestic is the detective's aversion," he said as the car whirred into the avenue. "The lady of the lodge will be a sufficiently tough proposition if we try to drag information out of her, but the real tug of war will come when we tackle the family butler."

"Her husband is also the head keeper," said Winter.

"Name of Bates," added Furneaux.

"Oh, you've been here before, then?"

"No. While you were taking stock of the kennels generally, I was deciphering a printed label on a box of dog biscuit."

"I hardly feel that I've begun this inquiry yet," said Winter airily.

"You'd better pull yourself together. The dead man's limousine is still waiting at the door, and the local doctor is in attendance."

"Walter J. Stern, M.D."

"Probably. That brass plate on the Georgian house in the center of the village positively glistened."

They were received by Hilton Fenley himself, all the available men servants having been transferred to the cohort organized and directed by Police Constable Farrow.

"Good morning, Mr. Furneaux," said Fenley. "I little thought, when last we met, that I should be compelled to seek your help so soon again, and under such dreadful circumstances."

Furneaux, whose face could display at will a Japanese liveliness of expression or become a mask of Indian gravity, surveyed the speaker with inscrutable eyes.

"This is Superintendent Winter, Chief of my Department," he said.

"The Assistant Commissioner told me to take charge of the inquiry without delay, sir," explained Winter. He glanced at his watch. "We have not been long on the road. It is only twenty minutes to eleven."

Fenley led them through a spacious hall into a dining-room on the left. On an oak settee at the back of the hall the outline of a white sheet was eloquent of the grim object beneath. In the dining-room were an elderly man and a slim, white-faced girl. Had Trenholme been present he would have noted with interest that her dress was of white muslin dotted with tiny blue spots – not *fleurs de lys*, but rather resembling them.

"Dr. Stern, and Miss Sylvia Manning," said Fenley to the newcomers. Then he introduced the Scotland Yard men in turn. By this time the young head of the family had schooled himself to a degree of self-control. His sallow skin held a greenish pallor, and as if to satisfy some instinct that demanded movement he took an occasional slow stride across the parquet floor or brushed a hand wearily over his eyes. Otherwise he had mastered his voice, and spoke without the gasping pauses which had made distressful his words to Farrow.

"Ours is a sad errand, Mr. Fenley," began Winter, after a hasty glance at the table, which still bore the disordered array of breakfast. "But, if you feel equal to the task, you might tell us exactly what happened."

Fenley nodded.

"Of course, of course," he said quietly. "That is essential. We three, my father, Miss Manning and myself, breakfasted together. The second gong goes every morning at eight forty-five, and we were fairly punctual today. My father and Sylvia, Miss Manning, came in together – they had been talking in the hall previously. I saw them entering the room as I came downstairs. During the meal we chatted about affairs in the East; that is, my father and I did, and Syl – Miss Manning – gave us some news of a church bazaar in which she is taking part.

"My father rose first and went to his room, to collect papers brought from the City overnight. I met him on the stairs, and he gave me some instructions about a prospectus. (Let me interpolate that I was going to Victoria by a later train, having an appointment at eleven o'clock with Lord Ventnor, chairman of a company we are bringing out.) I stood on the stairs, saying something, while my father crossed the hall and took his hat and gloves from Harris, the footman. As I passed along the gallery to my own room I saw him standing on the landing at the top of the steps.

"He was cutting the end off a cigar, and Harris was just behind him and a little to the left, striking a match. Every fine morning my father lighted a cigar there. In rain or high wind he would light up inside the house. By the way, my mother is an invalid, and dislikes the smell of tobacco, so unless we have guests we don't smoke indoors.

"Well, I had reached my room, a sitting-room adjoining my bedroom, when I heard a gunshot. Apparently it came from the Quarry Wood, and I was surprised, because there is no shooting at this season. A little later – some few seconds – I heard Sylvia scream. I did not rush out instantly to discover the cause. Young ladies sometimes scream at wasps and caterpillars. Then I heard Tomlinson say, 'Fetch Mr. Hilton at once,' and I ran into Harris, who blurted out, 'Mr. Fenley has been shot, sir.'

"After that, I scarcely know what I said or how I acted. I remember running downstairs, and finding my father lying outside the front door, with Sylvia supporting his head and Tomlinson and Brodie trying to lift him. I think – in fact, I am sure now from what Dr. Stern tells me – that my father was dead before I reached him. We all thought at first that he had yielded to some awfully sudden form of paralysis, but some one – Tomlinson, I believe – noticed a hole through the right side of his coat and waistcoat. Then Sylvia – oh, perhaps that is matterless – "

"Every incident, however slight, is of importance in a case of this sort," Winter encouraged him.

"Well, she said – what was it, exactly? Do you remember, Sylvia?"

"Certainly," said the girl, unhesitatingly. "I said that I thought I recognized the sound of Bob's .450. Why shouldn't I say it? Poor Bob didn't shoot his father."

Her voice, though singularly musical, had a tearful ring which became almost hysterical in the vehemence of the question and its disclaimer.

Fenley moved uneasily, and raised his right hand to his eyes, while the left grasped the back of a chair.

"Bob is my brother Robert, who is away from home at this moment," he said, and his tone deprecated the mere allusion to the rifle owned by the absentee. "I only mentioned Miss Manning's words to show how completely at a loss we all were to account for my father's wound. I helped Tomlinson and Brodie to carry him to the settee in the hall. Then we – Tomlinson, that is – opened his waistcoat and shirt. Tomlinson cut the shirt with a scissors, and we saw the wound. Dr. Stern says there are indications that an expanding bullet was used, so the injuries must have been something appalling… Sylvia, don't you think – "

"I'll not faint, or make a scene, if that is what you are afraid of, Hilton," said the girl bravely.

"That is all, then, or nearly all," went on Fenley, in the same dreary, monotonous voice. "I telephoned to Dr. Stern, and to Scotland Yard, deeming it better to communicate with you than with the local police. But it seems that Bates, our head keeper hurrying to investigate the cause of the shot, met some artist coming away from the other side of the wood. The Roxton police constable too, met and spoke with the same man, who told both Bates and the policeman that he heard the shot fired. The policeman, Farrow, refused to arrest the artist, and is now searching the wood with a number of our men – "

"Can't they be stopped?" broke in Furneaux, speaking for the first time.

"Yes, of course," and Hilton Fenley became a trifle more animated. "I wanted Farrow to wait till you came, but he insisted – said the murderer might be hiding there."

"When did Farrow arrive?"

"Oh, more than half an hour after my father was shot. I forgot to mention that my mother knows nothing of the tragedy yet. That is why we did not carry my poor father's body upstairs. She might overhear the shuffling of feet, and ask the cause."

"One thing more, Mr. Fenley," said Winter, seeing that the other had made an end. "Have you the remotest reason to believe that any person harbored a grievance against your father such as might lead to the commission of a crime of this nature?"

"I've been torturing my mind with that problem since I realized that my father was dead, and I can say candidly that he had no enemies. Of course, in business, one interferes occasionally with other men's projects, but people in the City do not shoot successful opponents."

"No private feud? No dismissed servant, sent off because of theft or drunkenness?"

"Absolutely none, to my knowledge. The youngest man on the estate has been employed here five or six years."

"It is a very extraordinary crime, Mr. Fenley."

For answer, the other sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"How can we get those clodhoppers out of the wood?" said Furneaux. His thin, high-pitched voice dispelled the tension, and Fenley dropped his hands.

"Bates is certain to make for a rock which commands a view of the house," he said. "Perhaps, if we go to the door, we may see them."

He arose with obvious effort, but walked steadily enough. Winter followed with the doctor, and inquired in an undertone —

"Are you sure about the soft-nosed bullet, doctor?"

"Quite," was the answer. "I was in the Tirah campaign, and saw hundreds of such wounds."

Furneaux, too, had something to say to Miss Manning.

"How were you seated during breakfast?" he asked.

She showed him. It was a large room. Two windows looked down the avenue, and three into the garden, with its background of timber and park. Mr. Mortimer Fenley could have commanded both views; his son sat with his back to the park; the girl had faced it.

"I need hardly put it to you, but you saw no one in or near the trees?" said Furneaux.

"Not a soul. I bathe in a little lake below those cedars every morning, and it is an estate order that the men do not go in that direction between eight and nine o'clock. Of course, a keeper might have passed at nine thirty, but it is most unlikely."

"Did you bathe this morning?"

"Yes, soon after eight."

"Did you see the artist of whom Mr. Fenley spoke?"

"No. This is the first I have heard of any artist. Bates must have mentioned him while I was with Dr. Stern."

When Farrow arrived at the head of his legion he was just in time to salute his Inspector, who had cycled from Easton after receiving the news left by the chauffeur at the police station. Farrow was bursting with impatience to reveal the discoveries he had made, though resolved to keep locked in his own breast the secret confided by Bates. He was thoroughly nonplussed, therefore, when Winter, after listening in silence to the account of the footprints and scratches on the moss-covered surface of the rock, turned to Hilton Fenley.

"With reference to the rifle which has been mentioned – where is it kept?" he said.

"In my brother's room. He bought it nearly a year ago, when he was planning an expedition to Somaliland."

"May I see it?"

Fenley signed to the butler, who was standing with the others at a little distance.

"You know the .450 Express which is in the gun rack in Mr. Robert's den?" he said. "Bring it to the Superintendent."

Tomlinson, shaken but dignified, and rather purple of face as the result of the tramp through the trees, went indoors. Soon he came back, and the rich tint had faded again from his complexion.

"Sorry, sir," he said huskily, "but the rifle is not there."

"Not there!"

It was Sylvia Manning who spoke; the others received this sinister fact in silence.

"No, miss."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Fenley.

"It is not in the gun rack, sir, nor in any of the corners."

There was a pause. Fenley clearly forced the next words.

"That's all right. Bates may have it in the gun room. We'll ask him. Or Mr. Robert may have taken it to the makers. I remember now he spoke of having the sight fitted with some new appliance."

He called Bates. No, the missing rifle was not in the gun room. Somehow the notion was forming in certain minds that it could not be there. Indeed, the keeper's confusion was so marked that Furneaux's glance dwelt on him for a contemplative second.

CHAPTER IV
Breaking Cover

Winter drew the local Inspector aside. "This inquiry rests with you in the first instance," he said. "Mr. Furneaux and I are here only to assist. Mr. Fenley telephoned to the Commissioner, mainly because Scotland Yard was called in to investigate a bond robbery which took place in the Fenley Bank some two months ago. Probably you never heard of it. Will you kindly explain our position to your Chief Constable? Of course, we shall work with you and through you, but my colleague has reason to believe that the theft of the bonds may have some bearing on this murder, and, as the securities were disposed of in Paris, it is more than likely that the Yard may be helpful."

"I fully understand, sir," said the Inspector, secretly delighted at the prospect of joining in the hunt with two such renowned detectives. The combined parishes of Easton and Roxton seldom produced a crime of greater magnitude than the theft of a duck. The arrest of a burglar who broke into a villa, found a decanter of whisky, and got so hopelessly drunk that he woke up in a cell at the police station, was an event of such magnitude that its memory was still lively, though the leading personage was now out on ticket of leave after serving five years in various penal settlements.

"You will prepare and give the formal evidence at the inquest, which will be opened tomorrow," went on Winter. "All that is really necessary is identification and a brief statement by the doctor. Then the coroner will issue the burial certificate, and the inquiry should be adjourned for a fortnight. I would recommend discretion in choosing a jury. Avoid busybodies like the plague. Summons only sensible men, who will do as they are told and ask no questions."

"Exactly," said the Inspector; he found Machiavellian art in these simple instructions. How it broadened the horizon to be brought in touch with London!

Winter turned to look for Furneaux. The little man was standing where Mortimer Fenley had stood in the last moment of his life. His eyes were fixed on the wood. He seemed to be dreaming, but his friend well knew how much clarity and almost supernatural vision was associated with Furneaux's dreams.

"Charles!" said the Superintendent softly.

Furneaux awoke, and ran down the steps. In his straw hat and light Summer suit he looked absurdly boyish, but the Inspector, who had formed an erroneous first impression, was positively startled when he met those blazing black eyes.

"Mr. Fenley should warn all his servants to speak fully and candidly," said Winter. "Then we shall question the witnesses separately. What do you think? Shall we start now?"

"First, the boots," cried Furneaux, seemingly voicing a thought. "We want a worn pair of boots belonging to each person in the house and employed on the estate, men and women, no exceptions, including the dead man's. Then we'll visit that wood. After that, the inquiry."

Winter nodded. When Furneaux and he were in pursuit of a criminal they dropped all nice distinctions of rank. If one made a suggestion the other adopted it without comment unless he could urge some convincing argument against it.

"Mr. Fenley should give his orders now," added Furneaux.

Winter explained his wishes to the nominal head of the household, and Fenley's compliance was ready and explicit.

"These gentlemen from Scotland Yard are acting in behalf of Mrs. Fenley, my brother and myself," he said to the assembled servants. "You must obey them as you would obey me. I place matters unreservedly in their hands."

"And our questions should be answered without reserve," put in Winter.

"Yes, of course. I implied that. At any rate, it is clear now."

"Brodie," said Furneaux, seeming to pounce on the chauffeur, "you were seated at the wheel when the shot was fired?"

"Ye – yes, sir," stuttered Brodie, rather taken aback by the little man's suddenness.

"Were you looking at the wood?"

"In a sort of a way, sir."

"Did you see any one among the trees?"

"No, sir, that I didn't." This more confidently.

"Place your car where it was stationed then. Take your seat, and try to imagine that you are waiting for your master. Start the engine, and behave exactly as though you expected him to enter the car. Don't watch the wood. I mean that you are not to avoid looking at it, but just throw yourself back to the condition of mind you were in at nine twenty-five this morning. Can you manage that?"

"I think so, sir."

"No chatting with others, you know. Fancy you are about to take Mr. Fenley to the station. If you should happen to see me, wave your hand. Then you can get down and stop the engine. You understand you are not to keep a sharp lookout for me?"

"Yes, sir."

The butler thought it would take a quarter of an hour to collect sample pairs of boots from the house and outlying cottages. Police Constable Farrow was instructed to bring the butler and the array of boots to the place where the footprints were found, and Bates led the detectives and the Inspector thither at once.

Soon the four men were gazing at the telltale marks, and the Inspector, of course, was ready with a shrewd comment.

"Whoever it was that came this way, he didn't take much trouble to hide his tracks," he said.

The Scotland Yard experts were so obviously impressed that the Inspector tried a higher flight.

"They're a man's boots," he continued. "We needn't have worried Tomlinson to gather the maids' footgear."

Furneaux left two neat imprints in the damp soil.

"Bet you a penny whistle there are at least two women in The Towers who will make bigger blobs than these," he said.

A penny whistle, as a wager, is what Police Constable Farrow would term "unusual."

"Quite so," said the Inspector thoughtfully.

Winter caught Furneaux's eye, and frowned. There was nothing to be gained by taking a rise out of the local constabulary. Still, he gave one sharp glance at both sets of footprints. Then he looked at Furneaux again, this time with a smile.

The party passed on to the rock on the higher ground. Bates pointed out the old scratches, and those made by Farrow and himself.

"Me first!" cried Furneaux, darting nimbly to the summit. He was not there a second before he signaled to some one invisible from beneath. Winter joined him, and the east front of the house burst into view. Brodie was in the act of descending from the car. The doctor had gone. A small group of men were gazing at the wood, but Hilton Fenley and Sylvia Manning were not to be seen.

Neither man uttered a word. They looked at the rock under their feet, at the surrounding trees, oak and ash, elm and larch, all of mature growth, and towering thirty to forty feet above their heads, while the rock itself rose some twelve feet from the general level of the sloping ground.

Bates was watching them.

"The fact is, gentlemen, that if an oak an' a couple o' spruce first hadn't been cut down you wouldn't see the house even from where you are," he said. "Mr. Fenley had an idee of buildin' a shelter on this rock, but he let it alone 'coss o' the birds. Ladies would be comin' here, an' a-disturbin' of 'em."

The detectives came down. Furneaux, meaning to put the Inspector in the right frame of mind, said confidentially —

"Brodie saw me instantly."

"Did he, now? It follows that he would have seen any one who fired at Mr. Fenley from that spot."

"It almost follows. We must guard against assuming a chance as a certainty."

"Oh, yes."

"And we must also try to avoid fitting facts into preconceived notions. Now, while the butler is gathering old boots, let us spend a few profitable minutes in this locality."

After that, any trace of soreness in the inspectorial breast was completely obliterated.

Both Winter and Furneaux produced strong magnifying-glasses, and scrutinized the scratches and impressions on the bare rock and moss. Bates, skilled in wood lore, was quick to note what they had discerned at a glance.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen both, but may I put in a word?" he muttered awkwardly.

"As many as you like," Winter assured him.

"Well, these here marks was made by Farrow an' meself, say about ten forty, or a trifle over an hour after the murder; an' I have no sort o' doubt as these other marks are a day or two days older."

"You might even put it at three days," agreed Winter.

"Then it follows – " began the Inspector, but checked himself. He was becoming slightly mixed as to the exact sequence of events.

"Come, now, Bates," said Furneaux, "you can tell us the day Mr. Robert Fenley left home recently? There is no harm in mentioning his name. It can't help being in our thoughts, since it was discovered that his gun was missing."

"He went off on a motor bicycle last Saturday mornin', sir."

"Can you fix the hour?"

"About half past ten."

"You have not seen him since?"

"No, sir."

"You would be likely to know if he had returned?"

"Certain, sir, unless he kem by the Roxton gate."

"Oh, is there another entrance?"

"Yes, but it can't be used, 'cept by people on foot. The big gates are always locked, and the road has been grassed over, an' not so many folk know of a right of way. Of course, Mr. Robert knows."

Bates was disturbed. He expected to be cross-examined farther, but, to his manifest relief, the ordeal was postponed. Winter and Furneaux commenced a careful scrutiny of the ground behind the rock. They struck off on different paths, but came together at a little distance.

"The trees," murmured Winter.

"Yes, when we are alone."

"Have you noticed – "

"These curious pads. They mean a lot. It's not so easy, James."

"I'm growing interested, I admit."

They rejoined the others.

"Did you tell me that only you and Police Constable Farrow visited this part of the wood?" said Furneaux to Bates.

"I don't remember tellin' you, sir, but that's the fact," said the keeper.

"Well, warn all the estate hands to keep away from this section during the next few days. You will give orders to Farrow to that effect, Inspector?"

"Yes. If they go trampling all over, you won't know where you are when it comes to a close search," was the cheerful answer. "Now, about that gun – it must be hidden somewhere in the undergrowth. The man who fired it would never dare to carry it along an open road on a fine morning like this, when everybody is astir."

"You're undoubtedly right," said Winter. "But here come assorted boots. They may help us a bit."

Tomlinson was a man of method. He and Farrow had brought two wicker baskets, such as are used in laundry work. He was rather breathless.

"House – and estate," he wheezed, pointing to each basket in turn.

"Go ahead, Furneaux," said Winter. "Because I ought to stoop, I don't."

The little man choked back some gibe; the presence of strangers enforced respect to his chief. He took a thin folding rule of aluminum from a waistcoat pocket, and applied it to the most clearly defined of the three footprints. Then beginning at the "house" basket, he ran over the contents rapidly. One pair of boots he set aside. After testing the "estate" basket without success, he seized one of the selected pair, and pressed it into the earth close to an original print. He looked up at Tomlinson, who was in a violent perspiration.

"Whose boot is this?" he asked.

"God help us, sir, it's Mr. Robert's!" said Tomlinson in an agonized tone.

The Inspector, Farrow and Bates were visibly thrilled; but Furneaux only sank back on his heels, and peered at the boot.

"I don't understand why any one should feel upset because these footprints (which, by the way, were not made by this pair of boots) happen to resemble marks which may have been made by Mr. Robert Fenley," he said, apparently talking to himself. "These marks are three or four days old. Mr. Robert Fenley went away on Saturday. Today is Wednesday. He may have been here on Saturday morning. What does it matter if he was? The man who murdered his father must have been here two hours ago."

Sensation! Tomlinson mopped his forehead with a handkerchief already a wet rag; Farrow, not daring to interfere, nibbled his chin strap; Bates scowled with relief. But the Inspector, after a husky cough, spoke.

"Would you mind telling me, Mr. Furneaux, why you are so sure?" he said.

"Now, Professor Bates, you tell him," cackled Furneaux.

The keeper dropped on his knees by the side of the detective, and gazed critically at the marks.

"At this time o' year, gentlemen, things do grow wonderful," he said slowly. "In this sort o' ground, where there's wet an' shade, there's a kind o' constant movement. This here new print is clean, an' the broken grass an' crushed leaves haven't had time to straighten themselves, as one might say. But, in this other lot, the shoots are commencin' to perk up, an' insec's have stirred the mold. It's just the difference atween a new run for rabbits and an old 'un."

"Thank you, Bates," broke in Winter sharply. "Now, we must not waste any more time in demonstrations. Mr. Furneaux explained this thing purposely, to show the folly of jumping at conclusions. Innocent men have been hanged before today on just such evidence as this. We should deem ourselves lucky that these footprints were found so soon after the crime was committed. Tomorrow, or next day, there might have been a doubt in our minds. Luckily there is none. The man who shot Mr. Fenley this morning – " he paused; Furneaux alone appreciated his difficulty – "could not possibly have left those marks today."

It was a lame ending, but it sufficed. Four of his hearers took him to mean that the unknown, whose feet had left their impress in the soil could not have been the murderer; but Furneaux growled in French —

"You tripped badly that time, my friend. You need another cigar!"

Seemingly, he was soliloquizing, and none understood except the one person for whose benefit the sarcasm was intended.

Winter felt the spur, but because he was a really great detective it only stimulated him. Nothing more was said until the little procession reached the avenue. During their brief disappearance in the leafy depths two cars and three motor cycles had arrived at The Towers. A glance sufficed.

The newspapers had heard of the murder; this was the advance guard of an army of reporters and photographers. Winter buttonholed the Inspector.

"I'll tell you the most valuable service you can render at this moment," he said. "Arrange that a constable shall mount guard at the rock till nightfall. Then place two on duty. With four men you can provide the necessary reliefs, but I want that place watched continuously, and intruders warned off till further notice. This man who happens to be here might go on duty immediately. Then you can make your plans at leisure."

Thus, by the quaint contriving of chance, Police Constable Farrow, whose stalwart form and stubborn zeal had blocked the path to the Quarry Wood since a few minutes after ten o'clock, was deputed to continue that particular duty till a comrade took his place.

His face fell when he heard that he was condemned to solitude, shut out from all the excitement of the hour, debarred even, as he imagined, from standing on the rock and watching the comings and goings at the mansion. But Winter was a kindly if far-seeing student of human nature.

"It will be a bit slow for you," he said, when the Inspector had given Farrow his orders. "But you can amuse yourself by an occasional peep at the landscape, and there is no reason why you shouldn't smoke."

Farrow saluted.

"Do you mean, sir, that I can show myself?"

"Why not? The mere fact that your presence is known will warn off priers. Remember – no one, absolutely no one except the police, is to be allowed to pass the quarry, or approach from any side within hailing distance."

"Not even from the house, sir?"

"Exactly. Mr. Fenley and Miss Manning may be told, if necessary, why you are there, and I am sure they will respect my wishes."

Farrow turned back. It was not so bad, then. These Scotland Yard fellows had chosen him for an important post, and that hint about a pipe was distinctly human. Odd thing, too, that Mr. Robert Fenley was not expected to put in an appearance, or the Superintendent would have mentioned him with the others.

On reaching the house there were evidences of disturbance. Hilton Fenley stood in the doorway, and was haranguing the newspaper men in a voice harsh with anger. This intrusion was unwarranted, illegal, impudent. He would have them expelled by force. When he caught sight of the Inspector he demanded fiercely that names and addresses should be taken, so that his solicitors might issue summonses for trespass.

All this, of course, made excellent copy, and Winter put an end to the scene by drawing the reporters aside and giving them a fairly complete account of the murder. Incidentally, he sent off the Inspector post haste on his bicycle to station a constable at each gate, and stop the coming invasion. The house telephone, too, closed the main gate effectually, so when the earliest scouts had rushed away to connect with Fleet Street order was restored.

Winter was puzzled by Fenley's display of passion. It was only to be expected that the newspapers would break out in a rash of black headlines over the murder of a prominent London financier. By hook or by crook, journalism would triumph. He had often been amazed at the extent and accuracy of news items concerning the most secret inquiries. Of course the reporters sometimes missed the heart of an intricate case. In this instance, they had never heard of the bond robbery, though the numbers of the stolen securities had been advertised widely. Moreover, he was free to admit that if every fact known to the police were published broadcast, no one would be a penny the worse; for thus far the crime was singularly lacking in motive.

Meanwhile Furneaux had fastened on to Brodie again.

"You saw me at once?" he began.

"I couldn't miss you, sir," said the chauffeur, a solid, stolid mechanic, who understood his engine and a road map thoroughly, and left the rest to Providence. "I wasn't payin' particular attention, yet I twigged you the minute you popped up."

"So it is reasonable to suppose that if any one had appeared in that same place this morning and taken steady aim at Mr. Fenley, you would have twigged him, too."

"It strikes me that way, sir."

"Did you see nothing – not even a puff of smoke? You must certainly have looked at the wood when you heard the shot."

"I did, sir. Not a leaf moved. Just a couple of pheasants flew out, and the rooks around the house kicked up such a row that I didn't know the Guv'nor was down till Harris shouted."

"Where did the pheasants fly from?"

"They kem out a bit below the rock; but they were risin' birds, an' may have started from the ground higher up."

"No birds were startled before the shot was fired?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. But June pheasants are very tame, and they lie marvelous close. A pheasant would just as soon run as fly."

The detectives began a detailed inquiry almost at once. It covered the ground already traversed, and the only new incident happened when Hilton Fenley, at the moment repeating his evidence, was called to the telephone.

"If either of you cares to smoke there are cigars and Virginia cigarettes on the sideboard," he said. "Or, if you prefer Turkish, here are some," and he laid a gold case on the table. Furneaux grabbed it when the door had closed.

"All neurotics use Turkish cigarettes," he said solemnly. "Ah, I guessed it! A strong, vile, scented brand!"

"Sometimes, my dear Charles, you talk rubbish," sighed Winter.

"Maybe. I never think or smoke it. 'Language was given us to conceal our thoughts,' said Talleyrand. I have always admired Talleyrand, 'that rather middling bishop but very eminent knave,' as de Quincey called him. '*Cré nom!* I wonder what de Quincey meant by 'middling.' A man who could keep in the front rank under the Bourbons, during the Revolution, with Napoleon, and back again under the Bourbons, and yet die in bed, must have been superhuman. St. Peter, in his stead, would have lost his napper at least four times."

Winter stirred uneasily, and gazed out across the Italian garden and park, for the detectives were again installed in the dining-room.

"What about that artist, Trenholme?" he said after a pause.

"We'll look him up. Before leaving this house I want to peep into various rooms. And there's Tomlinson. Tomlinson is a rich mine. Do leave him to me. I'll dig into him deep, and extract ore of high percentage – see if I don't."

"Do you know, Charles, I've a notion that we shall get closer to bed-rock in London than here."

Furneaux pretended to look for an invisible halo surrounding his chief's close-cropped bullet head.

"Sometimes," he said reverently, "you frighten me when you bring off a brilliant remark like that. I seem to see lightning zigzagging round Jove's dome."

Fenley returned.

"It was a call from the bank," he announced. "They have just seen the newspapers. I told them I would run up to town this afternoon."

"Then you did not telephone Bishopsgate Street earlier?" inquired Winter, permitting himself to be surprised.

"No. I had other things to bother me."

"Now, Mr. Fenley, can you tell me where your brother is?"

"I can not."

He placed a rather unnecessary emphasis on the negative. The question seemed to disturb him. Evidently, if he could consult his own wishes, he would prefer not to discuss his brother.

"I take it he has not been home since leaving here on Saturday?" persisted Winter.

"That is so."

"Had he quarreled with your father?"

"There was a dispute. Really, Mr. Winter, I must decline to go into family affairs."

"But the probability is that the more we know the less our knowledge will affect your brother."

The door opened again. Mr. Winter was wanted on the telephone. Then there happened one of those strange coincidences which Furneaux's caustic wit had christened "Winter's Yorkers," being a quaint play on the lines:

Now is the Winter of our discontent
Made glorious Summer by this sun of York.

For the Superintendent had scarcely squeezed his big body into the telephone box when he became aware of a mixup on the line; a querulous voice was saying:

"I insist on being put through. I am speaking from Mr. Fenley's bank, and it is monstrous that I should be kept waiting. I've been trying for twenty minutes – "

Buzz. The protest was squelched.

"Are you there?" came the calm accents of the Assistant Commissioner.

"Yes, sir," said Winter.

"Any progress?"

"A little. Oddly enough, you are in the nick of time to help materially. Will you ring off, and find out from the exchange who 'phoned here two minutes ago? I don't mean Fenley's Bank, which is just trying to get through. I want to know who made the preceding call, which was effective."

"I understand. Good-by."

Winter explained in the dining-room that the Assistant Commissioner was anxious for news. He had hardly finished when the footman reappeared. A call for Mr. Hilton Fenley.

"Confound the telephone," snapped Fenley. "We won't have a moment's peace all day, I suppose."

Winter winked heavily at Furneaux. He waited until Fenley's hurried footsteps across a creaking parquet floor had died away.

"This is the bank's call," he murmured. "The other was from the Lord knows who. I've put the Yard on the track. I wonder why he lied about it."

"He's a queer sort of brother, too," said Furneaux. "It strikes me he wants to put Robert in the cart."

CHAPTER V
A Family Gathering

Fenley was frowning when he reappeared.

"Another call from the Bank," he said gruffly. "Everything there is at sixes and sevens since the news was howled through the City. That is why I really must go to town later. I'm not altogether sorry. The necessity of bringing my mind to bear on business will leaven the surfeit of horrors I've borne this morning…

"Now, about my brother, Mr. Winter. While listening to Mr. Brown's condolences – you remember Brown, the cashier, Mr. Furneaux – I was thinking of more vital matters. A policy of concealment often defeats its own object, and I have come to the conclusion that you ought to know of a dispute between my father and Robert. There's a woman in the case, of course. It's a rather unpleasant story, too. Poor Bob got entangled with a married woman some months ago. He was infatuated at first, but would have broken it off recently were it not for fear of divorce proceedings."

"Would you make the position a little clearer, sir?" said Winter, who also was listening and thinking. He was quite certain that when he met Mr. Brown he would meet the man who had been worrying a telephone exchange "during the last twenty minutes."

"I – I can't." And Fenley's hand brushed away some imaginary film from before his eyes. "Bob and I never hit it off very well. We're only half brothers, you see."

"Was your father married twice?"

"Am I to reopen a forgotten history?"

"Some person, or persons, may not have forgotten it."

"Well, you must have the full story, if at all. My father was not a well-born man. Thirty years ago he was a trainer in the service of a rich East Indian merchant, Anthony Drummond, of Calcutta, who owned racehorses, and one of Drummond's daughters fell in love with him. They ran away and got married, but the marriage was a failure. She divorced him – by mutual consent, I fancy. Anyhow, *I* was left on his hands.

"He went to Assam, and fell in with a tea planter named Manning, who had a big estate, but neglected it for racing. My father suddenly developed business instincts and Manning made him a partner. Unfortunately – well, that is a hard word, but it applies – my father married again – a girl of his own class; rather beneath it, in fact. Then Bob was born.

"The old man made money, heaps of it. Manning married, but lost his wife when Sylvia came into the world. That broke him up; he drank himself to death, leaving his partner as trustee and guardian for the infant. There was a boom in tea estates; my father sold on the crest of the wave and came to London. He progressed, but Mrs. Fenley – didn't. She was just a Tommy's daughter, and never seemed to try and rise above the level of 'married quarters'.

"I had to mind my p's and q's as a boy, I can assure you. My mother was always thrown in my teeth. Mrs. Fenley called her 'black.' It was a – lie. She was dark-skinned, as I am, but there are Cornish and Welsh folk of much darker complexion. My father, too, shared something of the same prejudice. I had to be the good boy of the family. Otherwise, I should have been turned out, neck and crop.

"As I behaved well, he was forced to depend on me, because Bob did as he liked, with his mother always ready to aid and abet him. Then came this scrape I've spoken of. I believe Bob was being blackmailed. That's the long and the short of it. Now you know the plain, ungarbled facts. Better that they should come from me than reach you with the decorations of gossip and servants' tittle-tattle."

The somewhat strained and metallic voice ceased. Fenley was seated at the corner of the table near the door. Seemingly yielding to that ever-present desire for movement, he pushed with his foot an armchair out of its place at the head of the table.

Sylvia Manning had pointed out that chair to Furneaux as the one occupied by Mortimer Fenley at breakfast.

"Is the first Mrs. Fenley dead?" said Furneaux suddenly.

"I don't think so," said Fenley, after a pause.

"You are not sure?"

"No."

"Have you ever tried to find out?"

"No, I dare not."

"May I ask why?"

"If it were discovered that my mother and I were in communication I would have been given short shrift in the bank."

"Did she marry again?"

"I don't know."

Again there was silence. Furneaux seemed to be satisfied that he was following a blind alley, and Winter became the inquisitor.

"What is the name of the woman with whom your brother is mixed up?"

"I can not tell you, but my father knew."

"What leads you to form that opinion?"

"Some words that passed between Bob and him last Saturday morning."

"Where? Here?"

"Yes, in the hall. Tomlinson heard more distinctly than I. I saw there was trouble brewing, and kept out of it – hung back, on the pretense of reading a newspaper."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.