Hornung Ernest William

Witching Hill

Ernest Hornung

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Hornung E.

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Содержание

Hornung E. W. Ernest William
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CHAPTER I
Unhallowed Ground

The Witching Hill Estate Office was as new as the Queen Anne houses it had to let, and about as worthy of its name. It was just a wooden box with a veneer of rough-cast and a corrugated iron lid. Inside there was a vast of varnish on three of the walls; but the one opposite my counter consisted of plate-glass worth the rest of the structure put together. It afforded a fine prospect of Witching Hill Road, from the level crossing by the station to the second lamp-post round the curve.

Framed and glazed in the great window, this was not a picture calculated to inspire a very young man; and yet there was little to distract a brooding eye from its raw grass-plots and crude red bricks and tiles; for one's chief duties were making out orders to view the still empty houses, hearing the complaints of established tenants, and keeping such an eye on painters and paperhangers as was compatible with "being on the spot if anybody called." An elderly or a delicate man would have found it nice light work; but for a hulking youth fresh from the breeziest school in Great Britain, where they live in flannels and only work when it is wet or dark, the post seemed death in life. My one consolation was to watch the tenants hurrying to the same train every morning, in the same silk hat and blacks, and crawling home with the same evening paper every night. I at any rate enjoyed comparatively pure air all day. I had not married and settled down in a pretentious jerry-building where nothing interesting could possibly happen, and nothing worth doing be ever done. For that was one's first feeling about the Witching Hill Estate; it was a place for crabbed age and drab respectability, and a black coat every day of the week. Then young Uvo Delavoye dropped into the office from another hemisphere, in the white ducks and helmet of the tropics. And life began again.

"Are you the new clerk to the Estate?" he asked if he might ask, and I prepared myself for the usual grievance. I said I was, and he gave me his name in exchange for mine, with his number in Mulcaster Park, which was all but a continuation of Witching Hill Road. "There's an absolute hole in our lawn," he complained – "and I'd just marked out a court. I do wish you could come and have a look at it."

There was room for a full-size lawn-tennis court behind every house on the Estate. That was one of our advertised attractions. But it was not our business to keep the courts in order, and I rather itched to say so.

"It's early days," I ventured to suggest; "there's sure to be holes at first, and I'm afraid there'll be nothing for it but just to fill them in."

"Fill them in!" cried the other young man, getting quite excited. "You don't know what a hole this is; it would take a ton of earth to fill it in."

"You're not serious, Mr. Delavoye."

"Well, it would take a couple of barrow-loads. It's a regular depression in the ground, and the funny thing is that it's come almost while my back was turned. I finished marking out the court last night, and this morning there's this huge hole bang in the middle of one of my side-lines! If you filled it full of water it would take you over the ankles."

"Is the grass not broken at the edges?"

"Not a bit of it; the whole thing might have been done for years."

"And what like is this hole in shape?"

Delavoye met me eye to eye. "Well, I can only say I've seen the same sort of thing in a village churchyard, and nowhere else," he said. "It's like a churchyard starting to yawn!" he suddenly added, and looked in better humour for the phrase.

I pulled out my watch. "I'll come at one, when I knock off in any case, if you can wait till then."

"Rather!" he cried quite heartily; "and I'll wait here if you don't mind, Mr. Gillon. I've just seen my mother and sister off to town, so it fits in rather well. I don't want them to know if it's anything beastly. May we smoke in here? Then have one of mine."

And he perched himself on my counter, lighting the whole place up with his white suit and animated air; for he was a very pleasant fellow from the moment he appeared to find me one. Not much my senior, he had none of my rude health and strength, but was drawn and yellowed by some tropical trouble (as I rightly guessed) which had left but little of his outer youth beyond a vivid eye and tongue. Yet I would fain have added these to my own animal advantages. It is difficult to recapture a first impression; but I think I felt, from the beginning, that those twinkling, sunken eyes looked on me and all things in a light of their own.

"Not an interesting place?" cried young Delavoye, in astonishment at a chance remark of mine. "Why, it's one of the most interesting in England! None of these fine old crusted country houses are half so fascinating to me as the ones quite near London. Think of the varied life they've seen, the bucks and bloods galore, the powder and patches, the orgies begun in town and finished out here, the highwaymen waiting for 'em on Turnham Green! Of course you know about the heinous Lord Mulcaster who owned this place in the high old days? He committed every crime in the Newgate Calendar, and now I'm just wondering whether you and I aren't by way of bringing a fresh one home to him."

I remember feeling sorry he should talk like that, though it argued a type of mind that rather reconciled me to my own. I was never one to jump to gimcrack conclusions, and I said as much with perhaps more candour than the occasion required. The statement was taken in such good part, however, that I could not but own I had never even heard the name of Mulcaster until the last few days, whereas Delavoye seemed to know all about the family. Thereupon he told me he was really connected with them, though not at all closely with the present peer. It had nothing to do with his living on an Estate which had changed hands before it was broken up. But I modified my remark about the ancestral acres – and made a worse.

"I wasn't thinking of the place," I explained, "as it used to be before half of it was built over. I was only thinking of that half and its inhabitants – I mean – that is – the people who go up and down in top-hats and frock-coats!"

And I was left clinging with both eyes to my companion's cool attire.

"But that's my very point," he laughed and said. "These City fellows are the absolute salt of historic earth like this; they throw one back into the good old days by sheer force of contrast. I never see them in their office kit without thinking of that old rascal in his wig and ruffles, carrying a rapier instead of an umbrella; he'd have fallen on it like Brutus if he could have seen his grounds plastered with cheap red bricks and mortar, and crawling with Stock Exchange ants!"

"You've got an imagination," said I, chuckling. I nearly told him he had the gift of the gab as well.

"You must have something," he returned a little grimly, "when you're stuck on the shelf at my age. Besides, it isn't all imagination, and you needn't go back a hundred years for your romance. There's any amount kicking about this Estate at the present moment; it's in the soil. These business blokes are not all the dull dogs they look. There's a man up our road – but he can wait. The first mystery to solve is the one that's crying from our back garden."

I liked his way of putting things. It made one forget his yellow face, and the broken career that his looks and hints suggested, or it made one remember them and think the more of him. But the

things themselves were interesting, and Witching Hill had more possibilities when we sallied forth together at one o'clock.

It was the height of such a June as the old century could produce up to the last. The bald red houses, too young to show a shoot of creeper, or a mellow tone from doorstep to chimney-pot, glowed like clowns' pokers in the ruthless sun. The shade of some stately elms, on a bit of old road between the two new ones of the Estate, appealed sharply to my awakened sense of contrast. It was all familiar ground to me, of course, but I had been over it hitherto with my eyes on nothing else and my heart in the Lowlands. Now I found myself wondering what the elms had seen in their day, and what might not be going on in the red houses even now.

"I hope you know the proper name of our road," said Delavoye as we turned into it. "It's Mulcaster Park, as you see, and not Mulcaster Park Road, as it was when we came here in the spring. Our neighbours have risen in a body against the superfluous monosyllable, and it's been painted out for ever."

In spite of that precaution Mulcaster Park was still suspiciously like a road. It was very long and straight, and the desired illusion had not been promoted by the great names emblazoned on some of the little wooden gates. Thus there was Longleat, which had just been let for £70 on a three-year tenancy, and Chatsworth with a C. P. card in the drawing-room window. Plain No. 7, the Delavoyes' house, was near the far end on the left-hand side, which had the advantage of a strip of unspoilt woodland close behind the back gardens; and just through the wood was Witching Hill House, scene of immemorial excesses, according to this descendant of the soil.

"But now it's in very different hands," he remarked as we reached our destination. "Sir Christopher Stainsby is apparently all that my ignoble kinsman was not. They say he's no end of a saint. In winter we see his holy fane from our back windows."

It was not visible through the giant hedge of horse-chestnuts now heavily overhanging the split fence at the bottom of the garden. I had come out through the dining-room with a fresh sense of interest in these Delavoyes. Their furniture was at once too massive and too good for the house. It stood for some old home of very different type. Large oil-paintings and marble statuettes had not been acquired to receive the light of day through windows whose upper sashes were filled with cheap stained glass. A tigerskin with a man-eating head, over which I tripped, had not always been in the way before a cast-iron mantelpiece. I felt sorry, for the moment, that Mrs. and Miss Delavoye were not at home; but I was not so sorry when I beheld the hole in the lawn behind the house.

It had the ugly shape and appearance which had reminded young Delavoye himself of a churchyard. I was bound to admit its likeness to some sunken grave, and the white line bisecting it was not the only evidence that the subsidence was of recent occurrence; the grass was newly mown and as short inside the hole as it was all over. No machine could have made such a job of such a surface, said the son of the house, with a light in his eyes, but a drop in his voice, which made me wonder whether he desired or feared the worst.

"What do you want us to do, Mr. Delavoye?" I inquired in my official capacity.

"I want it dug up, if I can have it done now, while my mother's out of the way."

That was all very well, but I had only limited powers. My instructions were to attend promptly to the petty wants of tenants, but to refer any matter of importance to our Mr. Muskett, who lived on the Estate but spent his days at the London office. This appeared to me that kind of matter, and little as I might like my place I could ill afford to risk it by doing the wrong thing. I put all this as well as I could to my new friend, but not without chafing his impetuous spirit.

"Then I'll do the thing myself!" said he, and fetched from the yard some garden implements which struck me as further relics of more spacious days. In his absence I had come to the same conclusion about a couple of high-backed Dutch garden chairs and an umbrella tent; and the final bond of fallen fortunes made me all the sorrier to have put him out. He was not strong; no wonder he was irritable. He threw himself into his task with a kind of feeble fury; it was more than I could

stand by and watch. He had not turned many sods when he paused to wipe his forehead, and I seized the spade.

"If one of us is going to do this job," I cried, "it shan't be the one who's unfit for it. You can take the responsibility, if you like, but that's all you do between now and two o'clock!"

I should date our actual friendship from that moment. There was some boyish bluster on his part, and on mine a dour display which he eventually countenanced on my promising to stay to lunch. Already the sweat was teeming off my face, but my ankles were buried in rich brown mould. A few days before there had been a thunderstorm accompanied by tropical rain, which had left the earth so moist underneath that one's muscles were not taxed as much as one's skin. And I was really very glad of the exercise, after the physical stagnation of office life.

Not that Delavoye left everything to me; he shifted the Dutch chairs and the umbrella tent so as to screen my operations alike from the backyard behind us and from the windows of the occupied house next door. Then he hovered over me, with protests and apologies, until the noble inspiration took him to inquire if I liked beer. I stood upright in my pit, and my mouth must have watered as visibly as the rest of my countenance. It appeared he was not allowed to touch it himself, but he would fetch some in a jug from the Mulcaster Arms, and blow the wives of the gentlemen who went to town!

I could no more dissuade him from this share of the proceedings than he had been able to restrain me from mine; perhaps I did not try very hard; but I did redouble my exertions when he was gone, burying my spade with the enthusiasm of a golddigger working a rich claim, and yet depositing each spadeful with some care under cover of the chairs. And I had hardly been a minute by myself when I struck indubitable wood at the depth of three or four feet. Decayed wood it was, too, which the first thrust of the spade crushed in; and at that I must say the perspiration cooled upon my skin. But I stood up and was a little comforted by the gay blue sky and the bottle-green horse-chestnuts, if I looked rather longer at the French window through which Delavoye had disappeared.

His wild idea had seemed to me the unwholesome fruit of a morbid imagination, but now I prepared to find it hateful fact. Down I went on my haunches, and groped with my hands in the mould, to learn the worst with least delay. The spade I had left sticking in the rotten wood, and now I ran reluctant fingers down its cold iron into the earth-warm splinters. They were at the extreme edge of the shaft that I was sinking, but I discovered more splinters at the same level on the opposite side. These were not of my making; neither were they part of any coffin, but rather of some buried floor or staging. My heart danced as I seized the spade again. I dug another foot quickly; that brought me to detached pieces of rotten wood of the same thickness as the jagged edges above; evidently a flooring of some kind had fallen in – but fallen upon what? Once more the spade struck wood, but sound wood this time. The last foot of earth was soon taken out, and an oblong trap-door disclosed, with a rusty ring-bolt at one end.

I tugged at the ring-bolt without stopping to think; but the trap-door would not budge. Then I got out of the hole for a pickaxe that Delavoye had produced with the spade, and with one point of the pick through the ring I was able to get a little leverage. It was more difficult to insert the spade where the old timbers had started, while still keeping them apart, but this once done I could ply both implements together. There was no key-hole to the trap, only the time-eaten ring and a pair of hinges like prison bars; it could but be bolted underneath; and yet how those old bolts and that wood of ages clung together! It was only by getting the pick into the gap made by the spade, and prizing with each in turn and both at once, that I eventually achieved my purpose. I heard the bolt tinkle on hard ground beneath, and next moment saw it lying at the bottom of a round bricked hole.

All this must have occupied far fewer minutes than it has taken to describe; for Delavoye had not returned to peer with me into a well which could never have been meant for water. It had neither the width nor the depth of ordinary wells; an old ladder stood against one side, and on the other the high sun shone clean down into the mouth of a palpable tunnel. It opened in the direction of the horse-chestnuts, and I was in it next moment. The air was intolerably stale without being actually foul; a

match burnt well enough to reveal a horseshoe passage down which a man of medium stature might have walked upright. It was bricked like the well, and spattered with some repulsive growth that gave me a clammy daub before I realised the dimensions. I had struck a second match on my trousers, and it had gone out as if by magic, when Delavoye hailed me in high excitement from the lawn above.

He was less excited than I expected on hearing my experience; and he only joined me for a minute before luncheon, which he insisted on our still taking, to keep the servants in the dark. But it was a very brilliant eye that he kept upon the Dutch chairs through the open window, and he was full enough of plans and explanations. Of course we must explore the passage, but we would give the bad air a chance of getting out first. He spoke of some Turkish summer-house, or pavilion, mentioned in certain annals of Witching Hill, that he had skimmed for his amusement in the local Free Library. There was no such structure to be seen from any point of vantage that he had discovered; possibly this was its site; and the floor which had fallen in might have been a false basement, purposely intended to conceal the trap-door, or else built over it by some unworthy successor of the great gay lord.

"He was just the sort of old sportsman to have a way of his own out of the house, Gillon! He might have wanted it at any moment; he must have been ready for the worst most nights of his life; for I may tell you they would have hanged him in the end if he hadn't been too quick for them with his own horse-pistol. You didn't know he was as bad as that? It's not a thing the family boasts about, and I don't suppose your Estate people would hold it out as an attraction. But I've read a thing or two about the bright old boy, and I do believe we've struck the site of some of his brightest moments!"

"I should like to have explored that tunnel."

"So you shall."

"But when?"

We had gobbled our luncheon, and I had drained the jug that my unconventional host had carried all the way from the Mulcaster Arms; but already I was late for a most unlucky appointment with prospective tenants, and it was only a last look that I could take at my not ignoble handiwork. It was really rather a good hole for a beginner, and a grave-digger could not have heaped his earth much more compactly. It came hard to leave the next stage of the adventure even to as nice a fellow as young Delavoye.

"When?" he repeated with an air of surprise. "Why to-night, of course; you don't suppose I'm going to explore it without you, do you?"

I had already promised not to mention the matter to my Mr. Muskett when he looked in at the office on his way from the station; but that was the only undertaking which had passed between us.

"I thought you said you didn't want Mrs. Delavoye to see the pit's mouth?"

It was his own expression, yet it made him smile, though it had not made me.

"I certainly don't mean either my mother or sister to see one end till we've seen the other," said he. "They might have a word too many to say about it. I must cover the place up somehow before they get back; but I'll tell them you're coming in this evening, and when they go aloft we shall very naturally come out here for a final pipe."

"Armed with a lantern?"

"No, a pocketful of candles. And don't you dress, Gillon, because I don't, even when I'm not bound for the bowels of the globe."

I ran to my appointment after that; but the prospective tenants broke theirs, and kept me waiting for nothing all that fiery afternoon. I can shut my eyes and go through it all again, and see every inch of my sticky little prison near the station. In the heat its copious varnish developed an adhesive quality as fatal to flies as bird-lime, and there they stuck in death to pay me out. It was not necessary to pin any notice to the walls; one merely laid them on the varnish; and that morning, when young Delavoye had leant against it in his whites, he had to peel himself off like a plaster. That morning! It seemed days ago, not because I had met with any great adventure yet, but the whole atmosphere of the place was changed by the discovery of a kindred spirit. Not that we were naturally akin in temperament,

tastes, or anything else but our common youth and the want in each of a companion approaching his own type. We saw things at a different angle, and when he smiled I often wondered why. We might have met in town or at college and never sought each other again; but separate adversities had driven us both into the same dull haven – one from the Egyptian Civil, which had nearly been the death of him; the other on a sanguine voyage (before the mast) from the best school in Scotland to Land Agency. We were bound to make the most of each other, and I for one looked forward to renewing our acquaintance even more than to the sequel of our interrupted adventure.

But I was by no means anxious to meet my new friend's womankind; never anything of a lady's man, I was inclined rather to resent the existence of these good ladies, partly from something he had said about them with reference to our impending enterprise. Consequently it was rather late in the evening when I turned out of one of the nominally empty houses, where I had gone to lodge with a still humbler servant of the Estate, and went down to No. 7 with some hope that its mistress at all events might already have retired. Almost to my horror I learned that they were all three in the back garden, whither I was again conducted through the little dining-room with the massive furniture.

Mrs. Delavoye was a fragile woman with a kind but nervous manner; the daughter put me more at my ease, but I could scarcely see either of them by the dim light from the French window outside which they sat. I was more eager, however, to see "the pit's mouth," and in the soft starlight of a velvet night I made out the two Dutch chairs lying face downward over the shaft.

"It's so tiresome of my brother," said Miss Delavoye, following my glance with disconcerting celerity: "just when we want our garden chairs he's varnished them, and there they lie unfit to use!"

I never had any difficulty in looking stolid, but for the moment I avoided the impostor's eyes. It was trying enough to hear his impudent defence.

"You've been at me about them all the summer, Amy, and I felt we were in for a spell of real hot weather at last."

"I can't think why you've put them out there, Uvo," remarked his mother. "They won't dry any better in the dew, my dear boy."

"They won't make a hopeless mess of the grass, at all events!" he retorted. "But why varnish our dirty chairs in public? Mr. Gillon won't be edified; he'd much rather listen to the nightingale, I'm sure."

Had they a nightingale? I had never heard one in my life. I was obliged to say something, and this happened to be the truth; it led to a little interchange about Scotland, in which the man Uvo assumed a Johnsonian pose, as though he had known me as long as I felt I had known him, and then prayed silence for the nightingale as if the suburban garden were a banqueting hall. It was a concert hall, at any rate, and never was sweeter solo than the invisible singer poured forth from the black and jagged wood between glimmering lawn and starry sky. I see the picture now, with the seated ladies dimly silhouetted against the French windows, and our two cigarettes waxing and waning like revolving lights seen leagues away. I hear the deep magic of those heavenly notes, as I was to hear them more summers than one from that wild wood within a few yards of our raw red bricks and mortar. It may be as the prelude of what was to follow that I recall it all so clearly, down to the couplet that Uvo could not quite remember and his sister did:

"The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown."

"That's what I meant!" he cried. "By emperor, clown, and old man Mulcaster in his cups! Think of him carrying on in there to such a tune, and think of pious Christopher holding family prayers to it now!"

And the bare thought dashed from my lips a magic potion compounded of milky lawn and ebony horse-chestnuts, of an amethyst sky twinkling with precious stars, and the low voice of a girl

trying not to drown the one in the wood; the spell was broken, and I was glad when at last we had the garden to ourselves.

"There are two things I must tell you for your comfort," said the incorrigible Uvo as we lifted one Dutch chair from the hole it covered like a hatchway, but left the other pressed down over the heap of earth. "In the first place, both my mother and sister have front rooms, so they won't hear or bother about us again. The other thing's only that I've been back to the Free Library in what the simple inhabitants still insist on calling the Village, and had another look into those annals of old Witching Hill. I can find no mention whatever of any subterranean passage. I shouldn't wonder if good Sir Chris had never heard of it in his life. In that case we shall rush in where neither man nor beast has trodden for a hundred and fifty years."

We lit our candles down the shaft, and then I drew the Dutch chair over the hole again on Delavoye's suggestion; he was certainly full of resource, and I was only too glad to play the practical man with my reach and strength. If he had been less impetuous and headstrong, we should have made a strong pair of adventurers. In the tunnel he would go first, for instance, much against my wish; but, as he put it, if the foul air knocked him down I could carry him out under one arm, whereas he would have to leave me to die in my tracks. So he chattered as we crept on and on, flinging monstrous shadows into the arch behind us, and lighting up every patch of filth ahead; for the long-drawn vault was bearded with stalactites of crusted slime; but no living creature fled before us; we alone breathed the impure air, encouraged by our candles, which lit us far beyond the place where my match had been extinguished and deeper and deeper yet without a flicker.

Then in the same second they both went out, at a point where the overhead excrescences made it difficult to stand upright. And there we were, like motes in a tube of lamp-black; for it was a darkness as palpable as fog. But my leader had a reassuring explanation on the tip of his sanguine tongue.

"It's because we stooped down," said he. "Strike a match on the roof if it's dry enough. There! What did I tell you? The dregs of the air settle down like other dregs. Hold on a bit! I believe we're under the house, and that's why the arch is dry."

We continued our advance with instinctive stealth, now blackening the roof with our candles as we went, and soon and sure enough the old tube ended in a wad of brick and timber.

In the brickwork was a recessed square, shrouded in cobwebs which perished at a sweep of Delavoye's candle; a wooden shutter closed the aperture, and I had just a glimpse of an oval knob, green with verdigris, when my companion gave it a twist and the shutter sprang open at the base. I held it up while he crept through with his candle, and then I followed him with mine into the queerest chamber I had ever seen.

It was some fifteen feet square, with a rough parquet floor and panelled walls and ceiling. All the woodwork seemed to me old oak, and reflected our naked lights on every side in a way that bespoke attention; and there was a tell-tale set of folding steps under an ominous square in the ceiling, but no visible break in the four walls, nor yet another piece of movable furniture. In one corner, however, stood a great stack of cigar boxes whose agreeable aroma was musk and frankincense after the penetrating humours of the tunnel. This much we had noted when we made our first startling discovery. The panel by which we had entered had shut again behind us; the noise it must have made had escaped us in our excitement; there was nothing to show which panel it had been – no semblance of a knob on this side – and soon we were not even agreed as to the wall.

Uvo Delavoye had enough to say at most moments, but now he was a man of action only, and I copied his proceedings without a word. Panel after panel he rapped and sounded like any doctor, even through his fingers to make less noise! I took the next wall, and it was I who first detected a hollow note. I whispered my suspicion; he joined me, and was convinced; so there we stood cheek by jowl, each with a guttering candle in one hand, while the other felt the panel and pressed the knots. And a knot it was that yielded under my companion's thumb. But the panel that opened inwards was not our panel at all; instead of our earthy tunnel, we looked into a shallow cupboard, with a little old

dirty bundle lying alone in the dust of ages. Delavoye picked it up gingerly, but at once I saw him weighing his handful in surprise, and with one accord we sat down to examine it, sticking our candles on the floor between us in their own grease.

"Lace," muttered Uvo, "and something in it."

The outer folds came to shreds in his fingers; a little deeper the lace grew firmer, and presently he was paying it out to me in fragile hanks. I believe it was a single flounce, though yards in length. Delavoye afterwards looked up the subject, characteristically, and declared it Point de Venise; from what I can remember of its exquisite workmanship, in monogram, coronet, and imperial emblems, I can believe with him that the diamond buckle to which he came at last was less precious than its wrapping. But by that time we were not thinking of their value; we were screwing up our faces over a dark coagulation which caused the last yard or so to break off in bits.

"Lace and blood and diamonds!" said Delavoye, bending over the relics in grim absorption. "Could the priceless old sinner have left us a more delightful legacy?"

"What are you going to do with them?" I asked rather nervously at that. They had not been left to us. They ought surely to be delivered to their rightful owner.

"But who does own them?" asked Delavoye. "Is it the worthy plutocrat who's bought the show and all that in it is, or is it my own venerable kith and kin? They wouldn't thank us for taking these rather dirty coals to Newcastle. They might refuse delivery, or this old boy might claim his mining rights, and where should we come in then? No, Gillon, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but as a twig of the old tree I mean to take the law into my own hands" – I held my breath – "and put these things back exactly where we found them. Then we'll leave everything in plumb order, and finish up by filling in that hole in our lawn – if ever we get out of this one."

But small doubt on the point was implied in his buoyant tone; the way through the panel just broached argued a similar catch in the one we sought; meanwhile we closed up the other with much relief on my side and an honest groan from Delavoye. It was sufficiently obvious that Sir Christopher Stainsby had discovered neither the secret subway nor the secret repository which we had penetrated by pure chance; on the other hand, he made use of the chamber leading to both as a cigar cellar, and had it kept in better order than such a purpose required. Sooner or later somebody would touch a spring, and one discovery would lead to another. So we consoled each other as we resumed our search, almost forgetting that we ourselves might be discovered first.

It was in a providential pause, broken only to my ear by our quiet movements, that Delavoye dabbed a quick hand on my candle and doused his own against the wall. Without a whisper he drew me downward, and there we cowered in throbbing darkness, but still not a sound that I could hear outside my skin. Then the floor above opened a lighted mouth with a gilded roof; black legs swung before our noses, found the step-ladder and came running down. The cigars were on the opposite side. The man knew all about them, found the right box without a light, and turned to go running up.

Now he must see us, as we saw him and his smooth, smug, flunkey's face to the whites of its upturned eyes! My fists were clenched – and often I wonder what I meant to do. What I did was to fall forward upon oozing palms as the trap-door was let down with a bang.

"Didn't he see us, Delavoye? Are you sure he didn't?" I chattered as he struck a match.

"Quite. I was watching his eyes – weren't you?"

"Yes – but they got all blurred at the finish."

"Well, pull yourself together; now's our time! It's an empty room overhead; it wasn't half lit up. But we haven't done anything, remember, if they do catch us."

He was on the steps already, but I had no desire to argue with him. I was as ripe for a risk as Delavoye, as anxious to escape after the one we had already run. The trap-door went up slowly, pushing something over it into a kind of tent.

"It's only the rug," purred Delavoye. "I heard him take it up – thank God – as well as put it down again. Now hold the candle; now the trap-door, till I hold it up for you."

And we squirmed up into a vast apartment, not only empty as predicted, but left in darkness made visible by the solitary light we carried now. The little stray flame was mirrored in a floor like black ice, then caught the sheen of the tumbled rug that Delavoye would stay to smooth, then twinkled in the diamond panes of bookcases like church windows, flickered over a high altar of a mantelpiece, and finally displayed our stealthy selves in the window by which we left the house.

"Thank God!" said Delavoye as he shut it down again. "That's something like a breath of air!"

"Hush!" I whispered with my back to him.

"What is it?"

"I thought I heard shouts of laughter."

"You're right. There they go again! I believe we've struck a heavy entertainment."

In a dell behind the house, a spreading cedar caught the light of windows that we could not see. Delavoye crept to the intermediate angle, turned round, and beckoned in silhouette against the tree.

"High jinks and junketings!" he chuckled when I joined him. "The old bloke must be away. Shall we risk a peep?"

My answer was to lead the way for once, and it was long before we exchanged another syllable. But in a few seconds, and for more minutes, we crouched together at an open window, seeing life with all our innocent eyes.

It was a billiard-room into which we gazed, but it was not being used for billiards. One end of the table was turned into a champagne bar; it bristled with bottles in all stages of depletion, with still an unopened magnum towering over pails of ice, silver dishes of bonbons, cut decanters of wine and spirits. At the other end a cluster of flushed faces hung over a spinning roulette wheel; nearly all young women and men, smoking fiercely in a silver haze, for the moment terribly intent; and as the ball ticked and rattled, the one pale face present, that of the melancholy croupier, showed a dry zest as he intoned the customary admonitions. They were new to me then; now I seem to recognise through the years the Anglo-French of his "*rien ne va plus*" and all the rest. There were notes and gold among the stakes. The old rogue raked in his share without emotion; one of the ladies embraced him for hers; and one had stuck a sprig of maidenhair in his venerable locks; but there he sat, with the deferential dignity of a bygone school, the only very sober member of the party it was his shame to serve.

The din they made before the next spin! It was worse when it died down into plainer speech; playful buffets were exchanged as freely; but one young blood left the table with a deadly dose of raw spirit, and sat glowering over it on a raised settee while the wheel went round again. I did not watch the play; the wild, attentive faces were enough for me; and so it was that I saw a bedizened beauty go mad before my eyes. It was the madness of utter ecstasy – wails of laughter and happy maledictions – and then for that unopened magnum! By the neck she caught it, whirled it about her like an Indian club, then down on the table with all her might and the effect of a veritable shell. A ribbon of blood ran down her dress as she recoiled, and the champagne flooded the green board like bubbling ink; but the old croupier hardly looked up from the pile of notes and gold that he was counting out with his sly, wintry smile.

"You saw she had a fiver on the number? You may watch roulette many a long night without seeing that again!"

It was Delavoye whispering as he dragged me away. He was the cool one now. Too excitable for me in the early stages of our adventure, he was not only the very man for all the rest, but a living lesson in just that thing or two I felt at first I could have taught him. For I fear I should have felled that butler if he had seen us in the cigar cellar, and I know I shouted when the magnum burst; but fortunately so did everybody else except Delavoye and the aged croupier.

"I suppose he was the butler?" I said when we had skirted the shallow drive, avoiding a couple of hansoms that stood there with the cabmen snug inside.

"What! The old fogey? Not he!" cried Delavoye as we reached the road. "I say, don't those hansoms tell us all about his pals!"

"But who was he?"

"The man himself."

"Not Sir Christopher Stainsby?"

"I'm afraid so – the old sinner!"

"But you said he was an old saint?"

"So I thought he was; my lord warden of the Nonconformist conscience, I always heard."

"Then how do you account for it?"

"I can't. I haven't thought about it. Wait a bit!"

He stood still in the road. It was his own road. There was that hole to fill in before morning; meanwhile the sweet night air was sweeter far than we had left it hours ago; and the little new suburban houses surpassed all pleasures and palaces, behind their kindly lamps, with the clean stars watching over them and us.

"I don't want you think the worse of me," said Delavoye, slipping his arm through mine as he led me on: "but at this particular moment I should somehow think less of myself if I didn't tell you, after all we've been through together, that I was really quite severely tempted to take that lace and those diamonds!"

I knew it.

"Well," I said, with the due deliberation of my normal Northern self, "you'd have had a sort of right to them. But that's nothing! Why, man, I was as near as a toucher to laying yon butler dead at our feet!"

"Then we're all three in the same boat, Gillon."

"Which three?"

It was my turn to stand still, outside his house. And now there was excitement enough in his dark face to console me for all mine.

"You, and I, and poor old Sir Christopher."

"Poor old hypocrite! Didn't I hear that his wife died a while ago?"

"Only last year. That makes it sound worse. But in reality it's an excuse, because of course he would fall a victim all the more easily."

"A victim to what?"

"My good Gillon, don't you see that he's up to the very same games on the very same spot as my ignoble kinsman a hundred and fifty years ago? Blood, liquor, and ladies as before! We admit that between us even you and I had the makings of a thief and a murderer while we were under that haunted roof. Don't you believe in influences?"

"Not of that kind," said I heartily. "I never did, and I doubt I never shall."

Delavoye laughed in the starlight, but his lips were quivering, and his eyes were like stars themselves. But I held up my hand: the nightingale was singing in the wood exactly as when we plunged below the earth. Somehow it brought us together again, and there we stood listening till a clock struck twelve in the distant Village.

""'Tis now the very witching time of night,'" said Uvo Delavoye, "'when church-yards yawn' – like our back garden!" I might have guessed his favourite play, but his face lit up before my memory. "And shall I tell you, Gillon, the real name of this whole infernal Hill and Estate? It's Witching Hill, my man, it's Witching Hill from this night forth!"

And Witching Hill it still remains to me.

CHAPTER II
The House with Red Blinds

Uvo Delavoye had developed a theory to match his name for the Estate. The baleful spirit of the notorious Lord Mulcaster still brooded over Witching Hill, and the innocent occupiers of the Queen Anne houses were one and all liable to the malign influence. Such was the modest proposition, put as fairly as can be expected of one who resisted it from the first; for both by temperament and training I was perhaps unusually proof against this kind of thing. But then I always held that Delavoye himself did not begin by believing in his own idea, that he never thought of it before our subterranean adventure, and would have forgotten all about it but for the house with red blinds.

That vermilion house with the brave blinds of quite another red! I can still see them bleaching in the glare of those few August days.

It was so hot that the prematurely bronze leaves of the horse-chestnuts, behind the odd numbers in Mulcaster Park, were as crisp as tinfoil, while a tawny stubble defied the garden rollers of those tenants who had not been driven to the real country or the seaside. Half our inhabited houses were either locked up empty, or in the hands of servants who spent their time gossiping at the gate. And I personally was not surprised when the red blinds stayed down in their turn.

The Abercromby Royles were a young couple who might be expected to mobilise at short notice, in spite of the wife's poor health, for they had no other ties. The mere fact of their departure on Bank Holiday, when the rest of the Estate were on the river, meant no more to me than a sudden whim on the lady's part; but then I never liked the looks of her or her very yellow hair, least of all in a bath chair drawn by her indulgent husband after business hours. Mr. Royle was a little solicitor, who himself flouted tradition with a flower in his coat and a straw hat worn slightly on one side; but with him I had made friends over an escape of gas which he treated as a joke rather than a grievance. He seemed to me just the sort of man to humour his sort of wife, even to the extent of packing off the servants on board wages, as they were said to have done before leaving themselves. Certainly I never thought of a sinister explanation until Uvo Delavoye put one into my head, and then I had no patience with him.

"It's this heat," I declared; "it's hot enough to uproot anybody."

"I wonder," said he, "how many other places they've found too hot for them!"

"But why should you wonder any such rot, when you say yourself that you've never even nodded to Abercromby Royle?"

"Because I've had my eye on him all the same, Gillon, as obvious material for the evil genius of the place."

"I see! I forgot you were spoiling for a second case."

"Case or no case," replied Uvo, "house-holds don't usually disperse at a moment's notice, and their cook told our butcher that it was only sprung on them this morning. I have it from our own old treasure, if you want to know, so you may take it or leave it at that for what it's worth. But if I had your job, Gilly, and my boss was away, I don't know that I should feel altogether happy about my Michaelmas rent."

Nor was I quite so happy as I had been. I was spending the evening at my friend's, but I cut it rather shorter than I had intended; and on my way to the unlet house in which I lodged, I could not help stopping outside the one with the drawn red blinds. They looked natural enough at this time of night; but all the windows were shut as well; there was no sign of life about the house. And then, as I went my way, I caught a sound which I had just heard as I approached, but not while standing outside the gate. It was the sound of furtive hammering – a few taps and then a pause – but I retraced my steps too quietly to prolong the pause a second time. It was some devil's tattoo on the very door

of the empty house, and as I reached up my hand to reply with the knocker, the door flew open and the devil was Abercromby Royle himself.

He looked one, too, by the light of the lamp opposite, but only for a moment. What impressed me most about our interview, even at the time, was the clemency of my reception by an obviously startled man. He interrupted my apologies to commend my zeal; as for explanations, it was for him to explain to me, if I would be good enough to step inside. I did so with a strange sense of impersonal fear or foreboding, due partly to the stuffy darkness of the hall, partly to a quiver of the kindly hand upon my shoulder. The dining-room, however, was all lit up, and like an oven. Whisky was on the side-board, and I had to join Mr. Royle in the glass that loosened his tongue.

It was quite true about the servants; they had gone first, and he was the last to leave the ship. The metaphor did not strike me as unfortunate until it was passed off with a hollow laugh. Mr. Royle no longer disguised his nervous worry; he seemed particularly troubled about his wife, who appeared to have followed the servants into the country, and whom he could not possibly join. He mentioned that he had taken her up to town and seen her off; then, that he was going up again himself by the last train that night; finally – after a pause and between ourselves – that he was sailing immediately for America. When I heard this I thought of Delavoye; but Royle seemed so glad when he had told me, and soon in such a stew about his train, that I felt certain there could be nothing really wrong. It was a sudden call, and a great upset to him; he made no secret of either fact or any of his plans. He had left his baggage that morning at the club where he was going to sleep. He even told me what had brought him back, and that led to an equally voluntary explanation of the hammering I had heard in the road.

"Would you believe it? I'd forgotten all about our letters!" exclaimed Abercromby Royle as we were about to leave the house together. "Having the rest of the day on my hands, I thought I might as well come back myself to give the necessary instructions. But it's no use simply filling up the usual form; half your correspondence still finds its way into your empty house; so I was just tacking this lid of an old cigar box across the slot. I'll finish it, if you don't mind, and then we can go so far together."

But we went together all the way, and I saw him off in a train laden with Bank Holiday water-folk. I thought he scanned them somewhat closely on the platform, and that some of my remarks fell on deaf ears. Among other things, I said I would gladly have kept the empty house aired, had he cared to trust me with his key. It was an office that I had undertaken for more than one of our absentee tenants. But the lawyer's only answer was a grip of the hand as the train began to move. And it seemed to me a haunted face that dissolved into the night, despite the drooping flower in the flannel coat and the hat worn a little on one side.

It would be difficult to define the impression left upon my mind by the whole of this equivocal episode; enough that, for more than one obvious reason, I said not a word about it to Uvo Delavoye. Once or twice I was tempted by his own remarks about Abercromby Royle, but on each occasion I set my teeth and defended the absent man as though we were both equally in the dark. It seemed a duty, after blundering into his affairs as I had done. But that very week brought forth developments which made a necessary end of all such scruples.

I was interviewing one of our foremen in a house that had to be ready by half-quarter-day, when Delavoye came in with a gleaming eye to tell me I was wanted.

"It's about our friend Royle," he added, trying not to crow. "I was perfectly right. They're on his tracks already!"

"Who are?" I demanded, when we were out of earshot of the men.

"Well, only one fellow so far, but he's breathing blood-hounds and Scotland Yard! It's Coysh, the trick-bicycle inventor; you must know the lunatic by name; but let me tell you that he sounds unpleasantly sane about your limb of the law. A worse case – "

"Where is he?" I interrupted hotly. "And what the devil does he want with me?"

"Thinks you can help him put salt on the bird that's flown, as sort of clerk to the whole aviary! I found him pounding at your office door. He'd been down to Royle's and found it all shut up, of

course – like his office in town, he says! Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Gilly! It's a clear case, I'm afraid, but you'd better have it from the fountain-head. I said I thought I could unearth you, and he's waiting outside for you now."

I looked through a window with a scroll of whitewash on the pane. In the road a thick-set man was fanning his big head with a wide soft hat, which I could not but notice that he wore with a morning coat and brown boots. The now eminent engineer is not much more conventional than the hot-headed patentee who in those days had still to find himself (and had lately been looking in the wrong place, with a howling Press at his heels). But even then the quality of the man outshone the eccentricities of the super-crank. And I had a taste of it that August morning; a foretaste, when I looked into the road and saw worry and distress where I expected only righteous indignation.

I went down and asked him in, and his face lit up like a stormy sunbeam. But the most level-headed man in England could not have come to the point in fewer words or a more temperate tone.

"I'm glad your friend has told you what I've come about. I'm a plain speaker, Mr. Gillon, and I shall be plainer with you than I've been with him, because he tells me you know Abercromby Royle. In that case you won't start a scandal – because to know the fellow is to like him – and I only hope it may prove in your power to prevent one."

"I'll do anything I can, Mr. Coysh," I went so far as to say. But I was already taken by surprise. And so, I could see, was Uvo Delavoye.

"I'll hold you to that," said Coysh frankly. "When did you see him last, Mr. Gillon?"

"Do you mean Mr. Royle?" I stammered, turning away from Delavoye. If only he had not been there!

"Of course I do; and let me tell you, Mr. Gillon, this is a serious matter for the man, you know. You won't improve his chances by keeping anything back. When did you see him last?"

"Monday night," I mumbled.

But Delavoye heard.

"Monday *night*?" he interjected densely. "Why, it was on Monday he went away!"

"Exactly – by the last train."

"But we heard they'd gone hours before!"

"We heard wrong, so far as Royle was concerned. I came across him after I left you, and I saw him off myself."

Coysh had a sharp eye on both of us, and Delavoye's astonishment was not lost upon him. But it was at me that he looked last and longest.

"And you keep this to yourself from Monday night till now?"

"What's about it?" I demanded, falling into my own vernacular in my embarrassment.

"It only looks rather as though you were behind the scenes," replied Coysh simply. And his honesty called to mine.

"Well, so I was, to a certain extent," I cried; "but I got there by accident, I blundered in where I wasn't wanted, and yet the fellow treated me like a gentleman! That's why I never gave it away. But," I added with more guile, "there was really nothing to give away." And with that I improvised a garbled version of my last little visit to the house with red blinds, which I did not say I had discovered in utter darkness, any more than I described the sound which had attracted my attention, or the state of the householder's nerves.

"Very good," said Coysh, making notes on an envelope. "And then you saw him off by the last train: did he say where he was going at that time of night?"

"To sleep at some club, I understood."

"And next morning?"

But I was sorry I had gone so far.

"Mr. Coysh," I said, "I'm here to let the houses on this Estate, and to look after odd jobs for the people who take them. It's not my business to keep an eye on the tenants themselves, still less to report their movements, and I must respectfully decline to say another word about Mr. Abercromby Royle."

The engineer put away his envelope with a shrug.

"Oh, very well; then you force me to go into details which I on my side would vastly prefer to keep to myself; but if you are sincere you will treat them as even more confidential than your own relations with Mr. Royle. You say you are hardly friends. I shall believe it if you stick to your present attitude when you've heard my story. Royle and I, however, have been only too friendly in the past, and I should not forget it even now – if I could find him."

He made a meaning pause, of which I did not avail myself, though Delavoye encouraged me with an eager eye.

"He was not only my solicitor," continued Coysh; "he has acted as my agent in a good many matters which neither lawyers nor patent agents will generally undertake. You've heard of my Mainspring bicycle, of course? It was in his hands, and would have paid him well when it comes off, which is only a question of time." His broad face lit with irrelevant enthusiasm and glowed upon us each in turn. "When you think that by the very act of pedalling on the level we might be winding up – but there! It's going to revolutionise the most popular pastime of the day, and make my fortune incidentally; but meanwhile I've one or two pot-boilers that bring me in a living wage in royalties. One's an appliance they use in every gold-mine in South Africa. It was taken up by the biggest people in Johannesburg, and of course I've done very well out of it, this last year or two; but ever since Christmas my little bit has been getting more and more overdue. Royle had the whole thing in hand. I spoke to him about it more than once. At last I told him that if he couldn't cope with our paymasters out there, I'd have a go at them myself; but what I really feared was that he was keeping the remittances back, never for a moment that he was tampering with each one as it came. That, however, is what has been going on all this year. I have the certified accounts to prove it, and Royle must have bolted just when he knew the mail would reach me where I've been abroad. I don't wonder, either; he's been faking every statement for the last six months!"

"But not before?" cried Delavoye, as though it mattered.

Coysh turned to him with puzzled eyes.

"No; that's the funny part of it," said he. "You'd think a man who went so wrong – hundreds, in these few months – could never have been quite straight. But not a bit of it. I've got the accounts; they were as right as rain till this last spring."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Delavoye in wild excitement.

"May I ask what you knew?"

Coysh was staring, as well he might.

"Only that the whole mischief must have happened since these people came here to live!"

"Do you suggest that they've been living beyond their means?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Delavoye, as readily as though nothing else had been in his mind.

"Well, and I should say you were right," rejoined the engineer, "if it wasn't for the funniest part of all. When a straight man goes off the rails, there's generally some tremendous cause; but one of the surprises of this case, as my banker has managed to ascertain, is that Abercromby Royle is in a position to repay every penny. He has more than enough to do it, lying idle in his bank; so there was no apparent motive for the crime, and I for my part am prepared to treat it as a sudden aberration."

"Exactly!" cried Delavoye, as though he were the missing man's oldest friend and more eager than either of us to find excuses for him.

"Otherwise," continued Coysh, "I wouldn't have taken you gentlemen into my confidence. But the plain fact is that I'm prepared to condone the felony at my own risk in return for immediate and complete restitution." He turned his attention entirely to me. "Now, Royle can't make good unless you help him by helping me to find him. I won't be hard on him if you do, I promise you! Not a dozen

men in England shall ever know. But if I have to hunt for him it'll be with detectives and a warrant, and the fat'll be in the fire for all the world to smell!"

What could I do but give in after that? I had not promised to keep any secrets, and it was clearly in the runaway's interests to disclose his destination on the conditions laid down. Of his victim's good faith I had not a moment's doubt; it was as patent as his magnanimous compassion for Abercromby Royle. He blamed himself for not looking after his own show; it was unfair to take a poor little pettifogging solicitor and turn him by degrees into one's trusted business man; it was trying him too high altogether. He spoke of the poor wretch as flying from a wrath that existed chiefly in his own imagination, and even for that he blamed himself. It appeared that Coysh had vowed to Royle that he would have no mercy on anybody who was swindling him, no matter who it might be. He had meant it as a veiled warning, but Royle might have known his bark was worse than his bite, and have made a clean breast of the whole thing there and then. If only he had! And yet I believe we all three thought the better of him because he had not.

But it was not too late, thanks to me! I could not reveal the boat or line by which Royle was travelling, because it had never occurred to me to inquire, but Coysh seemed confident of finding out. His confidence was of the childlike type which is the foible of some strong men. He knew exactly what he was going to do, and it sounded the simplest thing in the world. Royle would be met on the other side by a cable which would bring him to his senses – and by one of Pinkerton's young men who would shadow him until it did. Either he would cable back the uttermost farthing through his bank, or that young man would tap him on the shoulder without more ado. It was delightful to watch a powerful mind clearing wire entanglements of detail in its leap to a picturesque conclusion; and we had further displays for our benefit; for there was no up-train for an hour and more, and that set the inventor off upon his wonderful bicycle, which was to accumulate hill power by getting wound up automatically on the level. Nothing is so foolish as the folly of genius, and I shall never forget that great man's obstinate defence of his one supreme fiasco, or the diagram that he drew on an unpapered wall while Uvo Delavoye and I attended with insincere solemnity.

But Uvo was no better when we were at last alone. And his craze seemed to me the crazier of the two.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff, my good Gillon! This fellow Royle comes here an honest man, and instantly starts on a career of fraud – for no earthly reason whatsoever!"

"So you want to find him an unearthly one?"

"I don't; it's there – and a worse case than the last. Old Sir Christopher was the only sober man at his own orgy, but my satanic ancestor seems to have made a mighty clean job of this poor brute!"

"I'm not so sure," said I gloomily. "I'm only sure of one thing – that the dead can't lead the living astray – and you'll never convince me that they can."

It was no use arguing, for we were oil and vinegar on this matter, and were beginning to recognise the fact. But I was grateful to Uvo Delavoye for his attitude on another point. I tried to explain why I had never told him about my last meeting with Abercromby Royle. It was not necessary; there he understood me in a moment; and so it was in almost everything except this one perverse obsession, due in my opinion to a morbid imagination, which in its turn I attributed to the wretched muddle that the Egyptian climate had made of poor Uvo's inner man. While not actually an invalid, there was little hope of his being fit for work of any sort for a year or more; and I remember feeling glad when he told me he had obtained a reader's ticket for the British Museum, but very sorry when I found that his principal object was to pursue his Witching Hill will-o'-the-wisp to an extent impossible in the local library. Indeed, it was no weather for close confinement on even the healthiest intellectual quest. Yet it was on his way home from the museum that Uvo had picked up Coysh outside my office, and that was where he was when Coysh came down again before the week was out.

This time I was in, and sweltering over the schedule of finishings for the house in which he had found me before, when my glass door darkened and the whole office shook beneath his ominous

tread. With his back to the light, the little round man looked perfectly black with rage; and if he did not actually shake his fist in my face, that is the impression that I still retain of his outward attitude.

His words came in a bitter torrent, but their meaning might have been stated in one breath. Royle had not gone to America at all. Neither in his own name nor any other had he booked his passage at the London office of the Tuesday, or either of the Wednesday steamers, nor as yet in any of those sailing on the following Saturday. So Coysh declared, with characteristic conviction, as proof positive that a given being could not possibly have sailed for the United States under any conceivable disguise or alias. He had himself made a round of the said London offices, armed with photographs of Abercromby Royle. That settled the matter. It also branded me in my visitor's blazing eyes as accessory before or after the flight, and the deliberate author of a false scent which had wasted a couple of invaluable days.

It was no use trying to defend myself, and Coysh told me it was none. He had no time to listen to a "jackanapes in office," as he called me to my face. I could not help laughing in his. All he wanted and intended to discover was the whereabouts of Mrs. Royle – the last thing I knew, or had thought about before that moment – but in my indignation I referred him to the post-office. By way of acknowledgment he nearly shivered my glass door behind him.

I mopped my face and awaited Delavoye with little patience, which ran out altogether when he entered with a radiant face, particularly full of his own egregious researches in Bloomsbury.

"I can't do with that rot to-night!" I cried. "Here's this fat little fool going to get on the tracks of Mrs. Royle, and all through me! The woman's an invalid; this may finish her off. If it were the man himself I wouldn't mind. Where the devil do you suppose he is?"

"I'll tell you later," said Uvo Delavoye, without moving a muscle of his mobile face.

"You'll tell me – see here, Delavoye!" I spluttered. "This is a serious matter to me; if you're going to rot about it I'd rather you cleared out!"

"But I'm not rotting, Gilly," said he in a different tone, yet with a superior twinkle that I never liked. "I never felt less like it in my life. I really have a pretty shrewd idea of my own, but you're such an unbelieving dog that you must give me time before I tell you what it is. I should like first to know rather more about these alleged peculations and this apparent flight, and whether Mrs. Royle's in it all. I'm rather interested in the lady. But if you care to come in for supper you shall hear my views."

Of course I cared. But across the solid mahogany of more spacious days, though we had it to ourselves, we both seemed disinclined to resume the topic. Delavoye had got up some choice remnant of his father's cellar, grotesquely out of keeping with our homely meal, but avowedly in my honour, and it seemed a time to talk about matters on which we were agreed. I was afraid I knew the kind of idea he had described as "shrewd"; what I dreaded was some fresh application of his ingenious doctrine as to the local quick and dead, and a heated argument in our extravagant cups. And yet I did want to know what was in my companion's mind about the Royles; for my own was no longer free from presentiments for which there was some ground in the facts of the case. But I was not going to start the subject; and Delavoye steadily avoided it until we strolled out afterward (with humble pipes on top of that Madeira!). Then his arm slipped through mine, and it was with one accord that we drifted up the road toward the house with the drawn blinds.

All these days, on my constant perambulations, it had stared me in the face with its shut windows, its dirty step, its idle chimneys. Every morning those odious blinds had greeted me like red eyelids hiding dreadful eyes. And once I had remembered that the very letter-box was set like teeth against the outer world. But this summer evening, as the house came between us and a noble moon, all was so changed and chastened that I thought no evil until Uvo spoke.

"I can't help feeling that there's something wrong!" he exclaimed below his breath.

"If Coysh is not mistaken," I whispered back, "there's something very wrong indeed."

He looked at me as though I had missed the point, and I awaited an impatient intimation of the fact. But there had been something strange about Uvo Delavoye all the evening; he had singularly

little to say for himself, and now he was saying it in so low a voice that I insensibly lowered mine, though we had the whole road almost to ourselves.

"You said you found old Royle quite alone the other night?"

"Absolutely – so *he* said."

"You've no reason to doubt it, have you?"

"No reason – none. Still, it did seem odd that he should hang on to the end – the master of the house – without a soul to do anything for him."

"I quite agree with you," said Delavoye emphatically. "It's very odd. It means something. I believe I know what, too!"

But he did not appear disposed to tell me, and I was not going to press him on the point. Nor did I share his confidence in his own powers of divination. What could he know of the case, that was unknown to me – unless he had some outside source of information all the time?

That, however, I did not believe; at any rate he seemed bent upon acquiring more. He pushed the gate open, and was on the doorstep before I could say a word. I had to follow in order to remind him that his proceedings might be misunderstood if they were seen.

"Not a bit of it!" he had the nerve to say as he bent over the tarnished letter-box. "You're with me, Gillon, and isn't it your job to keep an eye on these houses?"

"Yes, but – "

"What's the matter with this letter-box? It won't open."

"That's so that letters can't be shot into the empty hall. He nailed it up on purpose before he went. I found him at it."

"And didn't it strike you as an extraordinary thing to do?" Uvo was standing upright now. "Of course it did, or you'd have mentioned it to Coysh and me the other day."

It was no use denying the fact.

"What's happening to their letters?" he went on, as though I could know.

"I expect they're being re-directed."

"To the wife?"

"I suppose so."

And my voice sank with my heart, and I felt ashamed, and repeated myself aggressively.

"Exactly!" There was no supposing about Uvo. "The wife at some mysterious address in the country – poor soul!"

"Where are you going now?"

He had dived under the front windows, muttering to himself as much as to me. I caught him up at the high side gate into the back garden.

"Lend me a hand," said Delavoye when he had tried the latch.

"You're not going over?"

"That I am, and it'll be your duty to follow. Or I could let you through. Well – if you won't!"

And in the angle between party-fence and gate he was struggling manfully when I went to his aid as a lesser evil; in a few seconds we were both in the back garden of the empty house, with the gate still bolted behind us.

"Now, if it were ours," resumed Delavoye when he had taken breath, "I should say the lavatory window was the vulnerable point. Lavatory window, please!"

"But, Delavoye, look here!"

"I'm looking," said he, and we faced each other in the broad moonlight that flooded the already ragged lawn.

"If you think I'm going to let you break into this house, you're very much mistaken."

I had my back to the windows I meant to hold inviolate. No doubt the moon revealed some resolution in my face and bearing, for I meant what I said until Delavoye spoke again.

"Oh, very well! If it's coming to brute force I have no more to say. The police will have to do it, that's all. It's their job, when you come to think of it; but it'll be jolly difficult to get them to take it on, whereas you and I – "

And he turned away with a shrug to point his admirable aposiopesis.

"Man Uvo," I said, catching him by the arm, "what's this job you're jawing about?"

"You know well enough. You're in the whole mystery of these people far deeper than I am. I only want to find the solution."

"And you think you'll find it in their house?"

"I know I should," said Uvo with quiet confidence. "But I don't say it'll be a pleasant find. I shouldn't ask you to come in with me, but merely to accept some responsibility afterwards – to-night, if we're spotted. It will probably involve more kudos in the end. But I don't want to let you in for more than you can stand meanwhile, Gillon."

That was enough for me. I myself led the way back to the windows, angrily enough until he took my arm, and then suddenly more at one with him than I had ever been before. I had seen his set lips in the moonlight, and felt the uncontrollable tremor of the hand upon my sleeve.

It so happened that it was not necessary to break in after all. I had generally some keys about me and the variety of locks on our back doors was not inexhaustible. It was the scullery door in this case that a happy chance thus enabled me to open. But I was now more determined than Delavoye himself, and would have stuck at no burglarious excess to test his prescience, to say nothing of a secret foreboding which had been forming in my own mind.

To one who went from house to house on the Estate as I did, and knew by heart the five or six plans on which builder and architect had rung the changes, darkness should have been no hindrance to the unwarrantable exploration I was about to conduct. I knew the way through these kitchens, and found it here without a false or noisy step. But in the hall I had to contend with the furniture which makes one interior as different from another as the houses themselves may be alike. The Abercromby Royles had as much furniture as the Delavoyes, only of a different type. It was not massive and unsuitable, but only too dainty and multifarious, no doubt in accordance with the poor wife's taste. I retained an impression of artful simplicity – an enamelled drain-pipe for the umbrellas – painted tambourines and counterfeit milk-stools – which rather charmed me in those days. But I had certainly forgotten a tall flower-stand outside the kitchen door, and over it went crashing as I set foot in the tessellated hall. I doubt if either of us drew breath for some seconds after the last bit of broken plant-pot lay still upon the tiles. Then I rubbed a match on my trousers, but it did not strike. Uvo had me by the hand before I could do it again.

"Do you want to blow up the house?" he croaked. "Can't you smell it for yourself?"

Then I realised that the breath which I had just drawn was acrid with escaped gas.

"It's that asbestos stove again!" I exclaimed, recalling my first visit to the house.

"Which asbestos stove?"

"It's in the dining-room. It was leaking as far back as June."

"Well, we'd better go in there first and open the window. Stop a bit!"

The dining-room was just opposite the kitchen, and I was on the threshold when he pulled me back to tie my handkerchief across my nose and mouth. I did the same for Delavoye, and thus we crept into the room where I had been induced to drink with Royle on the night he went away.

The full moon made smouldering panels of the French window leading into the garden, but little or no light filtered through the long red blind. Delavoye went round to it on tip-toe, and I still say it was a natural instinct that kept our voices down and our movements stealthy; that any other empty house, where we had no business at dead of night, would have had the same effect upon us. Delavoye speaks differently for himself; and I certainly heard him fumbling unduly for the blind-cord while I went over to the gas-stove. At least I was going when I stumbled against a basket chair, which creaked without yielding to my weight, and creaked again as though some one had stirred in it. I recoiled,

panic-stricken, and so stood until the blind flew up. Then the silence was sharply broken by a voice that I can still hear but hardly recognise as my own.

It was Abercromby Royle who was sitting in the moonlight over the escaping stove; and I shall not describe him; but a dead flower still drooped from the lapel of a flannel jacket which the dead man had horribly outgrown.

I drove Delavoye before me through the window he had just opened; it was he who insisted on returning, ostensibly to turn off the gas, and I could not let him go alone. But neither could I face the ghastly occupant of the basket chair; and again it was Uvo Delavoye who was busy disengaging something from the frozen fingers when a loud rat-tat resounded through the house.

It was grim to see how the corpse sat still and let us jump; but Uvo was himself before the knock was repeated.

"You go, Gillon!" he said. "It's only somebody who's heard or seen us. Don't you think we smelt the gas through the letter-box, and wasn't it your duty – "

The second knock cut him short, and I answered it without more ado. The night constable on the beat, who knew me well by sight, was standing on the doorstep like a man, his right hand on his hip till he had blinded me with his lantern. A grunt of relief assured me of his recognition, while his timely arrival was as promptly explained by an insensate volley in a more familiar voice.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.