Le Queux William

The Stolen Statesman: Being the Story of a Hushed Up Mystery

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Chapter One.
Concerning Sheila Monkton

As the Right Honourable Reginald Monkton walked towards Charing Cross on that June morning his fifty-odd years appeared to weigh lightly upon him True, his hair was tinged with grey, yet that was but natural after over twenty years of political strife and Party bickering, of hard-fought divisions in the House, and of campaigns of various sorts up and down the country. His career had been a brilliantly outstanding one ever since he had graduated at Cambridge. He had risen to be a Bencher of the Inner Temple; had been, among other things, Quain Professor of Law at University College, London. In Parliament he had sat for North-West Manchester for ten years, afterwards for East Huntingdon, and later for the Govan Division of Glasgow. Among other political appointments he had held was that of a Junior Lord of the Treasury, afterwards that of Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Home Office, and now in the latest Administration he had been given the portfolio of Colonial Secretary.

His one regret was that while he loved the country, and more especially Fydinge, that fine old Elizabethan manor house in Leicestershire, not far from Melton Mowbray, yet he was compelled to live in London and endure the fevered political and social life of the metropolis.

That morning, as he turned from Charing Cross towards Pall Mall, he was in a pensive mood. True, that little knot of people had spontaneously expressed their approval, and perhaps he was secretly gratified. Whatever popular men may say to the contrary, it is always the small appreciations that please. Reginald Monkton was far more gratified by a schoolgirl asking for his autograph in her well-thumbed album, than by the roars of applause that greeted his open and fearless speeches in the huge halls of Manchester, Birmingham, or Glasgow.

The millions of Britain knew him. His portrait appeared regularly in the illustrated papers, sometimes in declamatory attitude with his mouth open, his right fist in the palm of his left hand, addressing a great audience. But that morning, as he passed the “Senior” – as the United Service Club is known to officialdom – his thoughts were serious. He had tasted most of the sweets of life, and all the delights of popularity. Yet that day, the eighth of June, was the fourth anniversary of the death of Sheila, his beloved wife, the fine, self-sacrificing helpmate of his early days, the woman who had moulded his career and seen him through many hours of disappointment and tribulation, and who, with her woman’s amazing intuition and tact, had at the crisis of his life given him that sound advice which had swept him high upon the crest of the wave of popularity.

He recollected that it was on a bright sunny June day – just as that was – when, in that little villa amid the feathery palms at Mentone, he had held his dear one’s wasted hard while her eyes had slowly closed in her last long sleep.

A lump arose in his throat as he turned into Cockspur Street, heedless of the busy bustle of London life, or that two honourable Members had nodded to him. So absorbed was he that he had only stared at them blankly and passed on.

Like many another man whose name is a household word in Britain to-day, all his popularity counted as nothing to him, and even though he led the busy life of a Cabinet Minister, yet he was very lonely at heart.

For a second he held his breath, then, setting his wide jaws in hard determination to put aside those bitter thoughts of the past, and still unaware that he was being followed, he crossed the road and entered the Carlton Hotel.

The young woman in plain navy blue who had followed him from Downing Street passed by, and continued until she reached the corner of Waterloo Place, when she turned, retraced her steps, and, entering the hotel by the door in Pall Mall, glanced into the palm-court with quick, furtive eyes. Then, apparently satisfying herself, she went along the narrow corridor and emerged into the Haymarket.

Again turning the corner into Pall Mall she drew out her handkerchief to dab her nose again, and afterwards hailed a taxi and drove away.

On the kerb opposite stood the thick-set young man, who, having seen her signal, watched her leave, and then crossed and entered the hotel.

Reginald Monkton, on entering the palm-court after leaving his hat and cane, found his daughter Sheila seated at one of the little tables with a spruce, well-set-up, refined young man, awaiting him.

The young man sprang up eagerly, and, putting out his hand, exclaimed:

"It's awfully good of you to come, Mr Monkton! I know how terribly busy you must be."

"Delighted, my dear Austin," declared the statesman. "Delighted! The Cabinet was just over in time, so I've walked along. Well, Sheila," he asked merrily, turning to his daughter, "what have you been doing this morning?"

"Oh!" replied the pretty, fair-haired girl, who was very daintily, yet not showily, dressed. "I've not been doing much, father. I went to Bond Street for you, and then I called on Cicely Wheeler. She and her husband are off to Dinard to-morrow. I've asked them to dine with us to-night."

"Ah! Then you will have to entertain them, I fear, as I must be down at the House."

"What a pity!" replied the girl in disappointment. "I thought you said you would dine at home to-night!"

"I intended to do so, but find it will be impossible," declared her father as the trio made a move into the restaurant, filled as it was with a gay London throng who were lunching to the well-modulated strains of the Roumanian orchestra.

Of the many pretty girls seated at the tables certainly none could compare with Sheila Monkton. Indeed, more than one young man turned to admire her as she seated herself and drew off her gloves, and they envied the good-looking young fellow with whom she was laughing so happily. She had just turned twenty. Her clear-cut features were flawless; her healthy complexion, her clear hazel eyes, her soft fair hair, and her small mouth combined to impart to her sweetness and daintiness that were both peculiarly attractive. Her black velvet hat trimmed with saxe blue suited her soft countenance admirably, while the graceful poise of her head had often been admired by artists; indeed, she was at that very period sitting to Howe, the R.A., for her portrait for next year's Academy.

As for Austin Wingate, her companion, he was about twenty-four, and if not exactly an Adonis he was handsome enough, clean-shaven, with black hair, eyes of a dark grey, and a mouth which needed no moustache to hide it. His figure was that of the young man of pre-war days whom you met by the dozen in the High at Oxford, broad-shouldered, muscular, and full of natural energy and grace.

Women who met Austin Wingate for the first time usually thought him an ordinary easy-going fellow of that type known as a "nut," who was careless as long as he lived his own go-ahead town life, the centre of which was the Automobile Club. Yet they would soon discern a certain deep thoughtful expression in his eyes and a gravity about the lips which at once upset the first estimate they had made of his character.

It was true that young Wingate was a merry, careless young fellow. He lived in cosy chambers in Half Moon Street, and his circle of friends, young men of his own age, were a rather wild lot. Most of them were ardent motorists, and nearly all were habitués of that centre of motoring in Pall Mall.

Of late Monkton's daughter had been seen about with him a good deal, and in the select little world of politicians' wives there had been many whisperings over teacups.

That day, however, Monkton was lunching openly with the pair, and several people in the restaurant, recognising the trio, put together their heads and gossiped.

While the two young people chattered merrily, Monkton, who had tried to crush down those ghosts of the past that had obsessed him while he walked along Whitehall, glanced across at his pretty daughter and sighed as he commenced his meal. Ah! how complete was the image of his dead wife. It was as though she sat there before him in those long-ago days of over twenty-five years ago, when she was the daughter of a country vicar and he was on the threshold of his career.

He saw how happy Sheila was with the young man who had so recently come into her life. Sometimes he had resented their acquaintance, yet to resent it was, he reflected, only jealousy after all. He himself had but little to live for. As a member of the Cabinet he had gained his goal. He would, he knew, never fulfil the prophecy of his humble admirer standing in Downing Street. He could never become Premier. There were abler men than he, men with greater influence with the nation, men who had schemed for the office for half a lifetime. No. Death might come to him soon – how soon he knew not. And then Sheila should marry. Therefore, even though the wrench would be a great one, personally he, honest man that he was, felt that he should make a sacrifice, and promote a union between the pair.

Sheila was his only home companion and comfort. True, she scolded him severely sometimes. Sometimes she pouted, put on airs, and betrayed defiance. But do not all young girls? If they did not they would be devoid of that true spirit of independence which every woman should possess.

Again he glanced at her while she laughed happily with the young man who loved her, but who had never admitted it. Then he looked across the room, where sat Benyon, a well-known member of the Opposition, with his fat, opulent wife, who had, until recently, been his housekeeper. The eyes of the two men met, and the Cabinet Minister waved his hand in recognition, while the stout, over-dressed woman stared.

Half the people in the restaurant had, by this time, recognised Reginald Monkton by the many photographs which appeared almost daily, for was he not the popular idol of his Party, and did not the *Court Circular* inform the nation of the frequent audiences he had of His Majesty the King?

"Well, Austin?" asked the Minister, when the waiter had served an exquisitely cooked entrée. "How are things out at Hendon?"

"Oh! we are all very busy, sir. Wilcox is experimenting with his new airship. At last he has had some encouragement from the Government, and we are all delighted. My shops are busy. We sent three planes to Spain yesterday. King Alphonso ordered them when he was over in the early spring."

"Austin has promised to take me up for a flight one day, dad!" exclaimed the girl enthusiastically. "He wants to ask you if he may."

Her father did not reply for some moments. Then he said judiciously:

"Well, dear, we must see. Perhaps he might take you just a little way – once round the aerodrome – eh?"

"Of course not far," said his daughter, glancing significantly at her lover.

"There is no risk, Mr Monkton, I assure you. Miss Sheila is very anxious to go up, and I shall be most delighted to take her – with your consent, of course," Wingate said. "My suggestion is just a circuit or two around the aerodrome. We are completing a new machine this week, and after I've tried her to see all is safe. I'd like to take Sheila up."

"We must see – we must see," replied her indulgent father, assuming a non-committal attitude. He, however, knew that in all England no man knew more of aerial dynamics than Austin Wingate, and, further, that beneath his apparently careless exterior with his immaculate clothes and his perfectly-brushed hair was a keen and scientific mind, and that he was working night and day directing the young and rising firm of aeroplane makers at Hendon, of which he was already managing director.

Sheila's meeting with him had been the outcome of one of his experiments. One afternoon in the previous summer he had been driving a new hydroplane along the Thames, over the Henley

course, when he had accidentally collided with a punt which Sheila, in a white cotton dress, was manipulating with her pole.

In an instant the punt was smashed and sunk, and Miss Monkton and her two girl companions were flung into the water. After a few minutes of excitement all three were rescued, and the young inventor, on presenting himself to express his deep regret, found himself face to face with "Monkton's daughter," as Sheila was known in Society.

The girl with her two friends, after changing their clothes at the Red Lion, had had tea with the author of the disaster, who was unaware of their names, and who later on returned to London, his hydroplane being badly damaged by the collision.

Six months went past, yet the girl's face did not fade from Austin Wingate's memory. He had been a fool, he told himself, not to ascertain her name and address. He had given one of the girls his card, and she had told him her name was Norris. That was all he knew. On purpose to ascertain who they were he had been down to Henley a fortnight after the accident, but as the girls had not stayed at the Red Lion, but were evidently living in some riverside house or bungalow, farther up the river, he could obtain no knowledge or trace of her.

One bright Saturday afternoon in November the usual gay crowd had assembled at the aerodrome at Hendon to watch the aviation, a science not nearly so well developed in 1912 as it is to-day. At the Wingate works, on the farther side of the great open grass lands, Austin was busy in the long shed directing the final touches to a new machine, which was afterwards wheeled out, and in which he made an experimental flight around the aerodrome, which the public, many of them seated at tea-tables on the lawn, watched with interest.

After making several circles and performing a number of evolutions, he came to earth close to a row of smart motor-cars drawn up on the lawn reserved for subscribers, and unstrapping himself sprang gaily out.

As he did so he saw, seated in the driver's seat of a fine limousine straight before him, a girl in motoring kit chatting with an elderly man who stood beside the car.

The girl's eyes met his, and the recognition was instantly mutual. She smiled merrily across to him, whereupon he crossed to her, just as he was, in his mechanic's rather greasy brown overalls, and bowing before her exclaimed:

"How fortunate! Fancy meeting again like this!" Whereupon, with her cheeks flushed with undisguised pleasure, she shook his hand, and then turning to the tall elderly man explained:

"This is the gentleman who smashed our punt at Henley, father! We have not met since."

"I fear it was very careless of me, sir," Wingate said. "But I offer a thousand apologies."

"The accident might have been far worse," declared the girl's father, smiling. "So let it rest at that."

"I had no idea that it was you in the air just now," exclaimed the girl, and then for ten minutes or so the trio stood chatting, during which time he explained that his works were on the opposite side of the aerodrome, after which he shook hands and left them.

"Whose car is that big grey one, third in the row yonder?" he asked eagerly of one of the gatekeepers, a few moments later.

"Oh, that, sir? Why, that belongs to Mr Reginald Monkton, the Colonial Secretary. There he is – with his daughter."

So his sweet, dainty friend of the river was daughter of the popular Cabinet Minister!

He drew a long breath and bit his lip. Then climbing back into his machine, he waved father and daughter adieu and was soon skimming across to the row of long sheds which comprised the Wingate Aeroplane Factory.

The young man was sensible enough to know that he could never aspire to the hand of the Cabinet Minister's daughter, yet a true and close friendship had quickly sprung up between her father and himself, with the result that Wingate was now a frequent and welcome visitor to the cosy old-

world house in Mayfair, and as proof the well-known statesman had accepted Austin's invitation to lunch at the Carlton on that well-remembered day of the Cabinet meeting, the true importance of which is only known to those who were present at the deliberations in Downing Street that morning.

Curious, indeed, were the events that were to follow, events known only to a few, and here chronicled for the first time.

Chapter Two.
The Discovery in Chesterfield Street

In the absence of her father, Sheila Monkton was compelled to entertain her guests at dinner alone. There were three: Sir Pemberton Wheeler and his young dark-haired wife Cicely, an old schoolfellow of Sheila's, and Austin Wingate.

They were a merry quartette as they sat in the cosy dining-room in Chesterfield Street, a few doors from Curzon Street, waited on by Grant, the white-headed, smooth-faced old butler who had been in the service of Monkton's father before him.

The house was an old-fashioned Georgian one. Upon the iron railings was a huge extinguisher, recalling the days of linkmen and coaches, while within was a long, rather narrow hall and a spiral staircase of stone worn hollow by the tread of five generations. The rooms were not large, but very tastefully, even luxuriously, furnished, with many fine paintings, pieces of beautiful statuary, and magnificent bronzes, while everywhere were soft carpets upon which one's feet fell noiselessly. In that house, indeed in that very room wherein the four sat laughing in the June twilight, the pale-pink shades of the lamps shedding a soft glow over the table with its flowers and silver, many of the most prominent British statesmen had been entertained by the Colonial Secretary, and many a State secret had been discussed within those four dark-painted walls.

"The Prime Minister dined with us last Thursday," Sheila remarked to Cicely Wheeler. "Lord Horsham came in later, and they had one of their private conferences."

"Which meant that you were left to amuse yourself alone, eh?" laughed Sir Pemberton Wheeler, and he glanced mischievously towards Austin on the other side of the table.

"Yes. That is quite true." Sheila laughed, instantly grasping his meaning. "Mr Wingate did not happen to be here. When father has a political dinner no ladies are invited. Some of those dinners are horribly boring, I can assure you," declared the girl.

"Their eternal discussion of this measure and the other measure, and – oh! how they all intrigue, one Party against the other! Do you know that I've sat here and heard some most remarkable schemes."

"Secrets, I suppose?" remarked Austin, twisting the stem of his windlass between his fingers.

"Yes – I've heard them discuss what they call matters of policy which, to me, appear merely to be the most ingenious methods of gulling the public."

"Ah! my dear Miss Monkton, few politicians are so straight and open as your father. That is why the Opposition are so deadly in fear of him. His speech last week regarding the recent trouble in the Malay States was an eye-opener. He lifted the veil from a very disconcerting state of affairs, much to the chagrin and annoyance of those to whose advantage it was to hush-up the matter."

"That is what father is always saying," declared Sheila. "He often sighs when going through despatches which the messengers bring, and exclaims aloud 'Ah! if the public only knew! – if they only knew! What would they think – what would they say?'"

"Then something is being concealed from the nation?" Austin remarked.

"Something!" echoed the girl. "Why, a very great deal. Of that I am quite certain."

"You know nothing of its nature?" asked her friend Cicely, with her woman's eagerness to inquire.

"Of course not, dear. Father never confides any secrets to me," she replied. "He always says that women gossip too much, and that it is through the chattering wives of Members of the House, whom he calls the jays, that much mischief is done."

"The jays!" laughed Sir Pemberton. "Very good! I suppose he has given them that name because of their fine feathers. Personally I shall be glad to get to Dinard out of it all for a while."

"We always enjoy Dinard, Sheila," declared his wife. "You really must get your father to bring you to the Royal this summer. We shall be there all the season. We sent the car over a week ago."

Cicely, or Lady Wheeler to give her her title, was a giddy little woman who, after being a confirmed flirt and known in Mayfair as one of its prettiest butterflies, had married a man more than double her age, for Wheeler was fifty, interested in spinning-mills in Yorkshire, and sat in Parliament for the constituency in which his mills were situated. At the last moment she had jilted young Stenhouse, of the Grenadier Guards, for the more alluring prospect of Wheeler's title and his money. Hence the *Morning Post* had one day announced to the world that her marriage with the good-looking young Captain would "not take place," and a week later her photograph had appeared as the future Lady Wheeler.

She had joined that large circle of London society who are what is known in their own particular jargon as "spooky." She attended séances, consulted mediums, and believed in the statements of those who pretended to have made psychic discoveries. Yet Sheila, who was far too level-headed to follow London's latest craze, was devoted to her, and had been ever since they studied together at that fashionable school near Beachy Head.

"I spoke to father to-day about a little trip across to you," Sheila replied, "and he thinks he may be able to do it when the House is up."

"That's good," declared Sir Pemberton in his plethoric voice. "Get him to bring his car over too, and we'll have a tour together through Brittany and down to Nantes and the Touraine."

"I'd love to see the old châteaux there," Sheila declared. "There's a big illustrated book about them in the library – Blois, Chenonceaux, Chinon, Loches, and the rest."

"Well, your father certainly requires a rest after all the stress of this session."

"Certainly he does," declared Cicely. "Get round dear old Macalister, the doctor, to order him a rest and suggest a motor-tour as relaxation."

"Besides, it always delights the public to know that a Cabinet Minister has gone away on holiday. It shows that he is overworked in the interests of the nation," laughed Austin, who was nothing if not matter-of-fact.

At last, the dinner having ended, Sheila and Cicely rose and left the men, after which Grant sedately served them with coffee, two glasses of triple-sec, and cigarettes.

For ten minutes or so they gossiped, after which they rejoined the ladies in the long, old-fashioned drawing-room upstairs.

At Wheeler's suggestion Sheila went to the piano and sang one of those gay chansons of the Paris cafés which she had so often sung at charity concerts. She had begun to learn French at eight years of age, and after her school at Eastbourne had been at Neuilly for three years before coming out.

She chose "Mon p'tit Poylt," that gay song to which Lasaigues had written the music and which was at the moment being sung at half the café concerts in France. Playing her own accompaniment in almost the professional style of the entertainer, she began to sing the merry tuneful song, with its catchy refrain:

"On s'aimait, on n'était pas rosse.
On s'frôlait gentiment l'museau;
On rigolait comme des gosses.
On s'bécotait comm' des moineaux."

The trio listening laughed merrily, for she played and sang with all the verve of a Parisian chanteuse. Besides, both music and words were full of a gay abandon which was quite unexpected, and which charmed young Wingate, who knew that, though the Cabinet Minister held him in high esteem as a friend, yet to marry Sheila was entirely out of the question. He realised always that he

was a mere designer of aeroplanes, "a glorified motor-mechanic" some jealous enemies had declared him to be. How could he ever aspire to the hand of "Monkton's daughter?"

Level-headed and calm as he always was, he had from the first realised his position and retained it. Mr Monkton had admitted him to his friendship, and though always extremely polite and courteous to Sheila, he remained just a friend of her father.

At last she concluded, and, rising, made a mock bow to her three listeners, all of whom congratulated her, the mill-owner declaring:

"You really ought to give a turn at the Palace Theatre, Sheila! I've heard lots of worse songs there!"

"'Tiny Tentoes, the Cabinet Minister's daughter' would certainly be a good draw!" declared Cicely.

"Oh! well, I know you all like French songs, so I sang it. That's all," answered their sprightly young hostess. "But look! it's past eleven, and father said he would be back before ten to see you before you left. I'll telephone to the House."

And she descended to the small library on the ground floor, where she quickly "got on" to the House of Commons.

When she re-entered the drawing-room she exclaimed:

"He left the House more than an hour ago. I wonder where he is? He ought to have been back long before this."

Then at her guests' request she sang another French chanson – which, through the half-open window, could have been heard out in Curzon Street – greatly to the delight of the little party.

At last, just before midnight. Cicely, pleading that they had to leave by the Continental mail early next morning, excused herself and her husband, and left in a taxi, for which Grant had whistled, after which Sheila and Austin found themselves alone.

When two people of the opposite sex, and kindred spirits as they were, find themselves alone the usual thing happens. It did in their case. While Sheila looked over her music, in response to Austin's request to sing another song while awaiting the return of her father, their hands touched. He grasped hers and gazed straight into her face.

In those hazel eyes he saw that love-look – that one expression which no woman can ever disguise, or make pretence; that look which most men know. It is seldom in their lives they see it, and when once it is observed it is never forgotten, even though the man may live to be a grandfather.

At that instant of the unconscious contact of the hands, so well-remembered afterwards by both of them, Sheila flushed, withdrew her hand forcibly, and rose, exclaiming with pretended resentment:

"Don't, Austin – please."

Meanwhile there had been what the newspapers term a "scene" in the House of Commons that evening. An important debate had taken place upon the policy of the Imperial Government towards Canada, a policy which the Opposition had severely criticised in an attempt to belittle the splendid statesmanship of the Colonial Secretary, who, having been absent during greater part of the debate, entered and took his seat just as it was concluding.

At last, before a crowded House, Reginald Monkton, who, his friends noticed, was looking unusually pale and worn, rose and replied in one of those brief, well-modulated, but caustic speeches of his in which he turned the arguments of the Opposition against themselves. He heaped coals of fire upon their heads, and denounced them as "enemies of Imperialism and destroyers of Empire." The House listened enthralled.

He spoke for no more than a quarter of an hour, but it was one of the most brilliant oratorical efforts ever heard in the Lower Chamber, and when he reseated himself, amid a roar of applause from the Government benches, it was felt that the tide had been turned and the Opposition had once more been defeated.

Hardly had Monkton sat down when, remembering that he had guests at home, he rose and walked out.

He passed out into Palace Yard just before ten o'clock and turned his steps homeward, the night being bright and starlit and the air refreshing. So he decided to walk.

Half-an-hour after Cicely and her husband had left Chesterfield Street Sheila again rang up the House and made further inquiry, with the same result, namely, that the Colonial Minister had left Westminster just before ten o'clock. Monkton had been seen in St. Stephen's Hall chatting for a moment with Horace Powell, the fiery Member for East Islington, whom he had wished "good-night" and then left.

So for still a further half-hour Sheila, though growing very uneasy, sat chatting with Austin, who, be it said, had made no further advances. He longed to grasp her slim white hand and press it to his lips. But he dared not.

"I can't think where father can be!" exclaimed the girl presently, rising and handing her companion the glass box of cigarettes. "Look! it is already one o'clock, and he promised most faithfully he would be back to wish the Wheelers farewell."

"Oh! he may have been delayed – met somebody and gone to the club perhaps," Austin suggested. "You know how terribly busy he is."

"I know, of course – but he always rings me up if he is delayed, so that I need not sit up for him, and Grant goes to bed."

"Well, I don't see any necessity for uneasiness," declared the young man. "He'll be here in a moment, no doubt. But if he is not here very soon I'll have to be getting along to Half Moon Street."

Through the next ten minutes the eyes of both were constantly upon the clock until, at a quarter-past one, Wingate rose, excusing himself, and saying:

"If I were you I shouldn't wait up any longer. You've had a long day. Grant will wait up for your father."

"The good old fellow is just as tired as I am – perhaps more so," remarked the girl sympathetically. And then the pair descended to the hall, where Sheila helped him on with his coat.

"Well – good-night – and don't worry," Austin urged cheerfully as their hands met. The contact sent a thrill through him. Yes. No woman had ever stirred his soul in that manner before. He loved her – yes, loved her honestly, truly, devotedly, and at that instant he knew, by some strange intuition, that their lives were linked by some mysterious inexplicable bond. He could not account for it, but it was so. He knew it.

By this time Grant had arrived in the hall to let out Miss Sheila's visitor, and indeed he had opened the door for him, when at that same moment a taxi, turning in from Curzon Street, slowly drew up at the kerb before the house.

The driver alighted quickly and, crossing hurriedly to Austin, said:

"I've got a gentleman inside what lives 'ere, sir. 'E ain't very well, I think."

Startled by the news Austin and Grant rushed to the cab, and with the assistance of the driver succeeded in getting out the unconscious form of the Colonial Secretary.

"I'd send the lady away, sir – if I were you," whispered the taxi-driver to Wingate. "I fancy the gentleman 'as 'ad just a drop too much wine at dinner. 'E seems as if 'e 'as!"

Amazed at such a circumstance Sheila, overhearing the man's words, stood horrified. Her father was one of the most temperate of men. Such a home-coming as that was astounding! The three men carried the prostrate statesman inside into the small sitting-room on the right, after which Austin, completely upset, handed the taxi-man five shillings, and with a brief word of thanks dismissed him.

Meanwhile Sheila had rushed into the dining-room to obtain a glass of water, hoping to revive her father. Old Grant, faithful servant that he was, had thrown himself upon his knees by the couch whereon his master had been placed.

He peered into his pale face, which was turned away from the silk-shaded electric light, and then suddenly gasped to Wingate: “Why! It isn’t Mr Reginald at all, sir! He’s wearing his clothes, his watch and chain – and everything! But he’s a stranger – it isn’t Mr Reginald! Look for yourself!”

Chapter Three.
The Whispered Name

Austin Wingate approached the unconscious man, and scrutinised the white, drawn features closely. When Grant had uttered those words, he could hardly believe his ears. Had the shock been too much for the old man's reason?

But as he gazed intently, the conviction grew upon him that Grant was right. There was a little resemblance between the Cabinet Minister and the insensible man lying there. Their figures were much the same, and in the half-light a mere cursory glance could not have detected them apart.

But to those who, like Grant and Austin, knew Reginald Monkton intimately, there were striking points of difference at once apparent.

Wingate drew a deep sigh of relief.

"You are right. Grant, it is not your master! He looks ghastly, doesn't he? The driver said that he was drunk, but I don't believe it. The man, whoever he is, seems to me as if he were dying."

At that moment, Sheila, her cheeks pale, her hand trembling so that she spilled the glass of water she was carrying, came into the sitting-room.

Austin rushed towards her and, taking the glass from her, pressed her trembling hand. At a moment of acute tension like that, he knew she would not resent the action.

"Sheila, for God's sake keep calm. It is not what we thought. The man we carried in here is not your father. He is a stranger, wearing your father's clothes. Look for yourself, and you will see where the likeness ends."

"Not my father?" she repeated mechanically, and flung herself down beside Grant. A moment's inspection was enough to convince her. She rose from her knees.

"Thank God!" she cried, fervently. It had cut her to the heart to think that the father whom she so loved and revered should be brought home in such a condition. She was grateful that none but those three had been present.

But to her gratitude succeeded a sudden wave of fear, and her face went paler than before.

"But, Austin, there must be some terrible mystery behind this. Why is this man wearing father's clothes? And why – " she broke suddenly into a low wail – "is father not home?"

Austin could make no answer; the same thought had occurred to him.

"My poor child, there is a mystery, but you must summon all your courage till we can discover more," he murmured soothingly. "Now I must go and 'phone for the doctor. In my opinion, this man is not suffering from excess, as that driver led us to believe. He appears to be in a dying state."

When he had gone to ring up the family doctor, who lived close by in Curzon Street, Sheila again knelt down beside the prostrate form.

Presently the man's lips began to move and faint sounds issued from them. He seemed trying to utter a name, and stumbling over the first syllable.

They strained their ears, and thought they caught the word "Moly" repeated three times.

There was silence for a few seconds, and then the muttering grew louder and they thought they heard the name "Molyneux."

"Oh, if only he could wake from his sleep or lethargy!" Sheila exclaimed impatiently. "If he could only throw some light upon this awful mystery?"

He relapsed into silence again, and then presently recommenced his mutterings. This time, he pronounced the syllables even less clearly than before. And now they fancied the name was more like "Mulliner."

Would he come back to consciousness and be able to answer questions, or would those be his last words on earth? They could not tell. His form had relapsed into its previous rigidity and his face had grown more waxen in its hue.

What was the explanation of his being dressed in her father's clothes? Sheila was sure they were the same Reginald Monkton had won on setting out that evening.

A sudden thought struck her. She inserted her hand gently in his waistcoat pocket, and drew out a gold watch. It was her father's; she had given it to him on his last birthday. She felt in the breast pocket of his coat, but it was empty. That told her little, for she did not know if he had taken any papers with him.

She felt in his pockets one by one, but only discovered a little loose silver. It was her father's habit always to carry a few banknotes in a leather case. If he had done so to-night these had been abstracted. But if the money had been taken, why not the watch? And then she recollected it was inscribed with his name.

While she was pondering these disturbing queries. Doctor Macalister entered the room with Austin, who had imparted to him the startling news in a few words.

He bent over the quiet form, murmuring as he did so: "He is dressed in Mr Monkton's clothes, certainly. I might have been deceived at the first glance myself."

He unbuttoned the waistcoat and shirt, and laid his stethoscope on the chest of the inanimate body.

"Dead!" he said briefly, when he had made his examination. "One cannot, of course, at present tell the cause of death, although the appearances point to heart-failure."

Sheila looked up at him, her lovely eyes heavy with grief and foreboding.

"He spoke a little before you came in," she said. "He seemed to utter two names, Molyneux and Mulliner. He repeated them three times."

The kindly old doctor who had brought her into the world looked at her with compassionate eyes. "The part he bore in this mystery, whether he was a victim or accomplice, will never be revealed by him. He must have been near death when he was put into that taxi. I suppose you did not notice the number?"

No, neither Grant nor Austin had thought of it. They had been too much perturbed at the time.

"Well, I have no doubt the driver can be found. Now I must telephone for the police, and have the body removed."

He drew young Wingate aside for a moment. "You say you have inquired at the House of Commons. Have you rung up Monkton's clubs? He has only two. No; well, better do so. It is a forlorn hope; I knew the man so well. He would never keep Sheila waiting like this if he were with means of communication. There has been foul play – we can draw no other conclusion."

It was the one Wingate had drawn himself, and he quite agreed it was a forlorn hope. Still, he would make sure. He rang up the Travellers' and the Carlton. The answer was the same from both places. Mr Monkton had not been at either club since the previous day.

The police arrived in due course, and bore away the body of the man who wore the clothes of the well-known and popular Cabinet Minister.

And, at their heels, came the inspector of the division, accompanied by Mr Smeaton, the famous detective, one of the pillars of Scotland Yard, and the terror of every criminal.

Smeaton was a self-made man, risen from the ranks, but he had the manners of a gentleman and a diplomatist. He bowed gravely to the pale-faced girl, who was so bravely keeping back her tears. With Austin he had a slight acquaintance.

"I am more than grieved to distress you at such a time. Miss Monkton, but the sooner we get on the track of this mystery the better. Will you tell me, as briefly as you like, and in your own time, what you know of your father's habits?"

In tones that broke now and then from her deep emotion, Sheila imparted the information he asked for. She laid especial emphasis on the fact that, before leaving home in the evening, he outlined to her the programme of his movements. If anything happened that altered his plans he invariably telephoned to her, or sent a letter by special messenger.

The keen-eyed detective listened attentively to her recital.

"Can you recall any occasion on which he failed to notify you?" he asked when she had finished.

"No," she answered firmly. Then she recollected. "Stay! There was one occasion. He was walking home from the House on a foggy night, and was knocked down by a taxi, and slightly injured. They took him to a hospital, and I was telephoned from there, and went to him."

A gleam of hope shone in Austin's eyes.

"We never thought of that."

The great detective shook his head.

"But *we* thought of it, Mr Wingate. My friend here has had every hospital in the radius rung up. No solution there."

There was silence for a long time. It seemed that the last hope had vanished. Smeaton stood for a long time lost in thought. Then he roused himself from his reverie.

"It's no use blinking the fact that we are confronted with a more than usually difficult case," he said, at length. "Still, it is our business to solve problems, and we shall put our keenest wits to work. I wish it were possible, for Miss Monkton's sake, to keep it from the Press."

"But would that be impossible?" cried Wingate.

"I fear so. If a little servant-maid disappears from her native village, the newspaper-men get hold of it in twenty-four hours. Here, instead of an obscure little domestic, you have a man, popular, well-known to half the population of England, whose portrait has been in every illustrated paper in the three Kingdoms. I fear it would be impossible. But I will do my best. The Home Secretary may give certain instructions in this case."

Then turning to Sheila he said:

"Good-night, Miss Monkton. Rely upon it, we will leave no stone unturned to find your father, and bring him back to you."

He was gone with those comforting words. But with his departure, hope seemed to die away, and Sheila was left to confront the misery of the present.

The faithful Grant, who had been hovering in the background, came forward, and spoke to her in the coaxing tone he had used when she was a child.

"Now, Miss Sheila, you must go and rest."

"Oh, no!" she cried wildly. "What is the use of resting? I could not sleep. I can never rest until father comes back to me." She broke into a low wail of despair.

Grant looked at Wingate, with a glance that implored him to use his influence. The faithful old man feared for her reason.

"Sheila, Grant is right," said Austin gravely. "You must rest, even if you cannot sleep. You will need all your strength for to-morrow, perhaps for many days yet, before we get to the heart of this mystery. Let the servants go back to bed. Grant and I will wait through the night, in case good news may come to us."

There were times when, as the old butler remembered, she had been a very wilful Sheila, but she showed no signs of wilfulness now. The grave tones and words of Austin moved her to obedience.

"I will do as you tell me," she said in a hushed and broken voice. "I will go and rest – not to sleep, till I have news of my darling father."

Through the weary hours of the night, the two men watched and dozed by turns, waiting in the vain hope of word or sign of Reginald Monkton.

None came, and in the early morning Sheila stole down and joined them. Her bearing was more composed, and she had washed away the traces of her tears.

"I intend to be very brave," she told them. "I have roused the maids, and I am going to give you breakfast directly, after your long vigil."

Impulsively she stretched out a hand to each, the youthful lover and the aged servitor. "You are both dear, good friends, and my father will thank you for your care when he comes back to me."

Moved by a common impulse the two men, the young and the old, bent and imprinted a reverent kiss on the slender hands she extended to them.

It was a moment of exquisite pathos, the fair, slim girl, resplendent yesterday in the full promise of her youth and beauty; to-day stricken with grief and consumed with the direst forebodings of the fate of a beloved father.

Chapter Four.
The Man who Knew

Three days had gone by, and the mystery of Reginald Monkton's disappearance remained as insoluble as ever. Well, it might be so, since there did not seem a single clue, with the exception of the name muttered by the dying man, which at first had sounded like Molyneux, and afterwards like Mulliner. Neither Sheila nor Grant, who had listened to those faint sounds issuing from the dying lips, could be certain which of the two was correct.

Wingate had seen Smeaton twice, and that astute person assured him that the keenest brains at Scotland Yard were working on the case. But he was very reticent, and from his manner the young man was forced to draw the conclusion that the prospects of success were very slight.

If it had been simply a case of disappearance, uncomplicated by other circumstances, many theories could have been formed. There were plenty of instances of men whose reason had become temporarily unhinged, and who had lost consciousness of their own identity.

Again, men have disappeared voluntarily because they have been threatened with exposure of some shameful secret of the past, and will willingly pay the penalty of separation from their own kith and kin to avoid it.

But no such theories seemed tenable in this instance. Monkton's life, in the opinion of all who knew him, had been a well-ordered and blameless one. He had been a devoted husband; and he was a devoted father, wrapped up in his charming daughter, the sole legacy of that happy marriage.

In the case of such a man, with so stainless a record, it was unthinkable that anything could leap to light from the past which could shame him to such an extent that he would, of his own act, abandon his office, and isolate himself from his child.

Even granting such an hypothesis for a moment, and brushing aside all the evidences of his past life and all the knowledge of him gained through years by his relatives and intimate friends, how did such a theory fit in with the appearance on the scene of the stranger now dead?

"You fear the worst?" queried Wingate one day, as Smeaton sat with him in his cosy rooms in Half Moon Street.

"It is too early yet to give a decided opinion, if, in a case of such complexity, one could ever give a decided opinion at all," was the detective's answer. "But at present things point that way. What was the motive underlying the scheme? You can give the answer quickly – that all inquiries as to the real man are being stifled."

"In other words, that Mr Monkton has been done away with, for motives we do not know, by the person or persons who put the man into the taxi?"

Smeaton nodded. "That's what it seems to be at the moment, Mr Wingate. But we should be poor detectives if we pinned ourselves to any one theory, especially on such evidence – or rather want of evidence – as we have got at present. Cases as mysterious as this – and there was never one more mysterious – have been solved by unexpected means. If we can get hold of that driver who brought the dying man to Chesterfield Street, we may light upon something useful."

"If he was an accomplice, as seems possible, he will never turn up," said Wingate gloomily.

"Accomplice or not, I think the reward will tempt him," replied Smeaton, "even if he has to make up his tale before he comes. I expected he would come forward before now. But one of two things may have happened. Either he may be cogitating over what he shall say when he does come, or he may be an ignorant sort of fellow, who hardly ever reads the newspapers."

"Anyway," resumed Smeaton, after a thoughtful pause, "if and when he does turn up, we shall know, with our long experience, what sort of a customer he is. You may rely upon it that if there is anything to be got out of him, we shall get it, whether it proves valuable or not."

It was not a very cheering interview, certainly, but how could there be any chance of hopefulness at present?

During the few days, however, the police had not been idle. They had made a few discoveries, although they were of a nature to intensify rather than tend to a solution of the mystery.

They had established one most important fact.

Monkton had excused himself from dining at home on the plea that he must be down at the House, the inference being that he would snatch a hasty meal there, in the pause of his Ministerial work.

Instead of that, he had dined about seven o'clock in an obscure little Italian restaurant in Soho. Luigi, the proprietor, had at once recognised him from his portraits in the illustrated papers, and from having seen him at the Ritz, where he had been a waiter.

He had entered the café a few minutes before seven, and had looked round, as if expecting to find somebody waiting for him. Luigi had taken him the menu, and he had said he would wait a few minutes before giving his order, as a guest would arrive.

On the stroke of seven a tall, bearded man, evidently a foreigner, who walked with a limp, joined him. Questioned by Smeaton as to the nationality of the man, the proprietor replied that he could not be sure. He would take him for a Russian. He was quite certain that he was neither French nor Italian. And he was equally certain that he was not a German.

The new arrival joined Mr Monkton, who at once ordered the dinner. Neither of the men ate much, but consumed a bottle of wine between them.

They talked earnestly, and in low tones, during the progress of the meal, which was finished in about half-an-hour. Cigars, coffee, and liqueurs were then ordered, and over these they sat till half-past eight, conversing in the same low tones all the time.

Luigi added that the Russian – if he was of that nationality, as he suspected – seemed to bear the chief burden of the conversation. Mr Monkton played the part of listener most of the time, interjecting remarks now and again.

Asked if he overheard any of the talk between them, he replied that he did not catch a syllable. When he approached the table they remained silent, and did not speak again until he was well out of earshot.

"And you are quite positive it was Mr Monkton?" Smeaton had questioned, when Luigi had finished his recital. It had struck him that Luigi might have been mistaken after all.

Luigi was quite sure. He reminded Smeaton that before taking on the little restaurant in Soho he had been a waiter at the Ritz, where he had often seen the Cabinet Minister. It was impossible he could be mistaken.

He added in his excellent English, for he was one of those foreigners who are very clever linguists. "Besides, there is one other thing that proves it, even supposing I was misled by a chance likeness – though Mr Monkton's is not a face you would easily forget – as I helped him on with his light overcoat he remarked to his friend, 'I must hurry on as fast as I can. I am overdue at the House.'"

That seemed to settle the point. There might be a dozen men walking about London with sufficient superficial resemblance to deceive an ordinary observer, but there was no Member of the House of Commons who could pass for Monkton.

It was evident, then, that he had gone to that little, out-of-the-way restaurant to keep an appointment. The man he met was his guest, as Monkton paid for the dinner. The excuse he made for not dining at home was a subterfuge. The appointment was therefore one that he wished to conceal from his daughter, unless he did not deem it a matter of sufficient importance to warrant an explanation.

Monkton's secretary was also interrogated by the detective. He was a fat-faced, rather pompous young man, with a somewhat plausible and ingratiating manner. He had been with Monkton three years. Sheila had seen very little of him, but what little she had seen did not impress her in his favour.

And her father had owned that he liked him least of any one of the numerous secretaries who had served him.

This young man, James Farloe by name, had very little to tell. He was at the House at eight o'clock, according to Monkton's instructions, and expected, him at that hour. He did not come in till after half-past, and he noticed that his manner was strange and abrupt, as if he had been disturbed by something. At a few minutes before ten he left, presumably for home. When he bade Farloe good-night he still seemed preoccupied.

In these terrible days Austin Wingate's business occupied but second place in his thoughts. He was prepared to devote every moment he could snatch to cheer and sustain the sorrowing Sheila.

A week had gone by, but thanks to certain instructions given by the authorities, at the instance of the Prime Minister, who deplored the loss of his valuable colleague, the matter was being carefully hushed-up.

Late one afternoon, while Smeaton was seated in his bare official room on the second floor at Scotland Yard, the window of which overlooked Westminster Bridge, a constable ushered in a taxi-driver, saying:

"This man has come to see you, sir, regarding a fare he drove to Chesterfield Street the other night."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Smeaton, lounging back in his chair, having been busy writing reports. "Sit down. What is your name?"

"Davies, sir – George Davies," replied the man, twisting his cap awkwardly in his hands as he seated himself.

Smeaton could not sum him up. There was no apparent look of dishonesty about him, but he would not like to have said that he conveyed the idea of absolute honesty. There was something a little bit foxy in his expression, and he was decidedly nervous. But then Scotland Yard is an awe-inspiring place to the humbler classes, and nervousness is quite as often a symptom of innocence as of guilt.

"I only 'eard about this advertisement from a pal this morning. I never reads the papers," the taxi-driver said.

"Well, now you have come, we want to hear all you can tell us. That gentleman died, you know!"

The man shifted uneasily, and then said in a deep, husky voice:

"I've come 'ere, sir, to tell you the truth. I'll tell you all I know," he added, "providing I'm not going to get into any trouble."

"Not if you are not an accomplice," Smeaton said, his keen eyes fixed upon his visitor.

The man paused and then with considerable apprehension said:

"Well – I don't know 'ow I can be really an accomplice. All I know about it is that I was passin' into Victoria Street goin' towards the station, when three gentlemen standin' under a lamp just opposite the entrance to Dean's Yard hailed me. I pulls up when I sees that two of 'em 'ad got another gentleman by the arms. 'Look 'ere, driver,' says one of 'em, 'this friend of ours 'as 'ad a drop too much wine, and we don't want to go 'ome with 'im because of 'is wife. Will you take 'im? 'E lives in Chesterfield Street, just off Curzon Street,' and 'e gives me the number."

"Yes," said Smeaton anxiously. "And what then?"

"Well, sir, 'e gives me five bob and puts the gentleman into my cab, and I drove 'im to the address, where 'is servant took charge of 'im. Did 'e really die afterwards?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes – unfortunately he did," was the police official's reply. "But tell me, Davies. Did you get a good look at the faces of the two men?"

"Yes, sir. They were all three under the lamp."

"Do you think you could recognise both of them again – eh?"

"Of course I could. Why, one of 'em I've seen about lots o' times. Indeed, only yesterday, about three o'clock, while I was waitin' on the rank in the Strand, opposite the Savoy, I saw 'im come out with a lady, and drive away in a big grey car. If I'd a known then, sir, I could 'ave stopped 'im!"

Chapter Five.
Contains some Curious Facts

At the beginning of the interview, the demeanour of the taxi-driver had betrayed signs of nervousness and trepidation. He had hesitated and stumbled in his speech, so much so that Smeaton, the detective, was still in doubt as to his honesty.

Smeaton, however, was a past-master in the art of dealing with a difficult witness. So reassuring was his manner that at the end of five minutes he had succeeded in inspiring the taxi-driver with confidence. His nervousness and hesitation were succeeded by loquacity.

Urged to give a description of the two men, he explained, with amplitude of detail, that the man who had come out of the Savoy was of medium height and clean-shaven, with angular features and piercing dark eyes. He was of striking appearance, the kind of man you would be sure to recognise anywhere. The lady with him was smartly dressed and appeared to be about thirty or under.

"Seems to me I've known 'im about London for years, although I can't remember as I ever drove 'im," he added.

The other man was, Davies said, tall and bearded, and certainly a foreigner, although he could not pretend to fix his nationality.

A tall, bearded man, and a foreigner! Smeaton pricked up his ears. The description tallied somewhat with that of the person who had dined with Monkton in the little restaurant in Soho.

Davies was dismissed with encouraging words and a liberal *douceur*. Given Smeaton the semblance of a clue, and he was on the track like a bloodhound.

Within twenty minutes of the taxi-driver's departure, he was interviewing one of the hall-porters at the Savoy, an imposing functionary, and an old friend.

Smeaton had a large and extensive acquaintance among people who could be useful. He knew the hall-porters of all the big hotels. They were men of quick intelligence, keen powers of observation, and gathered much important information. He had unravelled many a mystery with their assistance.

The detective, standing aside in the hall, described the man as he had been featured by Davies. Did the hall-porter recognise him?

The answer was in the affirmative.

"He's not a man you would be likely to forget, Mr Smeaton," he said. "He is a pretty frequent visitor here. He lunches two or three times a week, and is popular with the waiters, through being pretty free with his tips. Most times he comes alone. Now and again he brings a guest, but nobody we know."

"And his name?" questioned Smeaton eagerly.

"Well, that's the funny part of it," explained the other man. "We get to know the names of the habitués sooner or later, but none of us have ever heard his. He never seems to meet anybody here that he knows, and none of the waiters have ever heard one of his guests address him by name. The maître d'hôtel and I have often talked him over, and wondered who and what he was."

Smeaton showed his disappointment. "That is unfortunate. Let us see if we can be more successful in another direction. Yesterday afternoon, about three o'clock, this man, whose name we don't know, drove away from this place in a taxi, accompanied by a lady. My informant tells me she was smartly dressed, and he puts her age at about thirty, or perhaps less."

The hall-porter indulged in a smile of satisfaction.

"I think I can help you there, Mr Smeaton. I was passing through the palm-court at the time, and saw them go out together. We all know the lady very well. She is here pretty often. Sometimes she comes with a big party, sometimes with a lady friend, sometimes with a gentleman. Her name is Saxton, and she has a flat in Hyde Park Mansions. One of her friends told me she is a widow."

"What sort of a person is she? How would you class her? She seems to dress well, and is, I suppose, attractive."

The hall-porter mused a moment before he replied. Like most of his class, he was an expert at social classification.

"Not one of the 'nobs,' certainly," he answered at length, with a smile. "Semi-fashionable, I should say; moves in society with a small 's.' Her friends seem of two sorts, high-class Bohemians – you know the sort I mean, – and rich middle-class who spend money like water."

"I see," said Smeaton. "And she lives in Hyde Park Mansions off the Edgware Road, or, to be more correct, Lisson Grove. She is evidently not rich."

They bade each other a cordial good-day, Smeaton having first expressed his gratitude for the information, and left in the hall-porter's capacious palm a more substantial proof of his satisfaction.

The next thing to be done was to interview the attractive widow. Before doing so, he looked in at Chesterfield Street, and, as he expected, found Wingate and Sheila together.

He told them of the visit of Davies, and his subsequent conversation with the hall-porter at the Savoy.

When he mentioned the name of Saxton, Sheila uttered an exclamation. "Why, Mr Farloe has a sister of the name of Saxton, a widow! He brought her once to one of our parties, and I remember she was very gushing. She begged me to go and see her at her flat, and I am pretty certain Hyde Park Mansions was the place she named, although I can't be positive."

"Did you go. Miss Monkton?"

"No. As I have told you, I never liked Mr Farloe, and I liked his sister less. She was pretty, and I think men would find her attractive. But there seemed to me an under-current of slyness and insincerity about her."

It was rather a weakness of Wingate's that he credited himself with great analytical powers, and believed he was eminently suited to detective work. So he broke in:

"Perhaps Miss Monkton and I could help you a bit, by keeping a watch on this woman. I have time to spare, and it would take her out of herself."

Smeaton repressed a smile. Like most professionals, he had little faith in the amateur. But it would not be polite to say so.

"By all means, Mr Wingate. We can do with assistance. 'Phone me up or call at Scotland Yard whenever you have anything to communicate. Now, I think I will be off to Hyde Park Mansions and see what sort of a customer Mrs Saxton is." A taxi bore him to his destination, and in a few moments he was ringing at the door of the flat.

A neat maid admitted him, and in answer to his inquiries said her mistress was at home.

"What name shall I say, please?" she asked in a hesitating voice. He produced his case and handed the girl a card.

"Of course, you know I am a stranger," he explained. "Will you kindly take this to Mrs Saxton, and tell her that I will take up as little of her time as possible."

After the delay of a few moments, he was shown into a pretty drawing-room, tastefully furnished. The lady was sitting at a tea-table, and alone.

"Please sit down," she said; her tones were quite affable. She did not in the least appear to resent this sudden intrusion into her domestic life. "Lily, bring another cup. You will let me offer you some tea?"

She was certainly a most agreeable person – on the right side of thirty, he judged. Smeaton was somewhat susceptible to female influence, although, to do him justice, he never allowed this weakness to interfere with business.

He explained that tea was a meal of which he never partook. Mrs Saxton, it appeared, was a most hospitable person, and promptly suggested a whisky-and-soda. He must take something, she protested, or she would feel embarrassed.

The detective accepted, and felt that things had begun very smoothly. The velvet glove was very obvious, even if, later, he should catch a glimpse of the iron hand encased within.

"I must apologise for intruding upon you, Mrs Saxton, in this fashion. But I am in want of a little information, and I believe you can furnish me with it, if you are disposed to."

Mrs Saxton smiled at him very sweetly, and regarded him with eyes of mild surprise. Very fine eyes they were, he thought. It was a pity that she had taken the trouble to enhance their brilliancy by the aid of art. She was quite good-looking enough to rely upon her attractions, without surreptitious assistance.

"How very interesting," she said in a prettily modulated, but rather affected voice. "I am all curiosity."

She was purring perhaps a little bit too much for absolute sincerity, but it was pleasant to be met with such apparent cordiality.

Smeaton came to the point at once. "I am at the present moment considerably interested in the gentleman with whom you left the Savoy yesterday afternoon in a taxi-cab."

There was just a moment's pause before she replied. But there were no signs of confusion about her. Her eyes never left his face, and there was no change in her voice when she spoke. She was either perfectly straightforward, or as cool a hand as he had ever met.

"You are interested in Mr Stent? How strange! Gentlemen of your profession do not generally interest themselves in other persons without some strong motive, I presume?"

"The motive is a pretty strong one. At present, other interests require that I do not divulge it," replied Smeaton gravely. He was pleased with one thing, he had already got the name of the man; he preferred not to confess that he did not know it. And her frank allusion to him as Mr Stent seemed to show that she had nothing to hide. Unless, of course, it was a slip.

"I know I am asking something that you may consider an impertinence," he went on. "But, if you are at liberty to do so, I should like you to tell me all you know of this gentleman; in short, who and what he is."

She laughed quite naturally. "But I really fear I can tell you very little. I suppose going away together in a taxi appears to argue a certain amount of intimacy. But in this case it is not so. I know next to nothing of Mr Stent. He is not even a friend, only a man whose acquaintance I made in the most casual manner. And, apart from two occasions about which I will tell you presently, I don't suppose I have been in his company a dozen times."

It was a disappointment, certainly, and this time Smeaton did not believe she was speaking the truth. In spite of the silvery laugh and the apparently frank manner. But he must put up with what she chose to give him.

"Do you mind telling me how you first made his acquaintance, Mrs Saxton?"

"Not in the least," she replied graciously. "Two years ago I was staying in the Hotel Royal at Dinard. Mr Stent was there too. He seemed a very reserved, silent sort of man, and kept himself very much aloof from the others, myself included, although, as I daresay you have guessed, I am of a gregarious and unconventional disposition."

She gave him a flashing smile, and Smeaton bowed gallantly. "I should say you were immensely popular," he observed judiciously.

"Thanks for the compliment; without vanity, I think I may say most people take to me. Well, one day Mr Stent and I found ourselves alone in the drawing-room, and the ice was broken. After that we talked together a good deal, and occasionally went to the Casino, and took walks together. He left before I did, and I did not meet him again till next year at Monte Carlo."

"Did you learn anything about his private affairs, his profession or occupation?"

"Not a word. The conversation was always general. He was the last man in the world to talk about himself. He was at Monte Carlo about a week. I did not see very much of him then, as I was staying with a party in Mentone; he was by himself, as before."

"Did he give you the impression of a man of means?"

"On the whole, I should say, yes. One night he lost a big sum in the Rooms, but appeared quite unconcerned. Since then I have met him about a dozen times, or perhaps less, at different places, mostly restaurants. Yesterday he came through the palm-court, as I was sitting there after lunch, and we exchanged a few words."

"Did you not see him at lunch; you were both there?" questioned Smeaton quickly.

"I saw him at a table some distance from mine, but he did not see me. I mentioned that I was going back to Hyde Park Mansions. He said he was driving in the direction of St. John's Wood, and would drop me on his way. He left me at the entrance to the flats."

Smeaton rose. He knew that if he stopped there for another hour he would get nothing more out of her.

"Thanks very much, Mrs Saxton, for what you have told me. One last question, and I have done. Do you know where he lives?"

There was just a moment's hesitation. Did she once know, and had she forgotten? Or was she debating whether she would feign ignorance? He fancied the latter was the correct reason.

"I don't remember, if I ever knew, the exact address, but it is somewhere in the direction of St. Albans."

Smeaton bowed himself out, and meditated deeply. "She's an artful customer, for all her innocent air, and knows more than she will tell, till she's forced," was his inward comment. "Now for two things – one, to find out what there is to be found at St. Albans; two, to get on the track of the bearded man."

Chapter Six.
Just Too Late

Mr Smeaton was not a man to waste time. Within ten minutes of his arrival at Scotland Yard he had sent two sergeants of the C.I. Department to keep Mrs Saxton under close surveillance, and to note the coming and going of all visitors. As her flat was on the ground floor, observation would be rendered comparatively easy.

The evening's report was barren of incident. Mrs Saxton had remained at home. The only visitor had been a young man, answering to the description of James Farloe, her brother. He had called about dinner-time, and left a couple of hours later.

For the moment Smeaton did not take Farloe very seriously into his calculations. Mrs Saxton would tell her brother all about his visit, and to interrogate him would be a waste of time. He would tell him nothing more about Stent than he had already learned.

He had noticed, with his trained powers of observation which took in every detail at a glance, that there was a telephone in a corner of the small hall.

If her connection with the mysterious Stent were less innocent than she had led him to believe, she would have plenty of time to communicate with this gentleman by means of that useful little instrument.

Later, he instructed a third skilled subordinate to proceed the next morning in a car to St. Albans, and institute discreet inquiries on the way. Afterwards, he thought of the two amateur detectives in Chesterfield Street, and smiled. Sheila was a charming girl, pathetically beautiful in her distress, and Wingate was a pleasant young fellow. So he would give them some encouragement.

He wrote a charming little note, explaining what he had done with regard to Mrs Saxton. He suggested they should establish their headquarters at a small restaurant close by, lunch and dine there as often as they could. If occasion arose, they could co-operate with his own men, who would recognise them from his description. He concluded his letter with a brief résumé of his conversation with Mrs Saxton.

Poor souls, he thought, nothing was likely to come out of their zeal. But it would please them to think they were at least doing something towards the unravelling of the mystery.

In this supposition he was destined to be agreeably disappointed in the next few hours.

Wingate, after reading the letter, escorted Sheila on a small shopping expedition in the West End. They were going to lunch afterwards at the restaurant in close proximity to Hyde Park Mansions.

The shopping finished, Wingate suddenly recollected he must send a wire to the works at Hendon, and they proceeded to the nearest post-office in Edgware Road.

It was now a quarter to one, and they had settled to lunch at one o'clock, so they walked along quickly. When within a few yards of the post-office, Sheila laid her hand upon his arm.

"Stop a second!" she said in an excited voice. "You see that woman getting out of a taxi. It is Mrs Saxton. Let her get in before we go on."

He obeyed. The elegant, fashionably-attired young woman paid the driver, and disappeared within the door. The pair of amateur detectives followed on her heels.

Sheila's quick eyes picked her out at once, although the office was full of people. Mrs Saxton was already in one of the little pens, writing a telegram.

Unobserved by the woman so busily engaged, Sheila stepped softly behind her, and waited till she had finished. She had splendid eyesight, and she read the words distinctly. They ran as follows:

"Herbert. Poste Restante, Brighton. Exercise discretion. Maude."

Then she glided away, and, with Wingate, hid herself behind a group of people. She had only met the woman once, but it was just possible she might remember her if their glances met.

Mrs Saxton took the telegram to the counter, and they heard her ask how long it would take to get to Brighton. Then, having received an answer to the query, which they could not catch, she went out.

They looked at each other eagerly. They had made a discovery, but what were they to do with it?

"Ring up Smeaton at once, and tell him," suggested Sheila. "He will know what to do."

After a moment's reflection, Wingate agreed that this was the proper course. While they were discussing the point, the man himself hurried in. His quick eye detected them at once, and he joined them.

"I've just missed Mrs Saxton – eh?" he queried.

Sheila explained to him how they had arrived there by accident, and had seen her stepping out of the taxi. Smeaton went on to explain.

"I looked round this morning to see how my men were getting on, and found a taxi waiting before the door. I had to hide when she came out, but one of my men heard her give the address of this office. I picked up another taxi, and drove as hard as I could. My fellow kept the other well in sight, but just as we were gaining on her, I was blocked, and lost three minutes. She came here, of course, to send a wire. But it is only a little delay. I can get hold of that wire very shortly."

"But there is no need," cried Sheila triumphantly. "At any rate, for the present. I looked over her shoulder, and read every word of it. I will tell it you."

She repeated the words. He had showed obvious signs of vexation at having just missed the woman he was hunting, and now his brow cleared.

"Very clever of you. Miss Monkton – very clever," he said in appreciative tones. "Now, who is Herbert, that's the question?"

"Stent, no doubt," suggested Wingate, with a certain amount of rashness.

The detective regarded him with his kindly but somewhat quizzical smile. "I very much doubt if it is Stent, Mr Wingate. I sent a man down early this morning to St. Albans, where I believe he lives. I should say Herbert is another man altogether." The young people readily accepted the professional's theory. They recognised that they were only amateurs.

There was a long pause. They stood humbly waiting for the great man to speak, this man of lightning intuition and strategic resource.

It seemed an interminable time to the expectant listeners before he again opened his lips. Before he did speak, he pulled out his watch and noted the time.

"This may be important, and we cannot afford to lose a moment," he said at length. "How do you stand, Mr Wingate, as regards time? Can you spare me the whole of the day?"

"The whole of to-day, to-morrow, and the next day, if it will help," cried the young man fervently.

"There is a fairly fast train from Victoria in forty minutes from now. You have plenty of time to catch it. I want you to go to the post-office in Brighton, and get hold of that telegram."

"But it is addressed to the name of Herbert."

"No matter," said Smeaton, a little impatiently. "If the real Herbert has not been before you – and I should guess it is an unexpected message – they will hand it to you; they are too busy to be particular. If he has already been, trump up a tale that he is a friend of yours, and not being sure that he would be able to call himself, had asked you to look in for it, so as to make sure."

"I see," said Wingate. He felt an increased admiration for the professional detective. He was not quite sure that he would have been ready with this glib explanation.

"I should love to go too," said Sheila, looking wistfully at the ever-resourceful Smeaton, whom she now frankly accepted as the disposer of their destinies.

"Forgive me if I oppose you this once, my dear Miss Monkton," he said in his kindest and most diplomatic manner. "Two are not always company in detective business, unless they've been trained

to work together. Besides, I shall want Mr Wingate to keep in close touch with me on the 'phone, and he will have no time to look after a lady."

Having settled that matter, he turned to Wingate. "First of all, here are a couple of my cards; one to show the post-office if there is anything awkward – this for the chief constable of Brighton if you have need of his assistance. I will scribble an introduction on it." He suited the action to the word. "Now, the sooner you are off the better. I will put Miss Monkton into a taxi. You be off, and try to get hold of that wire."

There was no resisting his powerful personality. He controlled the situation like an autocrat.

"Stay, just one thing more. I shall be at Scotland Yard till seven, and at home about eight. Here is my private 'phone number, if unseen developments arise."

He thought of everything, he foresaw the improbable. They were lost in admiration. At the moment of departing, he rather damped their enthusiasm by muttering, almost to himself:

"If I could put my hand on one of my own men, I wouldn't trouble you, but there is no time, and delay is dangerous."

A hasty hand-shake to Sheila, a fond lover's look into her eyes, and Wingate was out of the post-office, and into a taxi, en route for Victoria.

He thought of her all the time he was travelling to Brighton. In these last few days her great sorrow had brought her very near to him. He had read her disappointment when Smeaton had forbidden her to accompany him. But she would not resent that on him; she knew he was working in her interests, that his one thought was to help in solving the tragic mystery that was clouding her young life.

The train arrived at Brighton punctual to the minute, and mindful of Smeaton's remark that delay was dangerous, he drove straight to the post-office.

He was, in a certain sense, elated with the mission that had been entrusted him, through the mere accident of Smeaton not having had time to put his hand on an experienced man. But he felt some trepidation as he walked through the swing-doors. Surely people who set forth on detective work must have nerves of steel and foreheads of triple brass.

He bought some stamps first, not because he wanted them, but in order to screw up his courage to sticking-point.

A sharp-featured, not too amiable-looking young woman served him. When he had completed his purchase, he asked in as cordial a voice as he could assume:

"Are there any letters or telegrams for the name of Herbert?"

The young woman regarded him with a suspicious glance.

"Is your name Herbert, may I ask?"

At that moment, he blessed Smeaton for the lie which he had made him a present of at starting. He proceeded to retail it for the young woman's benefit.

She smiled a sour smile, and he felt his face flush. Decidedly he wanted more experience.

"Nothing doing this time," she said insolently, in a rasping cockney voice. "You'd better hurry up next time. The real owner of the telegram took it away half-an-hour ago!"

Chapter Seven.
The Mysterious Mrs Saxton

After Wingate's hurried departure, Smeaton put Sheila into a taxi, and quickly took his way back to Scotland Yard. Here he found a note awaiting him from the Home Secretary, requesting him to step round to the Home Office.

They knew each other well, these two men, and had been brought together several times on affairs of public importance. Before he had thrown all his energies into politics Mr Carlingford had been one of the most successful barristers of the day. His intellect was of the keen and subtle order.

He was, of course, profoundly interested in the mysterious disappearance of his colleague, the Colonial Secretary, and had sent for the detective to talk over the matter.

"Sit down, Smeaton. Have you any news? I know you are not a man to let the grass grow under your feet."

Smeaton explained the situation as it stood at present.

"We have partly identified one, and in my opinion the more important, of the two men who put him in the taxi. His name is given to me as Stent, and he is supposed to have a house somewhere in the neighbourhood of St. Albans. One of my best sergeants is down there to-day, making inquiries. I fancy we are also on the track of the second man."

He added that it was to Farloe's sister, Mrs Saxton, that he was indebted for the somewhat scanty information he possessed.

"I met that lady last winter at Mentone," remarked the Home Secretary. "She was an attractive young woman, with ingratiating manners. I remember she introduced herself to me, telling me that her brother was Monkton's secretary. My impression at the time, although I don't know that I had any particular evidence to go on, was that there was just a little touch of the adventuress about her."

"Precisely my impression," agreed the man from "over the way."

"I never took to that fellow, Farloe, either," continued the statesman. "I don't think Monkton was particularly attached to him, although he admitted he was the best secretary he ever had. I always thought there was something shifty and underhand about him."

They talked for a few moments longer, exchanging probable and possible theories, and then Smeaton rose to take his leave.

"Well, Mr Carlingford, thanks to your kind help we have been able to keep it out of the Press so far. I hope our inquiries will soon bear some fruit," he said, and then left the room.

Sheila had gone home feeling very sad and lonely. All her plans for the day had been upset by Wingate's sudden journey to Brighton.

She had looked forward to spending some hours in the society of her lover. The excitement of the detective business in which they proposed to engage for the rest of the day would have taken her out of herself, and kept alive the courage which flagged sorely now and again, as she confronted the apparently insoluble problem of her beloved father's disappearance.

Her luncheon finished, she went into her own dainty little sitting-room and tried to read. But she could not focus her attention. Her thoughts strayed away from the printed page, and at last she flung down the book impatiently.

"I wish that I had insisted on going down to Brighton with Austin," she said to herself. "I think I must get out. I shall go mad if I stop within these four walls."

As she was making up her mind, the door opened, and old Grant entered.

"A lady would like to see you. Miss," he said. "She says her name is Saxton and that you know her, as she is Mr Farloe's sister. She says she has been here once, but I don't seem to remember her."

Sheila was immediately interested. Their acquaintance was of the slightest. She recalled the incident at the post-office, and wondered what was the object of the visit.

"Yes, she came once to a big party. Grant. You have shown her into the drawing-room, I suppose? I will see her."

She went at once to the drawing-room. Mrs Saxton rose as she entered, and advanced towards her with outstretched hand, her pretty, rather hard features subdued to an expression of deep sympathy.

"My dear Miss Monkton, I do hope you will not regard my visit as an intrusion," she exclaimed fussily. "But, owing to my brother's connection with your family, I was bound to know something of what has happened. And I feel so deeply for you."

Sheila replied with some conventional phrase, but her manner was constrained and cold. Mrs Saxton was acting, no doubt to the best of her capacity, but there was an absence of sincerity in voice and glance.

She had come, not out of sympathy, but for her own ends. Sheila remembered what Smeaton had said, namely, that she knew a good deal more than she chose to tell. She also remembered the telegram which had been despatched a few hours ago. Was it possible Mrs Saxton had caught sight of her at the post-office in Edgware Road after all, and had come with the intention of pumping her?

Whatever the motives might be, Sheila made up her mind to one thing – that she would say as little as possible, and ask questions rather than answer them.

"What has Mr Farloe told you?"

"Oh, as little as he possibly could. But although it has been very cleverly kept from the Press, rumours are flying about at the clubs, in the House of Commons, everywhere. Your father has not been seen for several days, and he is much too important a man not to be missed."

Sheila made no answer. She was resolved to take a very passive *röle* in this interview which had been thrust upon her. She looked steadily at Mrs Saxton, who bore the scrutiny of those candid young eyes with absolute composure, and waited for her to resume the conversation.

"A rather strange thing happened the other day," went on her visitor, after a somewhat lengthy pause. "I had a visit from a Scotland Yard official, of the name of Smeaton. He told me he was very much interested in a Mr Stent, whose acquaintance I happened to make abroad a couple of years ago. I wonder if this Mr Stent happens to be a friend of yours, or your father's?" This time Sheila felt she could make a direct answer without committing herself. "I certainly do not know the man myself. For my father I cannot, of course, speak positively. In his position he must have known heaps of people, more or less intimately. But, as I have never seen him in this house, he could not have been a friend."

Mrs Saxton spoke again in her well-bred, but somewhat artificial voice:

"I hope you will excuse me for having put the question. But it struck me after he had left that his visit might have been connected with the sad events that have happened here, and that he believed Mr Stent to have been mixed up with them."

"Were you able to give him any information?" asked Sheila quickly. She thought it was her turn to question now.

"Nothing, I am afraid, of any value. I had simply met him abroad at an hotel, in the first place, and came across him about a dozen times afterwards. You know what a lot of people one picks up in that casual sort of way, people you know absolutely nothing about."

Sheila agreed that this was a common experience, and after the interchange of a few commonplaces, Mrs Saxton took leave. She renewed her expressions of sympathy, and begged Miss Monkton to make use of her in any way, if she thought she could render assistance.

What had been the motive of her visit? To reiterate the slenderness of her knowledge of the man Stent, so that the fact would be communicated to Smeaton? Or had she hoped to find an artless and impressionable girl, who would confide to her all that had been done, up to the present, to unravel the mystery of Monkton's disappearance?

If so, she had signally failed. She had gone away, having learned nothing. And Sheila had put no questions herself, although she was burning to ask her: “Who is that man at Brighton to whom you sent the telegram of warning?”

It had been a day of surprises, and events proceeded very rapidly, mostly in the direction of disappointments.

In the first place, Smeaton was rung up from Brighton by Wingate, who reported the failure of his attempt to get hold of the telegram, and asked for further instructions.

The detective mused a few moments before replying. He placed little or no reliance on the efforts of amateurs, however full of zeal. Still, the young man was there, and he might as well make use of him.

“Would it be inconveniencing you to spend a few more hours down there?” he asked at length over the wire from his room at Scotland Yard.

The reply was what might be expected. Wingate would be only too happy to place himself entirely at Smeaton’s disposal.

“Thanks. In that case, I would ask you to keep a watch on the post-office for as long as you think worth while. This fellow will be pretty certain to call again in an hour or two for another wire. You may depend their correspondence has not finished with that first telegram.”

So that was settled; it was a toss-up whether or not anything would result from Wingate’s observations.

A little later one of the two men who were watching Hyde Park Mansions reported that Mrs Saxton had driven to Chesterfield Street, and remained in Monkton’s house for some twenty minutes.

Smeaton at once rang up Sheila Monkton, and obtained particulars of the brief interview, which confirmed his opinion that Farloe’s attractive sister was engaged in some deep game.

This opinion was further corroborated by the arrival of the detective he had sent down to St. Albans at an early hour that morning.

This man had scoured the neighbourhood on his motor-cycle within a radius of twelve miles from the city of St. Albans. Nobody of the name of Stent was known, and so far as his information went, which he had picked up at various shops and local inns, nobody of that name had ever been a resident, at any rate within the last four or five or six years.

Smeaton cursed Mrs Saxton heartily. A really innocent woman might have made a mistake. But he was sure in his own mind that this innocent-looking young person with the charming manners and the well-bred voice had deliberately put him on a wrong scent.

And for what motive? Perhaps in order to gain time. Well, he had lost a few hours, but he intended to run Mr Stent to earth yet, without her assistance.

Chapter Eight.
The Man from Boundary Road

Austin Wingate's feelings as he left the post-office in Brighton can easily be imagined. He had failed ignominiously in his mission, and the sarcastic young woman who had spoken so insolently to him was laughing at his discomfiture.

It was some moments before he could sufficiently recover his composure to go to the nearest telephone – he did not dare to re-enter the post-office so soon – and communicate with Smeaton.

He was fortified by the detective's request to remain at his post for some time longer, in the hope of turning a failure into something of a partial success. He lit a big cigar and prepared for a long vigil.

He began to think there were certain discomforts attached to detective work. He found himself commiserating the two unfortunate creatures who had been appointed to keep watch at Hyde Park Mansions.

He was better off than they in one important particular. They only worked for pay, not, probably, of a very munificent description. If he succeeded, he would not only earn the praises of Smeaton, but he would be rewarded with the tender light of gratitude in the beautiful eyes of his beloved Sheila.

So he kept resolutely at his post, lounging up and down the street, with his glance ever alert for any likely stranger who should come along.

An hour passed, and then the minutes went very slowly. He kept looking at his watch. Smeaton was sure the strange man would come back for a further communication. Putting himself in the man's place, he reasoned that he had wired a reply to Mrs Saxton, and that he would allow himself a certain time for his wire to reach London, and the return wire to get to Brighton.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.