

Le Queux William

The Red Room



William Le Queux
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Chapter One

Three Inquisitive Men

The fifteenth of January, 1907, fell on a Tuesday. I have good cause to remember it.

In this narrative of startling fact there is little that concerns myself. It is mostly of the doings of others – strange doings though they were, and stranger still, perhaps, that I should be their chronicler.

On that Tuesday morning, just after eleven o'clock, I was busy taking down the engine of one of the cars at my garage in the High Road, Chiswick. Dick, one of my men, had had trouble with the “forty-eight” while bringing home two young gentlemen from Oxford on the previous night, and I was trying to locate the fault.

Suddenly, as I looked up, I saw standing at my side a man who lived a few doors from me in Bath Road, Bedford Park – a man who was a mystery.

He greeted me pleasantly, standing with his hands thrust into the pockets of his shabby black overcoat, while, returning his

salutation, I straightened myself, wondering what had brought him there, and whether he wished to hire a car.

I had known him by sight for a couple of years or more as he passed up and down before my house, but we had not often spoken. Truth to tell, his movements seemed rather erratic and his shabbiness very marked, yet at times he appeared quite spruce and smart, and his absences were so frequent that my wife and I had grown to regard him with considerable suspicion. In the suburbs of London one doesn't mix easily with one's neighbours.

"Can I speak to you privately, Mr Holford?" he asked, with a slight hesitancy and a glance at my chauffeur Dick, who at that moment had his hand in the gear-box.

"Certainly," I said. "Will you step into my office?" And I led the way through the long garage to my private room beyond, through the glass windows of which I could see all the work in progress.

My visitor was, I judged, about fifty, or perhaps fifty-five, an anxious, slight, intellectual-looking man, with hair and moustache turning grey, a pair of keen, dark, troubled eyes, a protruding, well-shaven chin, an aquiline face, sniffing dimly the uncertain future, a complexion somewhat sallow, yet a sinewy, athletic person whose vocation I had on many occasions tried to guess in vain.

Sometimes he dressed quite smartly in clothes undoubtedly cut by a West-End tailor. At others, he slouched along shabby and apparently hard up, as he now was.

My wife – for I had married three years before, just after I had entered the motor business – had from the first put him down as an adventurer, and a person to be avoided. Her woman's instinct generally led to correct conclusions. Indeed, one night, when out with her sister, she had seen him in evening dress, seated in a box at a theatre with a lady, in pale blue and diamonds, and another man; and on a second occasion she had witnessed him at Charing Cross Station registering luggage to the Continent. He had with him two smartly-dressed men, who were seeing him off.

I myself had more than once seen him arrive in a hansom with well-worn suit-cases and travelling kit, and on several occasions, when driving a car through the London traffic, I had caught sight of him in silk hat and frock-coat walking in the West End with his smart friends.

Women are generally inquisitive regarding their neighbours, and my wife was no exception. She had discovered that this Mr Kershaw Kirk was a bachelor, whose home was kept by an unmarried sister, Miss Judith, about nine years his junior. They employed a charwoman every Friday, but, as Miss Kirk's brother was absent so frequently, they preferred not to employ a general servant.

Now, I was rather suspicious of this fact. The man Kirk was a mystery, and servants are always prone to pry into their master's affairs.

My visitor was silent for a few moments after he had taken the chair I had offered. His dark eyes were fixed upon me with a

strange, intense look, until, with some hesitation, he at last said:

“I believe, Mr Holford, you are agent for a new German tyre – the Eckhardt it is called, is it not?”

“I am,” I replied. “I am sole agent in London.”

“Well, I want to examine one,” he exclaimed, “but in strict confidence. Other persons will probably come to you and beg to see this particular tyre, but I wish you to regard the fact that I have seen it as entirely between ourselves. Will you do so? A very serious issue depends upon your discretion – how serious you will one day realise.”

I looked at him in surprise. His request for secrecy struck me as distinctly peculiar.

“Well, of course, if you wish,” I replied, “I’ll regard the fact that you have seen the Eckhardt non-skid as confidential. Is it in connection with any new invention?” I asked suspiciously.

“Not at all,” he laughed. “I have nothing whatever to do with motor-cars or the motor trade. I merely wish to satisfy myself by looking at one of the new tyres.”

So I went upstairs, and brought down one of the German covers for his inspection.

He took it in his hands, and, very careful that Dick should not observe him from the outside, closely examined the triangular steel studs with which the cover was fitted.

From his pocket he took a piece of paper, and, folding it, measured the width of the tyre, making a break in the edge of the folded paper. Then he felt the edges of the studs, and began

to ask questions regarding the life of the new tyre.

“The inventor, who lives at Cologne, was over here three months ago, and claimed for it that it lasted out three tyres of any of the present well-known makes,” I replied. “But, as a matter of fact, I must admit that I’ve never tried it myself.”

“You’ve sold some, of course?”

“Yes, several sets – and I believe they’ve given satisfaction.”

“You are, I take it, the only agent in this country?”

“No; Farmer and Payne, in Glasgow, have the agency for Scotland,” I replied, greatly wondering why this tyre should attract him if he had no personal interest in cars.

A second time he examined the cover, again very closely; then, placing it aside, he thanked me, apologising for taking up my time.

“Mind,” he said, “not a word to a soul that you have shown me this.”

“I have promised, Mr Kirk, to say nothing,” I said; “but your injunctions as to secrecy have, I must confess, somewhat aroused my curiosity.”

“Probably so.” And a good-humoured smile overspread his thin, rather melancholy face. “But our acquaintance is not very intimate, is it? I’ve often been on the point of asking you to run in and have a smoke with me. I’m a trifle lonely, and would be so delighted if you’d spend an hour with me.”

My natural curiosity to discover more about this man, who was such a mystery, prompted me to express a mutual desire for

a chat.

So it was arranged that I should look in and see him after dinner that same evening.

“I travel a good deal,” he explained, in a careless way, “therefore I never like to make engagements far ahead. I always believe in living for to-day and allowing to-morrow to take care of itself.”

He spoke with refinement, and, though presenting such a shabby exterior, was undoubtedly a gentleman and well bred.

He looked around the garage, and I showed him the dozen or so cars which I let out on hire, as well as the number of private cars whose owners place them in my care. But by the manner he examined them I saw that, whatever ignorance he might feign regarding motors, he was no novice. He seemed to know almost as much about ignition, timing, and lubrication as I did.

And when I remarked upon it his face only relaxed into a smile that was sphinx-like.

“Well, Mr Holford,” he exclaimed at last, “I’m hindering you, no doubt, so I’ll clear out. Remember, I’ll expect you for a chat at nine this evening.” And, buttoning his frayed overcoat, he left, and walked in the direction of Turnham Green.

Half an hour later I was called on the telephone to the other side of London, where I had a customer buying a new car, and it was not before six o’clock that I was back again at the garage, where I found my manager, Pelham, who during the morning had been out trying a car on the Ripley road.

“Funny thing happened this afternoon, sir,” he said as I entered. “Two men, both mysterious persons, have come in, one after the other, to see an Eckhardt non-skid. They had no idea of buying one – merely wanted to see it. The second man wanted me to roll one along in the mud outside to show him the track it makes! Fancy me doing that with a new tyre!”

His announcement puzzled me. These were the persons whose visit had been predicted by Kirk!

What could it mean?

“Didn’t they give any reason why they wanted to see the cover?”

“Said they’d heard about it – that was all,” my manager replied. “Both men wanted to take all sorts of measurements, but I told them they’d better buy a set outright. I fancy it’s some inventor’s game. Somebody has got a scheme to improve on it, I expect, and bring it out as a British patent.”

But I kept my counsel and said nothing. I was already convinced that behind these three visits there was something unusual, and I determined to endeavour to extract the truth from Kershaw Kirk.

Little did I dream the reason why the Eckhardt tyre was being so closely scrutinised by strangers. Little, likewise, did I dream of the curious events which were to follow, or the amazing whirl of adventure into which I was to be so suddenly launched.

But I will set it all down just as it happened, and try to present you with the complete and straightforward narrative – a

narrative which will show you what strange things can happen to a peaceful, steady-going, hard-working citizen in this Greater London of ours to-day.

Chapter Two

Some Strange Facts

Mr Kirk opened his front door himself that evening, and conducted me to a cosy study at the end of the hall, where a fire burned brightly.

In a black velvet lounge coat, a fancy vest, and bright, bead-embroidered slippers, he beamed a warm welcome upon me, and drew up a big saddle-bag arm-chair. From what I had seen of the house, I was surprised at its taste and elegance. There was certainly no sign of poverty there. The study was furnished with solid comfort, and the volumes that lined it were the books of a studious man.

The cigar he offered me was an exquisite one, though he himself preferred his well-coloured meerschaum, which he filled from an old German tobacco bowl. In one corner of the room stood his pet, a large grey parrot in a cage, which he now and then addressed in the course of his conversation.

One of his eccentricities was to think audibly and address his thoughts to his queer companion, whose name was Joseph.

We must have been chatting for fully half an hour when I mentioned to him that two other persons had called that afternoon to inspect the new Eckhardt tyre, whereupon he suddenly started forward in his chair and exclaimed:

“One of the men wore a dark beard and was slightly bald, while the other was a fair man, much younger – eh?”

I explained that my manager, Pelham, had seen them, whereupon he breathed more freely; yet my announcement seemed to have created within him undue consternation and alarm.

He pressed the tobacco very carefully and deliberately into his pipe, but made no further comment.

At last, raising his head and looking straight across at me, he said:

“I may as well explain, Mr Holford, that I had an ulterior motive in asking you in this evening. The fact is, I am sorely in want of a friend – one in whom I can trust. I suppose,” he added – “I suppose I ought to tell you something concerning myself. Well, I’m a man with many acquaintances, but very few friends. My profession? Well, that is surely my own affair. It often takes me far afield, and sometimes causes me to keep queer company. The fact is,” he said, after a moment’s hesitation, “I’m a dealer in secrets.”

“A dealer in secrets!” I echoed. “I don’t quite follow you.”

“The secrets sometimes confided to my keeping would, if I betrayed them, create a worldwide sensation,” he said slowly, looking straight into the fire. “At times I am in possession of ugly facts concerning my fellow-men which would eclipse any of the scandals of the past twenty years. And at this moment, as I tell you, I am in sad need of a friend.”

He was quick to notice the expression upon my face.

“I want no financial aid,” he hastened to assure me. “On the contrary, if at any time I can be of any little assistance to you, I generally have a few pounds lying idle.”

I thanked him, my curiosity growing greater. He was seated in a big, high-backed grandfather’s chair, his head leaning against the padded side, his gaze, a trifle melancholy, fixed upon the dancing flames. At his back was an open roll-top writing-table, very tidy, with a clean blotting-pad, and everything in its place, spick and span.

“To be quite frank with you, Mr Holford,” he said, “I may as well tell you that an incident has occurred which has rendered it necessary that I should come to you, a comparative stranger, for friendship and assistance. Ah,” he added, with a sharp and curious glance at me, “I see that you don’t trust me! You should never judge a man by his clothes.”

“I never do,” I protested. “But you haven’t explained the reason why you are so anxious for my friendship!”

For a few minutes he was silent. Then, of a sudden, he turned to the big grey parrot and asked in a shrill, squeaky tone, almost a croak: “Shall I tell him, Joseph? Shall I tell him?”

“Good night!” answered the loquacious bird. “Good night! Good night! Josef!”

“Well,” my host said slowly, knocking the ashes from his pipe into the fender, “it is a matter, a serious and very curious affair, of which as yet the public have no knowledge. Some things are not

allowed to leak out to the papers. This is one of them. I wonder,” he went on thoughtfully, after a pause – “I wonder if I told you whether you would keep the secret?”

“Certainly,” I said, full of curiosity, for I could not see Kirk’s motive in asking my assistance, and my natural caution now asserted itself.

“By the way,” he echoed suddenly, “do you know any other language besides English?”

“I know French fairly well,” I replied, “and a smattering of Italian.”

“Nothing else? German, for instance?”

I replied in the negative.

He rose, and relit his pipe with a spill. Then he chatted for some minutes with Joseph, all the time, it seemed, reflecting upon what he should say to me. At last, reseating himself in his old-fashioned chair, he again looked me straight in the face and said:

“You have given me your promise of silence, Mr Holford. I accept it from one whom I have watched closely for a long time, and whom I know to be a gentleman. Now I am going to tell you something which will probably alarm you. A crime, a very serious crime, has been committed in London during the past forty-eight hours, and I, Kershaw Kirk, am implicated in it – or, rather, suspected of it!”

I sat staring at the man before me, too surprised to reply. He had always been an enigma, and the mystery about him was

increasing.

“Tell me more,” I urged at last, looking into the face of the suspected criminal. “Who is the victim?”

“At present I am keeping the affair a strict secret,” he said. “There are reasons, very potent reasons, why the public should not know of the tragedy. Nowadays publicity is the curse of life. At last the Home Office have recognised this. I told you that I am a holder of secrets. Well, besides myself, not more than three persons are aware of the astounding affair.”

“And you are suspected as the assassin?” I remarked.

“Unfortunately, I shall be,” was his reply, and I saw that his countenance fell; “I foresee it. That is why I require your aid – the aid of a man who is honest, and who is a gentleman as well.”

And he broke off again to chatter to Joseph, who was keeping up a continual screeching.

“I am anxious to hear details of the affair,” I said eagerly.

“I wish I could tell you the details,” he answered, with a bitter smile; “but I am not aware of them myself. The affair is a mystery – one of which even the police must be kept in ignorance.”

“Haven’t the police been informed?”

“No,” was his prompt reply. “In certain cases information to the police means publicity. In this case, as I’ve already told you, there must be no publicity. Therefore, though a crime has been committed, it is being kept from the police, who, not knowing the facts, must only bungle the inquiries, and whose limited scope of inquiry would only result in failure.”

“You interest me, Mr Kirk. Relate the known facts to me,” I said. “Why, pray, will you be suspected of being a murderer?”

“Well,” he said, with a long-drawn sigh, “because – well, because I had everything to gain by the death of the murdered person. He had filched from me a very valuable secret.”

“Then the murdered person was not your friend?”

“No; my enemy,” he replied. “You, Mr Holford, as an Englishman, will no doubt think it impossible that I may be arrested, tried in secret, and sent to penal servitude for life for a crime of which I am innocent. You believe that every man in this isle of unrest of ours must have a fair trial by judge and jury. Yet I tell you that there are exceptions. There are certain men in England who would never be brought before a criminal court. I am one of them.”

At first I was inclined to regard Kirk as a madman, yet on looking into his face I saw an expression of open earnestness, and somehow I felt that he was telling me the curious truth.

“I certainly thought there were no exceptions,” I said.

“I am one of the few,” he replied. “They dare not place me in a criminal dock.”

“Why?”

“For certain reasons” – and he smiled mysteriously – “reasons which you, if you become my friend, may some day discover. I live here in this by-road of a London suburb, but this is not my home. I have another – a long way from here.”

And, turning from me suddenly, he addressed questions to

Joseph, asking him his opinion of me.

“Where’s your coat?” screeched the bird. “Where’s your coat? Good night!”

The whole scene was strangely weird and incongruous. Kirk at one moment speaking of a remarkable tragedy and at the next chaffing his pet.

At last, however, I fixed my host to the point, and asked him straight out what had occurred.

“Well,” he said, placing down his pipe and resting His protruding chin upon his right hand, as he gazed across at me, “just follow me for a few moments, and I’ll describe, as best I can, all that is known of the affair – or, rather, all I know of it. Do you happen to know Sussex Place, Regent’s Park?”

I replied in the affirmative. It was, as you probably know yourself, a highly respectable crescent of large houses overlooking the park. Entrance was gained from the road in the rear, for the houses faced the park, perhaps one of the pleasantest rows of residences in London. The occupiers were mostly City merchants or well-to-do ladies.

“Well,” he said, “in one of those houses there has lived for the past five years or so Professor Ernest Greer, the well-known chemist, who, among other appointments, holds the Waynflete Professorship of Chemistry at Oxford University. Though his age is only about fifty-five, his whole career has been devoted to scientific research, with the result that he has amassed a considerable fortune from royalties gained from the new process

he patented four years ago for the hardening of steel. I dare say you've often seen his name mentioned in the papers. He was a most popular man, and, with his daughter Ethelwynn, often went into society. In addition to the Regent's Park house, they had a pretty seaside cottage down at Broadstairs."

"I've seen the Professor's name very often in the papers," I remarked, "in connection, I think, with the British Association. I read, not long ago, an account of one of his interesting lectures at the London Institution."

"Then you realise his high standing," said Kirk, interpolating an aside to Joseph. "Well, Mrs Greer is dead, and the household at Regent's Park consists of the Professor, Ethelwynn, her maid Morgan, two housemaids, a female cook, and the butler Antonio Merli, an elderly Italian, who has been in the Professor's service for nearly twenty years. On the evening before last – that was Sunday – at twenty minutes to five o'clock, the Professor and his daughter were together in the large upstairs drawing-room, which overlooks the park, where Antonio served tea. Five minutes later Antonio re-entered and handed his master a telegram. The Professor, having read it, placed it upon the fire, and remarked that he would be compelled to go to Edinburgh that night by the 11:30 from King's Cross, but would return in three days' time, for the girl had accepted an invitation for the grand ball at Sutherland House to-morrow."

"The Professor sent no reply to the message?" I asked, much interested.

“No; but half an hour later his actions struck his daughter as somewhat peculiar, for, having suddenly glanced up at the clock, he rose, crossed to one of the three long windows – the end one – and drew up the blind. Then, after a pause, he lowered it again. Then twice he pulled it up and down quickly, and returned again to where he was sitting. At least, that is his daughter’s story.”

“He signalled to somebody – using the Morse code, I should say.”

“Exactly my theory, Mr Holford. I note that you follow me,” exclaimed the friendless man. “You possess a keen sense of deduction, I see!”

“Apparently you don’t believe this statement of Miss Ethelwynn’s?” I said.

He sniffed quickly, but did not at first reply.

“The fact that he drew the blinds up and down at a preconcerted hour shows that he communicated with somebody who was awaiting the signal outside in Regent’s Park,” he remarked at last.

“Well, what then?”

“At eight he dined, as usual, with his daughter, and after dinner the faithful Antonio packed his kit-bag and suit-case, putting in only sufficient clothes for a stay of three days. At her father’s order Ethelwynn telephoned to the station-master’s office at King’s Cross and secured a sleeping-berth in the 11:30 express for Edinburgh. At a quarter to eleven o’clock he kissed his daughter good night, and went away in a cab to the station,

promising faithfully to be back to take her to the ball.”

“And he disappeared – I suppose?”

“No, he didn’t,” my companion exclaimed, as, turning to the bird, he said, “Mr Holford jumps to conclusions just a little too quickly, doesn’t he, Joseph?” And he slowly relit his pipe, which had again gone out.

“First,” he went on, “let me tell you of the arrangement of the Professor’s house. The whole of the ground and first floors are devoted to reception rooms. The remaining two floors and attics are bedrooms. Now, on the first floor, reached by passing through what is known as the Red Room, a small boudoir at the back, and then through a short passage, one comes to a large and spacious studio, an addition made by a former owner, a well-known artist. The only entrance is through the Red Room. The Professor rented the house on account of this studio, and had it fitted up as a laboratory. Here, secure from intrusion, he frequently carried on his experiments, making those remarkable discoveries which have rendered him world-famous. The laboratory is shut off from the boudoir by this short passage, there being two doors, one in the boudoir itself and one at the entrance to the Professor’s workshop. To both these doors are patent locks, of which the Professor keeps the keys, carrying them upon his watch-chain. No one else has a key, while the door from the conservatory over the porch is walled up. This is in order that no prying person shall enter in his absence and discover what experiments are in progress – a very natural precaution.”

“Then they were secret experiments he was making?” I remarked.

“Yes. And now for the mysterious sequence of facts. They are as follows: Next morning, when the servants opened the house, one of the maids found, lying upon the hall table, a note addressed to Miss Greer. When Ethelwynn opened it, she found it to be from her father, telling her with regret that he must be absent abroad for several months, but that she was not to feel uncomfortable, and giving her certain directions, as well as how to obtain money during his enforced absence.”

“Well?”

Joseph, the parrot, set up a loud screeching, trying to attract his master’s attention.

“Two hours later Antonio discovered upon the stairs leading up to the drawing-room a curious little gold and enamel charm in the form of a child’s old-fashioned wooden doll – a beautifully-made little thing,” he went on; “and half an hour later a maid, while cleaning the boudoir outside the locked door giving entrance to the laboratory, was surprised to find a small spot of blood upon the white goatskin mat. This seems to have aroused Antonio’s apprehensions. A telegram to the Professor at the North British Hotel in Edinburgh, sent by his daughter, brought, about three o’clock in the afternoon, a reply stating that he was quite well, and it was not until seven o’clock last evening that Ethelwynn communicated with me, her father having suggested this in the note she had received. I called upon her at once, and

was shown the note, the little golden doll, and the ugly stain upon the mat. By then my curiosity became aroused. I went out to a telephone at a neighbouring public-house, and, unknown to anybody, got on to the reception clerk at the North British Hotel in Edinburgh. In answer to my inquiry, the young lady said that during the day a telegram had arrived addressed to Professor Greer, and it had been placed upon the board where telegrams were exhibited. Somebody had claimed it, but no one of the name was staying in the hotel."

"You have now said that the Professor was your friend," I remarked. "I understood you to say that he was an enemy."

"I'll explain that later," said my companion impatiently, drawing hard at his pipe. "Let me continue to describe the situation. Well, on hearing this from Edinburgh, I drove to King's Cross, and, somewhat to my surprise, found that Professor Greer had left London by the train he had intended. The sleeping-car attendant who had travelled with him up North was just back, and he minutely described his passenger, referring to the fact that he refused to have an early cup of tea, because tea had been forbidden by his doctor."

"A perplexing situation," I said. "How did you account for the bloodstain? Had any of the servants met with an accident?"

"No, none. Neither dog, nor cat, nor any other pet was kept, therefore the stain upon the mat was unaccountable. It was that fact which caused me, greatly against Miss Ethelwynn's consent, to seek a locksmith and take down the two locked doors of the

laboratory.”

And he paused, gazing once more straight into the flames, with a curious expression in those deep-set brown eyes.

“And what did you find?” I eagerly inquired.

“I discovered the truth,” he said in a hard, changed tone. “The doors gave us a good deal of trouble. At the end of the laboratory, huddled in a corner, was the body of the Professor. He had been stabbed to the heart, while his face presented a horrible sight, the features having been burned almost beyond recognition by some terribly corrosive fluid – a crime which in every phase showed itself to be due to some fiendish spirit of revenge.”

“But that is most extraordinary!” I gasped, staring at the speaker. “The sleeping-car conductor took him to Edinburgh! Besides, how could the two doors be locked behind the assassin? Were the keys still upon the victim?”

“They are still upon the dead man’s watch-chain,” he said. “But, mark you, there is still a further feature of mystery in the affair. After her father’s departure for the station, his daughter put on a dressing-gown and, sending Morgan to bed, seated herself in her arm-chair before the fire in the Red Room, or boudoir, and took a novel. She read until past four o’clock, being in the habit of reading at night, and then, not being sleepy, sat writing letters until a drowsiness fell upon her. She did not then awake until a maid entered at seven to draw up the blinds.”

“Then she was actually at the only entrance to the laboratory all the night!”

“Within a yard and a half of it,” said Kershaw Kirk. “But the affair presents many strange features,” he went on. “The worst feature of it all, Mr Holford, is that a motive – a very strong motive – is known to certain persons why I myself should desire to enter that laboratory. Therefore I must be suspected of the crime, and – well, I admit at once to you I shall be unable to prove an alibi!”

I was silent for a moment.

“Unable to prove an alibi!” I echoed. “But the police have as yet no knowledge of the affair,” I remarked.

“No; I have, however, reported it in another quarter. It’s a most serious matter, for I have suspicion that certain articles have been abstracted from the laboratory.”

“And that means – what?”

“It means, my dear sir, very much more than you ever dream. This is at once the strangest and the most serious crime that has been committed in England for half a century. You are a man of action and of honour, Mr Holford. Will you become my friend, and assist me in trying to unravel it?” he asked quickly, bending forward to me in his earnestness.

“Most certainly I will,” I replied, fascinated by the amazing story he had just related, quite regardless of the fact that he was the suspected assassin.

I wonder whether if I had known into what a vortex of dread, suspicion, and double-dealing that decision of mine would have led me I would have so lightly consented to render my help?

I think not.

“Well,” he said, glancing at his watch, “the place has not been touched. If you consent to help me, it would be best that you saw it and formed your own independent theory. Would you care to come with me now? You could run along and make some excuse to Mrs Holford.”

The remarkable mystery, surrounding as it did one of the best-known scientists in the land, had already gripped my senses. Therefore I did as he suggested, and about an hour later alighted from one of my own cars at the portico of that house of tragedy.

A white-faced, grave-eyed man in black, the man Antonio, opened the door in response to our ring, but on recognising my companion he gripped him quickly by the arm, gasping:

“Ah, signore, I had just telephoned to you! I had no idea you were returning here to-night. Madonna Santa, signore, it’s terrible – terrible! Something else has happened. The young lady – she’s – ”

“What do you mean? What has happened now?” asked Kirk quickly. “Tell me; she’s – what?”

But the old Italian could not speak, so overcome and scared was he. He only pulled my companion forward into the dining-room on the left, and with his thin, bony finger pointed within.

And as I entered the big room my eyes fell upon a sight that staggered me.

Like the old servant, I, too, stood aghast.

Truly Kershaw Kirk had spoken the truth when he had said

that the mystery was no ordinary one.

At that moment the problem seemed to me to be beyond solution. It already ranked in my mind as one of those mysteries to which the key is never discovered. Who *did* kill Professor Greer?

Chapter Three

The House of Mystery

What I saw in the house of Professor Greer on the night of that fifteenth of January formed indeed a strange and startling spectacle.

Ah, I am haunted by it even now!

That sallow-faced man who had conducted me there was himself a mystery, and upon his own confession was suspected of a foul crime. Besides, it was being kept rigorously from the police, which, to say the least, was a proceeding most unusual.

What could it all mean? Who was this Kershaw Kirk, this "dealer in secrets," as he called himself, who was immune from public trial, even though not immune from arrest and imprisonment? The whole intricate problem launched upon me during those past few hours held me in fascination as nothing had ever held me before.

I could see that the man Antonio held Mr Kirk in great fear or great regard, for he was urbanity itself.

But what we saw within the fine, solidly-furnished dining-room, with its carved buffet filled with antique shining silver, was so unexpected that even my companion gave vent to an exclamation of amazement. Upon the dark carpet near the empty grate, her head pillowed upon a yellow silken cushion, lay a very

pretty, fair-haired girl of about twenty-two. Her hat was off, otherwise she was in walking dress, with a short fur jacket and a fine blue fox boa, which, loosened, showed the delicacy of her white throat. Her face contour was bloodless; but all one side of her face was swollen, disfigured, and white as marble.

“Great heavens!” cried Kirk, as he fell on his knees beside her and grasped her hands. “Why, look! She’s been disfigured, just as her father has been!” And he bent until his ear was against her heart.

“Get me that little mirror from the wall – over there, Mr Holford. Quick!” he urged.

I sprang to do his bidding, and he placed against her mouth the little carved bracket wherein the square of looking-glass was set. When he withdrew it, it was unclouded.

“She may not be dead?” I exclaimed. “Shall I go for a doctor?”

“No,” Kirk snarled; “we want no doctors poking their noses about here. This is a matter which concerns only myself, Mr Holford!” And he bent to the prostrate girl to make a more minute investigation in a manner which showed me that he understood the various symptoms of death.

“As you know, signore,” Antonio said, “Miss Ethelwynn left last night to stay at her aunt’s, Lady Mellor’s, in Upper Brook Street, and I have not seen her since, until ten minutes ago I chanced to enter here, when, to my amazement, I found her lying just as you see her, except that I put the pillow beneath her head before telephoning for you. I didn’t know whom to call.”

“You’ve told no one else of this?” Kirk asked quickly.

“Only my brother, signore. He’s staying with me. The girls have all left, and Morgan, Miss Ethelwynn’s maid, is at Lady Mellor’s.”

“Your brother!” repeated Kirk reflectively.

“Yes, signore. He’s here.” And a respectably-dressed man a trifle younger than Antonio, who had been standing out in the hall, entered and bowed. “Pietro keeps a tobacconist’s in the Euston Road,” he explained. “I asked him here, as I don’t care to stay in this place alone just now.”

Kirk regarded the new-comer keenly, but made no remark. His attention was upon the unfortunate girl, who as far as we could gather, had returned in secret, entered quietly with her latch-key, and removed her hat, placing it upon the couch, sticking its pins through it, before she had been struck down by some unseen hand.

There was no perceptible wound, and Kirk could not determine whether she was still alive, yet he refused to summon medical aid. I confess to being somewhat annoyed at his obstinacy, and surprised at the secrecy with which he treated the whole of the remarkable circumstances. That very fact tended to strengthen the suspicion that he himself knew more about the crime than he had admitted.

Surely the police should be informed!

He was very carefully examining the girl’s clothing, seeking to discover a wound; but, as far as we could see, there was none,

yet the pallor of the countenance was unmistakably that of death, while the hard, white disfigurement of the face was weird and horrible. The eye was closed, distorted, and screwed up by pain, and both mouth and ear seemed shrivelled out of shape.

“Who’s responsible for this, I wonder?” growled Kirk to himself. “Why did she wish to return here in secret – to the house wherein she knew her father was lying dead? There was some strong motive – just as there is a motive for her death as well as her father’s.” Then, looking up to me, he added, “You know, Mr Holford, this poor young lady was her father’s assistant and confidante. She was in the habit of helping him in his experiments, and making notes at his dictation of certain results.”

I knelt at the other side of the inert, prostrate form, and took the ungloved hands in mine. The stiffening fingers were cold as ice.

“It’s brutal – blackguardly!” cried Kirk in a frenzy of anger. “Whoever has thus sacrificed the girl’s beauty deserves a dog’s death. The motive in both cases must be vengeance. But for what?”

Antonio and his brother were active in getting brandy, sal volatile, ammonia, hot water, and other restoratives; but, though Kirk worked unceasingly for half an hour in a manner which showed him to be no novice, all was to no purpose.

There was no sign of life whatever. Indeed, the colour of the disfigured portion of the fair countenance seemed to be slowly

changing from marble-white to purple.

Kirk watched it, held his breath, and, staying his hand, shook his head.

“Why don’t you call a doctor?” I again urged. “Something may be done, after all. She may not be dead!”

“I can do all that a doctor can do,” was his calm, rather dignified reply, and I saw by the dark shadow upon his brow that he was annoyed at my suggestion.

So I straightened myself again and watched.

At last my eccentric companion came to the conclusion that no more could be done for the unfortunate girl, and we all four lifted her from the carpet on to the large leather sofa set near the window.

Then Kirk led the way up the broad, thickly-carpeted staircase to the floor above. Entering an open door leading from the square landing, he touched an electric switch, revealing a small elegantly-furnished room, a boudoir, upholstered in dark red silk. The walls were enamelled dead white, relieved by a beading of gold, and set in the panels were two fine paintings of the modern Italian school.

The red room was a veritable nest of luxury, with low easy chairs, a cosy corner near the fire, and a small reading table, whereon stood a selection of the latest novels from the library. In the cosy corner I noticed that the cushions were crushed, just as they had been left by the unfortunate girl as she had been aroused from her sleep by the entrance of the maid at early morning.

One side of the room was occupied by a big bay window of stained glass, that probably faced a blank wall, while about four feet to the right of the cosy corner was a closed white-enamelled door – the door which gave entrance to the passage leading to the laboratory. The carpet was a pale grey, with a wreath of small roses running round the border, and before the door lay the white goatskin mat. My companion pointed to it, and I saw there the tell-tale stain of blood. The fire had been left just as it had died out on the morning of the tragedy.

“You see,” Kirk said, advancing to the closed door which led to the laboratory, “there is here a patent lock – an expensive make, which has but one key. This door I found still locked!”

Opening it, we passed into a short passage about twelve feet long, closed by a similar door. This also he reopened, and I found myself in a large long apartment, very lofty, and well lit by a long high window along the side towards the street and at the end, while a skylight occupied part of the roof.

Upon rows of shelves were many bottles of chemicals, retorts, and delicate experimental apparatus, while on the right was a small furnace. There were also three zinc-covered tables with the miscellaneous accumulation of objects which the owner of the place had been using. I saw a blocked-up door on the right, which my companion explained let into the conservatory over the portico.

“Look!” whispered my friend in a low voice. “This way.” And he switched on the lights at the further end of the great high

apartment.

I stepped forward at his side, until I distinguished, huddled up in the further corner, a human figure in dark grey trousers and black frock-coat. It seemed as though he had been propped in the corner, and his grey head had fallen sideways before death.

I went further forward, holding my breath.

The victim was apparently nearly sixty, with hair and moustache turning white, rather stoutly built, and broad-shouldered. His position was distorted and unnatural, as though he had twisted himself in the final agonies of death. The thin waxen hands were clenched tightly, and the linen collar was burst from the neck, while the Professor's dark blue fancy vest bore a stain where the assassin's knife had struck him unerringly in the heart.

Of his features I, a stranger, could distinguish but little, so swollen, livid, and scarred were they that I was instantly horrified by their sight. The disfigurement had been so terrible that there remained hardly any semblance to a human face.

"Well," exclaimed Kirk at last, "you have seen it! Now what is your opinion?"

We were standing alone in the great laboratory, for Antonio and his brother had remained downstairs at my companion's suggestion.

I looked round that great silent workshop of one of the most distinguished chemists of the age, and then I gazed upon the mortal remains of the man upon whom so many honours

had been showered. Warped, drawn, crouching, with one arm uplifted almost as though to ward off a blow, the body remained a weird and ghastly object.

“Has it been moved?” I inquired when I recovered speech.

“No; it is just as we found it – just as the unknown assassin left it,” he said. “The disfigurement, as far as I can judge, has been caused by some chemical agency – some acid or other substance placed upon the face, with fiendish cruelty, immediately before death.”

I bent closer to the lifeless face in order to examine it, and afterwards agreed with him. It was undoubtedly a murder prompted by a fierce and bitter vengeance.

“The work of a madman, it may be,” I suggested.

But Kershaw Kirk shook his head, saying: “Not of a madman, but of a very clever murderer who has left not a trace of his identity.”

“Do you think that the Professor was struck down at the spot where he now is?” I asked, for my friend seemed to be something of an expert in the habits of the criminal classes.

“I think not. Yet, as you see, the place is in no way disordered. There is no sign whatever of a struggle.”

I looked around, and as far as I could discern everything was as it should be. Upon the nearest table in the centre was a very delicate glass apparatus in which some experiments had recently been made, for certain yellowish liquids were still within. Had this table been violently jarred, the thin glass tubes would have

been disarranged and broken, a fact which showed conclusively that the fatal blow had been struck with great suddenness and in silence.

It had not occurred to Kirk to examine the dead man's pockets before, and now, kneeling at his side, he was in the act of doing so.

The various objects he took out, first examined, and afterwards handed them to me. There were several letters, none of any great importance, some chemical memoranda scribbled in pencil upon a piece of blank paper, a gold presentation watch and chain, fifteen pounds odd in money, and a few minor trifles, none of which threw any light upon the mysterious tragedy.

My companion made another careful examination of the body. Then, rising to his feet, he walked slowly around the laboratory, in further search, it seemed to me, of anything that the assassin might have left behind. But by his countenance I saw that this eccentric man who dealt in secrets, as he had admitted to me, was much puzzled and perplexed. The enigma was complete.

So complicated and extraordinary were the whole circumstances that any attempt to unravel them only led one at once into an absolute *cul-de-sac*.

To whom had the dead man signalled in the Morse code by raising and lowering the blind?

Someone, friend or enemy, had been waiting outside near Clarence Gate in Regent's Park in the expectation of a message.

He received it from the Professor's own hands, those hands

which before the dawn were cramped in the stiffness of death.

Chapter Four

A Silent Message

For a full hour we remained there in the presence of the dead.

Before that huddled figure I stood a dozen times trying to form some feasible theory as to what had actually occurred within that room.

The problem, however, was quite inexplicable. Who had killed Professor Greer?

There, upon the end of the unfortunate man's watch-chain, were the two keys which he always carried, keys which held the secrets of his experiments away from the prying eyes of persons who were undesirable. Many of his discoveries had been worth to him thousands of pounds, and to public companies which exploited and worked them hundreds of thousands of pounds more. There, in that very room in which I stood, had the Greer process of hardening steel been perfected, a process now used in hardening the armour-plates of our newest Dreadnoughts. Yet the master brain which had thought out those various combinations, and by years of patience had perfected the result, was now before me, inactive and dead.

I shuddered at sight of that disfigured face, hideous in its limp inertness and horrible to the gaze. But Kershaw Kirk, his eyes narrower and his face more aquiline, continued his minute

investigation of every object in the room. I watched him with increasing interest, noticing the negative result of all his labours.

“I shall return again to-morrow when it is light,” at last he said; “artificial light is of little use to me in this matter. Perhaps you’ll come with me again – eh?”

“I’ll try,” I said, though, to be candid, I was not very keen upon a second visit to the presence of the disfigured body of the Professor. I could not see why Kirk was so anxious to avoid the police and to keep the affair out of the papers.

“The body must be buried before long,” I remarked. “How will you obtain a medical certificate and get it buried by an undertaker?”

“Mr Holford,” he said, turning to me with an expression of slight annoyance upon his face, “I beg of you not to anticipate difficulty. It is the worst attitude a man can take up – especially in trying to solve a problem such as this. The future kindly leave entirely with me.”

At that moment I was fingering a small test-tube containing some thick grey-coloured liquid, and as I turned I accidentally dropped it upon the tiles with which the Professor had had the place paved. In an instant there was a bright flash, almost like a magnesium light, so brilliant that for a second we were both blinded.

“I wonder what that was?” he remarked, startled by the result. “One must be careful in handling what the dead man has left behind.”

“Evidently,” I said; “we cannot tell what these various experimental apparatus and tubes contain. Therefore we should handle them delicately.”

And I bent to the table to examine another tube containing some bright red crystals held over an extinguished spirit-lamp by a brass holder, an action which my companion, I noticed, watched with a curious expression.

Was it suspicion of myself?

“Well, my dear friend,” he exclaimed suddenly as he stood beside the table, “the problem is, as you see, rendered the more difficult of solution by the inexplicable fate which has overtaken the Professor’s daughter. Here is a man against whom, as far as we know, nobody in the world had a grudge, who receives a telegram which he is careful to destroy, makes a preconcerted signal at his drawing-room window, and goes upon a journey to Edinburgh. We know that he went, for the conductor recollects asking if he would take an early cup of tea. Again, he received his daughter’s telegram and replied to it. Yet at the same time he was in Edinburgh he was in this very room behind two locked doors of which he alone had the key, the victim of a brutally murderous attack! These doors were locked, and to enter here both he and the assassin must have passed through the boudoir within a yard or so of his daughter.”

“Is there no other means of access except through the boudoir?” I asked. “Have the windows been examined?”

“Yes; all the windows were screwed down on the inside. To-

morrow, in the light, you shall satisfy yourself. I must come here to search for any finger-prints," was his hasty reply. "When I caused these doors to be opened, I was careful not to allow the locksmith to see that any tragedy had occurred. The man was paid, and went away in ignorance. Yet when Miss Ethelwynn realised the truth she was as one demented. At first she refused to leave the place, but I persuaded her, and she went with her maid to her aunt's. I impressed upon her the value of silence, and she gave me her word that she would say nothing of what had occurred."

"What about her maid Morgan?"

"She is ignorant of the truth," he said, with a grim smile. "Well, this evening, it appears, the dead man's daughter returns in secret, enters with her latch-key the house where her father is lying, removes her hat carefully, and then –"

"Yes," I said. "And then? What do you believe occurred?"

He was silent, his deep-set eyes downcast in thought.

"Well, I – I hardly know what to think," he declared. "It almost seems as though she shared the same fate as her father. That horrible disfiguration is most remarkable."

"Her entry here in secret and the strange fate that has overtaken her increases the mystery tenfold!" I declared. "Why didn't she call Antonio?"

"Perhaps that was her intention, but she was prevented," suggested my friend. And I saw that his glance was fixed upon me curiously, as though he were deliberately gauging my character

and intelligence.

“But to me it appears as though her intention might have been to reach the laboratory unobserved,” I said. “She may, indeed, have been up here for aught we know to the contrary.”

“I hardly think so. She was far too horrified at sight of the body of her father, to whom she was so devoted. The scene when she saw him dead was very painful.”

“But might she not have been induced to return by morbid curiosity?” I suggested.

“You’ve already told me that she was beside herself with grief.”

“Well,” he replied, with a sigh and a final glance across to where the dark object was huddled in the opposite corner, “no purpose, I think, can be served by remaining here longer to-night. We must return in the morning. I only brought you here in order that you might fully understand the exact problem now before us. Come along.”

“But I don’t see, Mr Kirk, how it is possible for me to help you. I’m quite a novice in this kind of thing,” I said.

“You are not a detective. If you were, I should not seek your aid,” he snapped, as he led the way to the door and switched off the lights. “I know you think it rather strange that I have not called a doctor and the police, and had a post-mortem, and allowed the newspaper reporters to ‘work up’ a big sensation; but, as I’ve already told you, our success depends upon absolute secrecy. The affair is a startling one to you, no doubt; but if you were aware

of what the tragedy really means you would be dumbfounded. Why, the newspapers could make a worldwide sensation of it if only they got at the true facts; but they never will, I assure you – never.”

“Then even I may not know the true facts?” I asked, as I stood with him again in the boudoir.

“As far as the tragedy is concerned, you already know them. They are just as I have told you. But there are other facts – facts concerning myself and also the Professor – which I am not permitted to divulge. They must,” he added, “remain a secret.”

“Well – if you are not perfectly frank with me, Mr Kirk,” I protested, “I cannot see how I can regard you as a sincere friend. This is a serious and complicated problem, in which you require my assistance in an endeavour to seek a solution. How can I form any conclusions or help you if you deliberately hold back from me some of the circumstances?”

“I have held back none,” was his hasty response – “at least, none which have any bearing whatever upon the tragedy. It is of myself and my own connection with Greer that I am speaking. I was the first person called, before there was even a suspicion of anything wrong. The fact is, the dead man trusted me implicitly.”

“And, according to your showing, certain enemies of yours suspected the truth – that your friendship for the Professor was only feigned.”

My companion looked me straight in the face with his narrow-set eyes, and replied:

“My dear Mr Holford, what my enemies say was, I admit, perfectly correct. I have sought to conceal nothing. Greer believed that I was his friend, but I hated him. I had good cause to do so!”

The man’s crafty eyes again met mine, and I saw in them an expression which I had never noticed before. Was it possible that he was the unknown assassin, and was only misleading me by clever and cunning devices?

I recollected that he had told me that the Professor had stolen from him some valuable secret. Well, if he did not fear the crime of retaliation being brought home to him, why did he not go openly and lay the facts before the police? His evasive replies and thin excuses appeared to be utterly ridiculous. In my foolish ignorance I still believed Kershaw Kirk to be an ordinary individual, much like myself. The remarkable truth had not then been revealed to me – as it was later.

We descended to the dining-room, where Antonio and his brother Pietro were still watching beside the couch whereon lay the poor girl who had met with such a strange and inexplicable fate.

Kirk again knelt beside her, and for a long time searched for any wound she might bear. But he found none.

“Remember, Antonio, no person must enter this house under any pretext whatever,” my companion ordered. “You are responsible.”

“No one shall know anything, signore,” replied the man.

“Morgan and the maids are all in ignorance – for you, signore, kept it so cleverly from them.”

“A woman never can keep a secret,” Kirk answered sharply, “and if we are to fathom the mystery of your master’s death not a word must leak out. You know what I have told you.”

“I recollect, signore,” the man replied. And, using the Italian oath, he said, “I have promised you, upon the tomb of my sainted mother.”

“Then close this room, and with your brother keep a watchful vigil until to-morrow.”

And we both went out, and were soon running in the car back towards Bedford Park.

Arrived at his house, he insisted that I should enter for a “night-cap,” it being then just past three o’clock. Therefore, reluctantly, I accompanied him within.

In his study a tantalus-stand and glasses were upon the table. He had thrown off his overcoat, and was about to pour me out some whisky, when the telephone bell suddenly rang. He put down the glass, and, walking to the instrument, answered the summons.

“Hulloa? Yes?” he said.

Then, as he listened intently, his face blanched. He spoke some quick words in German, which, unfortunately, I could not follow. They seemed like instructions.

Again he listened, but suddenly whatever he heard so appalled him that the receiver dropped from his thin, nerveless fingers,

and with a low, hoarse cry he staggered across to his big grandfather chair, near which I was standing, and sank into it, rigid, staring, open-mouthed.

If ever guilt were written upon a man's face, it assuredly was written upon that of Kershaw Kirk at that moment.

Chapter Five

Certain Suspicions Strengthened

To Mabel, my wife, I said nothing. In the circumstances, I deemed silence golden.

Kirk's attitude at the telephone had filled me with suspicion.

During the hours I spent in bed before the dawn I lay thinking. The problem was utterly inexplicable, the more so now that the dead man's daughter was also dead.

I was convinced, as I lay there in the darkness, that there was something very suspicious in the fact that Kirk, who seemed to rule the household, would not allow the police to have any knowledge of what had occurred. Indeed, my own position was somewhat unenviable, for, being aware that a murder had been committed, was I not legally bound to give information? Was I not liable to prosecution if I failed to do so?

The mystery surrounding Kershaw Kirk had increased rather than diminished in that final quarter of an hour I had spent with him as he had sat staring straight into the fire, uttering scarce a word.

What had been told him over the telephone had caused an entire change in his manner. Previously he had been dictatorial and defiant. He was now cringing, crushed, terror-stricken.

The grim scenes I had witnessed surged through my brain.

The mystery of it all had gripped my senses. Carefully I analysed each event, trying to discern some light as to its cause and motive. But I was not a professional detective. This was the first time I had found myself mixed up in a crime by which human life had been lost.

That the death of Professor Greer was no ordinary crime of violence I had quickly recognised. There was some subtle motive both in the crime itself and in the supposed presence of the Professor in Edinburgh, whereas in reality he was already lying dead in his own laboratory.

Those instructions to his daughter, which seemed to have been written after his departure from King's Cross, also formed an enigma in themselves. The dead man had actually sought the assistance of his worst enemy!

Yet, when I weighed the circumstances as a whole calmly and coolly, I saw that if the unknown person to whom the Professor had signalled on that fateful night could be found a very great point would be gained towards the solution of the problem.

The pulling up and down of the drawing-room blind was, no doubt, in order to inform some person waiting without of his journey north. Was that person who received the signal afterwards the assassin?

Yet the fact that the crime was committed behind locked doors, that both the victim and the assassin had to pass within a few feet of where Miss Ethelwynn was seated, and that into the unfortunate Professor's face some terribly corrosive fluid had

been dashed, formed a problem which held me mystified.

There was something uncanny in the whole inexplicable affair. I now realised for the first time how complete was the mystery of the Professor's death, even apart from the other facts of his signals and his journey north.

Kirk, this dealer in secrets, admittedly posed as a friend of the family. Greer trusted him. To him Ethelwynn had fled for assistance at the first suspicion of anything being wrong. Therefore would it not have been easier for him than for anyone else to enter the house in secret and kill the man who had stolen from him that mysterious secret?

Yet, try how I would, I was unable to rid myself of the grave conviction that my new acquaintance was cognisant of more than he had told me. He was naturally a reserved man, it was true; yet there was an air of cosmopolitanism about him which spoke mutely of the adventurer.

His refusal to allow a doctor to see the Professor's daughter was nothing short of culpable. Had Antonio, that sly, crafty Italian, to whom I had taken such instinctive dislike, summoned a doctor at once, it was quite possible that the poor girl's life might have been saved.

But why had she returned to the house in a manner so secret? Why had she crept into the dining-room and removed her hat? It would almost seem as though she had returned for good, for if she had intended to go back to her aunt's she would not have taken off her hat and laid it aside.

And why had she done so in the dining-room, of all places? Why had she not ascended to her own room? And why, most of all, had she not summoned Antonio?

Was it because of fear of him?

Kirk and Antonio were friends. That I had detected from the very first. The Italian was polite, urbane, servile, yet I saw that the bow was only a shallow make-believe. Alone together, the pair would, no doubt, stand upon an equal footing.

The reason she had returned home was mysterious enough, yet the greater problem was the reason why she also had been struck down and the same corrosive liquid flung into her fair countenance.

I could not think that Kirk was responsible for this second assassination, for, unless Antonio had lied, it had been committed at the very hour when I had been seated with my mysterious neighbour only a few doors away from my own house.

So, as you may readily imagine, I was still sorely troubled when at last the maid brought me my hot water and I rose to dress.

I quite saw now that the reason why Kirk had called to inspect the new Eckhardt tyre was merely in order to make my acquaintance. Yet it was certainly curious that he should have predicted the visits of the two other men for the same purpose. After breakfast I went, as usual, to the garage, but my mind was still full of the events of the previous night.

Kirk had arranged to call for me at eleven and return to Sussex Place, where he intended to search for any finger-marks left

by the assassin. Eleven o'clock struck, but he did not arrive. In patience I waited until one, and then returned home to luncheon, as was my habit.

His non-arrival confirmed my suspicions. What, I wondered, could have been the purport of that mysterious message in German that he had listened to on the telephone just before we had parted?

At two o'clock I called at his house and rang the door-bell. There was no response. Both Kirk and his sister were out.

So I returned to the garage, and with Dick Drake, my stout, round-faced, dare-devil driver, who held two records at Brooklands, and was everlastingly being fined for exceeding the speed limit, I worked hard upon the refractory engine of a car which had been sent to me for repair.

All day it was misty, but towards evening the fog increased, until it became thick even in Chiswick, therefore I knew that it must be a regular "London particular" in the West End. One driver, indeed, who had come in from Romford, said he had taken four hours to cross London. Hence I resolved to possess my soul in patience and spend a quiet evening at home with my wife and her young sister, who lived with us.

Curiously enough, however, I found myself, towards six o'clock, again seized by a sudden and uncontrollable desire to return to Sussex Place in search of my mysterious neighbour. I felt within me a keen, irrepressible anxiety to fathom the curious problem which that shabby man, who declared himself immune

from trial in a criminal court, had placed before me. Who could he be, that, like the King himself, he could not be brought before a judge?

At times I found myself laughing at his absurd statements, and regarding them as those of a lunatic; but at others I was bound to admit that his seriousness showed him to be in deadly earnest.

Well, to cut a long story short, at eight o'clock I took Dick Drake and managed to creep over in the fog to Regent's Park on one of the small cars.

The door was opened, as before, by Antonio, who perceptibly started when he recognised me.

Yes, Mr Kirk was there, he admitted, and a few seconds later he came to me in the hall.

He was a changed man. His face was thinner, sallower, more haggard, and the lines about his mouth deeper and more marked; yet he greeted me affably, with many apologies for not keeping his appointment.

"I was here, very busy," he explained. "I rang you up twice on the 'phone, but each time you were engaged."

"Well," I asked, going straight to the point, "what have you discovered?"

"Very little," he said. "I've searched all day for finger-prints, but up to the present have found none, save those of Antonio, Ethelwynn, and members of the household."

"You do not suspect any of the servants?" I whispered, full of suspicion of the crafty-looking Italian.

“Of course not, my dear sir. What motive could they have in killing such an excellent, easygoing master as the Professor?”

“Revenge for some fancied grievance,” I suggested.

But he only laughed my theory to scorn.

I followed him upstairs, through the red boudoir to the laboratory, to which the fog had penetrated, and there watched him making his test for recent finger-prints. His examination was both careful and methodical. He drew a pair of old grey suède gloves over his hands, and, taking up one after another of the bottles and glass apparatus, he lightly coated them with some finely powdered chalk of a grey-green colour, afterwards dusting it off.

On one or two of the bottles prints of fingers were revealed, and each of these he very carefully examined beneath the light, rejecting them one after the other.

To me, unacquainted as I was with the various lines of the finger-tips, all looked alike. But this shabby, mysterious neighbour of mine apparently read them with the utmost ease, as he would a book.

In its corner, in the same position in which we had left it on the previous night, lay the hideous body of the Professor, crouching just as he had expired. But Kershaw Kirk worked on, heedless of its presence.

I remarked to him that he was a careful and painstaking detective, whereupon he straightened his back, and, looking me in the face, said:

“Please don’t run away with the idea that I’m a detective, Mr Holford. I am not. I have no connection whatever with the police, whom, I may tell you, I hold in contempt. There’s far too much red-tape at Scotland Yard, which binds the men hand and foot and prevents them doing any real good work. Look at the serious crimes committed in London during the past three years to the perpetrators of which the police have no clue! The whole police system in London is wrong. There’s too much observation upon the speed of motor-cars and too little latitude allowed the police for inquiry into criminal cases.”

“Then you are not a police officer?” I asked, for within the last few hours I had become suspicious that such was the fact.

“No, I am not. The reason I am inquiring into the death of Professor Greer is because, for the sake of my own reputation, and in order to clear myself of any stigma upon me, I must ascertain the truth.”

“And only for that reason?” I queried.

He hesitated.

“Well – and for another – another which must remain a confidential matter with myself,” he replied at length. “The Professor was in possession of a certain secret, and my belief is that this secret was stolen from him and his mouth afterwards closed by the thief.”

“Why?”

“Because, had the unfortunate man spoken, certain complications, very serious complications, involving huge losses,

would have accrued. So there was only one way – to kill poor Greer! But the manner in which this was accomplished is still an absolute enigma.”

“Has it not struck you that the telegram sent from Edinburgh may have been despatched by the assassin?” I asked.

But he was uncertain. He had as yet, he said, formed no theory as to that portion of the problem.

“Where is the unfortunate girl?” I asked, for I had noticed that she was not in the dining-room.

He looked at me quickly, with a strange expression in his peculiar eyes.

“She’s still here, of course,” he declared. “That second phase of the mystery is as complicated as the first – perhaps even more so. Come with me a moment.”

I followed him through the boudoir and into the study, where, opening a long cupboard in the wall, a small iron safe was revealed, the door of which opened at his touch.

“Here,” he explained, “the Professor kept the valuable notes upon the results of his experiments. The safe was closed when I first called, but this morning I found it open, and the contents gone!”

“Then the person who killed Professor Greer was not the thief!” I remarked.

“Unless he returned here afterwards,” was Kirk’s reply, with his eyes fixed upon mine.

Then he glanced at his watch, and without a word turned upon

his heel and passed out of the room.

Chapter Six

A Further Mystery

I stood awaiting his return for a few moments, and then followed him out upon the landing, where my feet fell noiselessly upon the thick Turkey carpet. Almost opposite, across the open staircase, I could see into the large drawing-room, and there, to my amazement, I saw Kirk raising and lowering one of the blinds.

He was making the same signal to someone outside in the park as that made by the Professor before his death!

I slipped back to the study, much puzzled, but in a few moments he returned, smiling and affable.

What signal had he made – and to whom? It was foggy outside, therefore the watcher must have been in the close vicinity.

Antonio appeared at the door, whereupon Kirk gave the manservant certain instructions regarding the payment and discharge of the servants. Apparently one of them had returned and asked for her wages in lieu of notice.

“Be liberal with them,” urged my companion. “We don’t want any grumbling. There is no suspicion as yet, and liberality will disarm it.”

“Very well, signore,” replied the man, “I will pay them all and get rid of them as soon as possible.”

“Yes, at once,” Kirk snapped, and the man went down the

stairs.

“Well,” I asked, after he was out of hearing, “what do you intend doing now?”

“I never set out any line of action. In such a case as this any such method is folly,” he replied.

“But at least you will do something with the bodies of the victims? They must be buried,” I exclaimed, for the gruesomeness of it all was now preying upon me. This was the first time that I had ever been implicated in a murder mystery—*and such a mystery!*

“The disposal of the bodies is my own affair, Mr Holford,” he said quietly. “Leave that to me. As far as the world knows, Professor Greer and his daughter are away visiting.”

“But Lady Mellor! Is she not anxious regarding her niece’s whereabouts?”

“Lady Mellor is on the Riviera. Her house in Upper Brook Street is in charge of servants, therefore she is unaware that anything extraordinary has transpired.”

“Your only confidant is Antonio?”

“And your own self,” he added. “But have I not already impressed upon you, my dear friend, the absolute necessity of secrecy in this affair?”

“You have given me no actual reason,” I demurred.

“Because certain circumstances bind me to secrecy,” was his reply. “From what I have already told you I dare say you have gathered that I am no ordinary individual. I am vested by a high

authority with a power which other men do not possess, and in this case I am compelled to exercise it.”

He saw the look of disbelief upon my countenance.

“Ah,” he laughed, “I see you doubt me! Well, I am not surprised; I should do so were I in your place. But, believe me or not, Mr Holford, you will lose nothing, by assisting me in this affair and performing a secret service for the high authority who must be nameless, but whose trusted agent I am – even though the onus of this strange tragedy may be cast upon me.”

“The whole affair is a mystery,” I remarked – “an inscrutable mystery.”

“Yes,” he sighed, “one that has been rendered a hundredfold more inscrutable by a discovery made to-day – the discovery which prevented me calling upon you at eleven o’clock. But remain patient, trust in me, assist me when I desire assistance, and it will, I promise, be well worth your while.”

For a moment I was silent. Then, a trifle annoyed, I answered:

“My legitimate profession of motor engineer pays me quite well, and I think I prefer, with your permission, to retire from this affair altogether.”

“What!” he exclaimed. “After giving me your promise – your word as a gentleman! Can’t you see, my friend, that you can assist in furthering the ends of justice – in fastening the guilt upon the assassin?”

“That, I maintain, should be left to the police.”

“Bah! The police in this case would be powerless. The

problem is for us, you and I, to solve, and by the exercise of patience and watchfulness we shall, I hope, be able to elucidate the mystery.

“The inquiries may carry us far afield; I have a keen presentiment that they will. Therefore if I am suddenly absent do not trouble on my account. My silence will mean that I am watchful and active. When I am abroad I make a point of receiving no letters, therefore do not write. I always communicate with my friends through the advertisement columns of the *Times*. To you I shall be ‘Silence.’

“Take the paper daily and watch for any message I may send you. You have a car outside, I suppose? I wonder whether you would take me to Tottenham Court Road?” he asked.

Thereupon we went below, and after a whispered conversation with Antonio, who was waiting in one of the back rooms, he mounted into the car, and Dick drove us very slowly through the fog half-way down Tottenham Court Road, where Kirk alighted.

“Shall I wait for you?” I asked.

“No,” he replied; “I really don’t know how long I shall be. Besides, I shall not return to Bedford Park to-night. It’s very kind of you, but I won’t trouble you further. Good night, Mr Holford! Perhaps I shall see you to-morrow. If not, then recollect to keep an eye upon the *Times* for a message from ‘Silence.’”

And he shook my hand, descended, and went forward into the yellow fog.

My curiosity was aroused; therefore in an instant I had

resolved to follow him and ascertain whither he went.

In the direction he had taken towards Oxford Street, I started off, but before me the lights blurred in the misty obscurity. Foot-passengers on the pavement loomed up in the uncertain light and melted again, and as I hurried on I discerned the figures before me with difficulty. Where the shopfronts were lit were patches of red mist, but where they were closed it was almost complete darkness, for in that neighbourhood the fog was thicker than further westward, and Dick had had considerable trouble in finding his way there at a snail's pace.

In my haste I collided with several persons coming my way, apologising and going forward again until I came to a corner where a shop was well lit. Of a sudden I distinguished the man I was following; he had halted in conversation with the shop-keeper, who was pointing up the side street.

In the fog, Kirk was evidently out of his bearings.

I drew back, so as to escape observation, but I watched him plunge into the darkness of the side street, and I was soon at his heels. It was a squalid neighbourhood into which we had entered. I had been through it before, but was not certain which street it might be down which we were going.

Guided by his footsteps I went on behind him. Fortunately my tread was soft, owing to the rubber heels I wore. At the crossing I listened, at first uncertain whether he had turned to the right or left, or gone straight on.

Again the footsteps sounded out of the obscurity, which now

caused my eyes to smart, and I knew that he had gone straight forward, so on I went.

At the next corner I was nearer him, near enough to distinguish that he crossed the road and suddenly turned along the pavement to the right. We were evidently going in the direction of Fitzroy Square, though in which street I had no idea. In fear lest his quick ears should detect that I was following, I fell back a little, allowing him to get further in front. The houses we were then passing were good-sized private ones interspersed with shops, substantial houses of the usual style found in the decayed districts of London, dark, gloomy, and mysterious-looking. I recognised that we were in Cleveland Street. Then we turned again – the first turning on the left round the corner by a laundry.

Of a sudden I heard Kirk halt, as though in doubt. It seemed as though he was retracing his steps, having passed the house of which he was in search. Quick as thought, in order to avoid meeting him face to face, I stepped off the kerb into the roadway.

He passed by within a few yards of me, yet entirely unconscious of my proximity. Then he repassed, as though having satisfied himself that he had not yet reached his goal. In a London fog, one house is very much like another, especially in a side street. In the distance I saw a red glimmer – the light of a surgery.

Two dark, evil-looking men lurched past me, and then a woman, half-drunken and reeling. For a few seconds I lost his footsteps, but again they reached my ears. The sound was a

different one. He had ascended one of the flights of steps!

I hurried forward, but as I did so I heard a door close sharply. He had entered one of those dark houses, but which of four or five I was, unfortunately, utterly at a loss to decide.

The exterior of each I examined carefully, taking note of their number. In two of them yellow gas-jets were burning over the grimy fanlights, throwing out a faint light into the pall of the fog, while in one a light was burning in the front room of the ground floor.

All were let in squalid apartments, for there seemed a general frowsiness about that undesirable neighbourhood, where the greater part of the inhabitants were foreigners of the working class. Each house, with its railings and deep area, had but little to distinguish it from its neighbours, all were dirty, neglected, and forbidding in that darkness and gloom.

I stood in chagrin at having thus lost sight of my mysterious friend, and could only wait for his exit. Two of the houses were within the zone of the weak light thrown by the street-lamp; the other three were in obscurity.

In one of them – which one I knew not – Kershaw Kirk had kept an appointment, arranged, perhaps, by that signal which he had made by the raising and lowering of the blind.

My position was most tantalising, yet I felt that if I remained there on watch I should most certainly see him come out, and then at least know the number of the one he had visited.

Midnight rang out from a church clock somewhere, but there

had been no sign of him.

Dick must, I knew, have grown tired of waiting, and, thinking me lost in the fog, would slowly creep homeward. The ever-watchful vigil I was keeping in that terrible atmosphere fagged me. I became numbed with cold, and very hungry.

Yet I dare not leave the spot lest Kirk should come forth, so I stood leaning against the railings in patience, full of wonder and apprehension.

More than once I feared that the “dealer in secrets” might notice me from within if he chanced to look out. Hence from time to time I changed my position.

My impression was that he had entered with a latch-key, for scarce had he reached the top of the steps when he was inside, with the door closed behind him; either that, or else someone was waiting there to admit him.

Another hour had nearly passed, when suddenly I was startled by a loud scream – a woman’s piercing scream – which appeared to come from the first of the houses which lay in the darkness.

Twice was that cry repeated, and I sped to the house whence it emanated. The place was in complete darkness. No light shone from any window of the gloomy, dismal house.

A third time was the shriek repeated, coming from the room behind the railing on a level with the door. As I stood upon the pavement I was only a few feet from the window.

“Help! Help! For God’s sake, help! You brute! I thought I had escaped you. No! Ah! Don’t! I beg – I implore you! Ah!”

shrieked a refined voice, the voice of a young woman. And then, in despairing tones that grew fainter with every syllable, I heard the words long drawn out. “Ah! You – you’ve – killed – me! Killed me! – just as you killed my – dear – father!”

I stood listening to that dying appeal, bewildered, utterly staggered.

What could I think? Place yourself in my position and ask yourself what you, in those circumstances, would have thought?

Chapter Seven

Another Person Becomes Inquisitive

I was uncertain what to do. Was it best to ascend the steps, knock boldly at the door, and inquire the reason of that frantic appeal? Or should I remain silent and watch?

If Kirk had caused the Professor's death, then why had he enlisted my aid? But was I not a complete novice, in the detection of crime, and might not all his protestations of friendship be a mere blind, a clever ruse to cover the truth?

I stood on the pavement, my ears strained to catch any sound within. But all was silent again.

Those final words of the woman's desperate appeal for help rang in my ears: "*You've killed me, just as you killed my dear father!*"

The woman who had shrieked could surely have no connection with the tragedy in Sussex Place, for, alas! Ethelwynn Greer was dead. I had, with my own eyes, seen her stiff and stark.

Then what did it all mean? Was this an additional phase of the already inscrutable problem?

I gazed at the window, where no light escaped through the lowered Venetian blinds. The very darkness struck me as strange, for either there were closed shutters upon the blinds, or some heavy curtains had been drawn carefully across to exclude any

ray of light from being seen without.

In the neighbourhood wherein I was, I recollected there were many mysterious houses – secret clubs where waiters and foreigners of the lower class danced, drank, and played faro, and were often raided by the police. Those streets bore a very bad reputation.

After all, I was not exactly certain that the house whence emanated the shrieks was the actual house into which Kirk had entered. Hence I was both undecided and bewildered. For that reason I waited, my eyes glued upon the dark door and house-front.

Suddenly, above the fanlight, I saw the flickering light of a candle carried down the hall, and a moment later the door opened. In fear of recognition I sprang back into the roadway, where, at that distance, the fog obscured me.

Someone descended the steps, and, turning to the left, went in the direction whence I had come. I followed stealthily for some distance until I at last made out the figure in the weak light of a street-lamp.

It was not Kirk, only a forbidding-looking old woman in faded bonnet and shawl – a typical gin-drinking hag of a type one may see in hundreds in that neighbourhood. I had followed her down into Cleveland Street, where she turned to the left, when it suddenly occurred to me that, in my absence, Kirk might make his exit. Therefore I rather foolishly abandoned pursuit, and retraced my steps.

Judge my chagrin, my utter disgust with myself when, on returning, I failed to recognise from which house the woman had come! In that puzzling pall of fog, which grew thicker and more impenetrable every moment, I hesitated to decide which of three or four houses was the place whence the woman's cries had emanated.

That hesitation was fatal to my success. In my excitement I had taken no notice of the number upon the door, and now I paced backwards and forwards before the railings of four houses, all almost exactly similar, all in darkness, all equally dingy and mysterious. Which of those houses held Kershaw Kirk I knew not, neither could I decide from which of the four had come those despairing cries.

I had been a fool, a very great fool, for not going boldly to the door and demanding an explanation, even though I might have received a rough handling, alone and unarmed as I was. So I returned to the street-lamp and tried to recognise the house from the point where I had stood when the first cry had fallen upon my ears. But, alas! again I could not decide.

My impulse to follow the woman had been my undoing, for I somehow felt a strong conviction that Kirk had escaped during my absence in Cleveland Street, for though I waited in that dense and choking blackness beneath the red lamp of a surgery at the further corner for still another hour, he came not.

Therefore I was compelled very reluctantly to grope my way back into the Tottenham Court Road, where at last I found a

hansom, and with a man leading the horse, I fell asleep as we went westward, so fagged and exhausted was I by that long and unpleasant vigil.

The wife of a motorist like myself is used to her husband's late hours, therefore I had little difficulty in excusing myself to Mabel, yet when I retired to bed no sleep came to my eyes.

That woman's shrill, despairing cry rang ever in my ears. Those words of hers were so mysterious, so ominous.

"You've killed me, just as you killed my dear father!"

Should I go to the police in the morning and make a clean breast of the whole affair?

At dawn I found the fog had lifted, therefore, after looking in at the garage, I called upon Kirk, resolved to pretend ignorance of his visit to the house off the Tottenham Court Road. But again I was disappointed, for he had been absent all night. His sister was ignorant of his whereabouts, but, as she explained, his movements were ever erratic.

This caused me to make another visit to the house, which, in the light of day, I found to be in Foley Street, an even more squalid neighbourhood than I had believed.

At the corner of Cleveland Street was the laundry, the windows of which were painted grey so that the passer-by could not peer within. The street seemed to be the play-ground of numberless dirty children, while the houses, all of which were let in tenements, were smoke-grimed and dismal.

At some of the windows the cheap lace curtains hung limp

and yellow, and at others the windows had been white-washed to prevent people looking in. The neighbourhood was one that had sadly decayed, for even the public-house a little way up the street was closed and to let.

I stood outside the easily recognised surgery in order to take my bearings, and quickly discovered the three or four houses from one of which had come that cry in the night.

Yet which house it was, I knew not. Therefore what could I do? To remain there might attract Kirk's attention if he were within. Hence I was afraid to loiter, so I passed on into Langham Street, and thus out into Portland Place.

I had become obsessed by the mystery of it all. I returned to Chiswick, and tried to give my mind to the details of my business, but all without avail. I saw that Pelham, my manager, was surprised at my apparent absent-mindedness. I knew it was incumbent upon me to go to the police-station, which was only a few hundred yards from me on the opposite side of the road, and tell the inspector on duty the whole story. Yet somehow the affair, with all its mysterious features, had fascinated me, and Kershaw Kirk most of all. The information was mine, and it was for me to solve this remarkable enigma.

Kirk's absence from home, and his failure to communicate with me, showed that either he mistrusted me, or that he was purposely misleading me for the attainment of his own ends.

He had sought my friendship and assistance, and yet next day he had abandoned me in doubt and ignorance.

I managed to get through the day at the garage, and eagerly bought the evening paper, anxious to see whether the tragedy had become public property; but as yet it was unknown. I dined at home, and I suppose my manner was so preoccupied that Mabel, my wife, asked:

“What’s the matter, Harry? You seem unusually worried?”

“Oh! I don’t know, dear,” I replied, trying to laugh. “I’ve had a lot of things to do at the office to-day,” I added in excuse; “I’ve got to go back this evening.”

Mabel pouted, and I knew the reason. I had promised to run her and her sister over to Teddington to see some friends with whom we had promised to spend the evening.

But I was in no mood for visiting friends. I went along to Kirk’s house, and, finding him still absent, took the train from Hammersmith to Baker Street, and walked through Clarence Gate to Sussex Place.

It had just struck nine when I halted at the Professor’s door, but I drew back suddenly when I saw a tall, well-dressed, clean-shaven young man in hard felt hat and overcoat, standing in the doorway.

He had rung, and was evidently awaiting an answer to his summons.

The place was, I noticed, in darkness. Antonio had evidently omitted to switch on the light in the hall.

What could that young man want at the house of death?

Unfortunately, I had not been quick enough, for as I halted he

turned upon me, realising that to call there was my intention.

“This is strange!” he remarked to me, “I’ve been ringing here nearly half an hour, and can get no reply. Yet when I passed the front of the house there was a light in the small drawing-room. I’ve never before known the place to be left; there are always servants here, even if the Professor and his daughter are absent.”

It occurred to me that Antonio had detected him from within, and that he might be an unwelcome visitor. I recollected Kirk’s strict injunctions to the faithful Italian.

“Antonio may be out,” I suggested.

“But the maids would surely be at home,” he argued. “I wonder if thieves are inside? I somehow suspect it,” he whispered.

“Why?”

“Because I distinctly heard a movement in the hall about ten minutes ago,” he answered. “Will you go round to the front and see if there are lights in any of the rooms, while I remain here? You’ll soon see the house – the first with the long columns at the drawing-room windows.”

I consented, and was quickly round at the front.

But the whole place was in total darkness. Not a light showed anywhere.

I returned, and suggested that in passing he might have been mistaken. There were lights in the windows of the adjoining house.

“No,” declared the young man, who, by his speech, I recognised was well educated, “I made no mistake. There’s some

mystery here. I wired from Paris to Miss Greer this morning, making an appointment this evening. It's curious that she's out."

"You are a friend of the family, I suppose?" I asked, eager to know who the young fellow was.

"Yes," he replied; "and you?"

"I am also," was my answer. What other reply could I make? "I believe the Professor is up in Scotland," I added.

"But where is Antonio and all the other servants?" he argued.

"Well," I said, "their master being absent, they may all be out, spending the evening; servants have a habit of doing so in the absence of their masters."

"Then how do you account for the movements I have heard inside?" he asked. "No; if the servants are out, then the thieves are within. Will you stay here to bar their exit, while I go out and find a constable?"

Mention of the police caused me to wince. This young man was in ignorance of what had really occurred.

"I should remain patient a little while if I were you," I said. "Antonio may return at any moment; he surely cannot have gone far."

"On the contrary, I think he has."

"Why?"

"Well, curiously enough, this afternoon, when I alighted from the Paris express and was passing through the buffet at Calais, I caught sight of a man who strangely resembled him. He turned his head and hurried away. At the moment I failed to recognise

the likeness, and not until half an hour later, when the boat was already on its way across to Dover, did I recollect that he was very like the Professor's faithful Antonio."

I held my breath.

Chapter Eight

A Fresh Turn in Affairs

Here was the whole affair in danger of being exposed to the police and public by this young man's encounter with the Professor's servant! If it were exposed, then I should be compelled to give some account of myself. It would certainly be difficult to convince the police that I had no knowledge of the Professor's death.

"Well," I remarked, "that Antonio should be leaving Calais seems somewhat curious, but perhaps it may have only been somebody resembling him."

"Of course, I'm not quite sure," the young man replied; "but is it not curious that Miss Greer and the servants are all out? The Professor is always so very careful of his experiments and the contents of his laboratory that the house is never left untenanted."

"I've called quite by chance and upon business," I explained. "I'm a motor-car engineer, and I live in Chiswick. My name is Holford."

"Mine's Langton – Leonard Langton," he answered. Then, after a second's hesitation, he added, "Ethelwynn – Miss Greer – is to become my wife. That's why I'm surprised that she hasn't kept the appointment I made."

I was silent. What if I told him of the girl's mysterious death?

What would he say? How would he act?

He seemed a smart, active, well-set-up fellow, quick, energetic, with a pair of merry grey eyes and a good-natured smile. Indeed, I took to him from the first. Yet how dare I divulge a word of what I knew?

“The only thing is to wait,” I suggested.

“But if the Professor is in Scotland, as you say, why have you called this evening?” he asked, with some little suspicion, I thought.

For the moment I was nonplussed.

“I wondered whether he had returned,” was my rather lame reply. “I simply called on the off-chance of seeing him.”

“Was your business of a pressing nature?” he asked, still wondering, I think, whether I might not have some connection with thieves who might be within. Perhaps he now suspected me of being an accomplice, set to watch outside. My hesitation when he suggested calling the police had no doubt aroused his suspicion. Besides, I suppose my agitation had caused him some surprise, for I was in deadly fear lest the police should be called, and should enter there.

The dead girl’s lover was a man of strongly marked character, that I could see. When once he learned the truth I should surely be suspected of having secret knowledge of the crime!

“Well?” he asked, as we still stood before the closed door, “what shall we do?”

“Wait,” I again suggested, “the Professor is evidently still

away. He may have sent Antonio across to the Continent upon some business.”

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