

Williamson Charles Norris, Williamson Alice
Muriel

Lord John in New York



Charles Williamson

Lord John in New York

«Public Domain»

Williamson C.

Lord John in New York / C. Williamson — «Public Domain»,

© Williamson C.
© Public Domain

Содержание

EPISODE I	5
EPISODE II	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

Williamson A. M. Alice Muriel, Williamson C. N. Charles Norris Lord John in New York

EPISODE I THE KEY

"More letters and flowers for you, Lord John," said my nurse.

Not that I needed a nurse; and, above all things, I needed no more letters or flowers. The waste-paper basket was full. The room smelt like a perfume factory. The mantelpiece and all other receptacles having an army of occupation, vases and bowls were mobilising on the floor. This would, of course, not be tolerated in hospital; but I was off the sick list, recovering in a private convalescent home. I was fed up with being a wounded hero; the fragrance of too many flowers, and the kindness of too many ladies, was sapping and mining my brain power; consequently, I could invent no excuse for escape.

The nurse came in, put down the lilies, and gave me three letters.

My heart beat, for I was expecting a note from a woman to whom somehow or other I was almost engaged, and to whom I didn't in the least wish to be engaged. She would not have looked at me before the war, when I was only a younger brother of the Marquis of Haslemere – and the author of a successful detective story called *The Key*. Now, however; simply because I'd dropped a few bombs from a monoplane on to a Zeppelin hangar in Belgium, had been wounded in one arm and two legs, and through sheer instinct of self-preservation had contrived to escape, I was a toy worth playing with. She wanted to play with me. All the women I knew, not busy with better toys, wanted to play with me. My brother Haslemere, who had been ashamed of my extremely clever, rather successful book, and the undoubted detective talent it showed, was proud of me as a mere bomb-dropper. So, too, was my sister-in-law. I was the principal object of attraction at the moment in Violet's zoo – I mean her convalescent home. She had cried because men were not being wounded fast enough to fill its expensively appointed rooms; I was captured, therefore, to make up for deficiencies and shown off to Violet's many friends, who were duly photographed bending beautifully over me.

There was, as I had feared, a letter from Irene Anderson; there was also – even worse – one from Mrs. Allendale. But the third letter was from Carr Price. On the envelope was the address of the New York theatre where the play he had dramatised from my book would shortly be produced. He had come to England a million years ago, before the war, to consult me about his work, which would have been brought out in London if the war had not upset our manager's plans. I like Carr Price, who is as much poet as playwright; a charming, sensitive, nervous, wonderful fellow. I gave his letter precedence.

"DEAR LORD JOHN," he began, and I judged from the scrawl that he wrote in agitation – "for goodness' sake, what have you done to Roger Odell that he should have a grouch on you? It must have been something pretty bad. I wish to Heaven you'd given me the tip last summer that you'd made an enemy of him. Roger Odell, of all men in America! I suppose the brother of a marquis can stand on his own feet in his own country, but even if his brother's an archangel his feet are apt to get cold in New York if Roger Odell turns the heat off.

"The facts – as I've just heard from Julius Felborn – are these. Yesterday Odell sent for Julius, who went like a bird, for he and Odell are friends. Odell's money and influence put Julius where he is now, as a manager, up at the top, though still young. What was Julius's horror, however, when Odell blurted out a warning not to produce any play dramatised from a book of yours, because he – Odell

– would do his best to ruin it! Julius asked what the dickens he meant. Odell wouldn't explain. All he'd say was, that he'd be sorry to hurt Julius and had nothing against me, but *The Key* would get no chance in New York or any old town in the United States where Roger Odell had a finger in the pie.

"Well, you must have heard enough about Odell to know what such a threat amounts to. There are mighty few pies he hasn't got a finger in. Not that he's a man who threatens as a rule. He's *made* a good many men. I never heard of his *breaking* one. But when he decides to do a thing, he does it. Julius is in a blue funk. He's not a coward, but even if he felt strong enough to fight Odell's newspapers and other influence, he says it would be an act of 'base ingratitude' to do so, as he'd be 'walking on his uppers' now but for Odell's help, tiding over rough places in the past. Julius took all night to reflect, and rang me up this morning. I'm writing in his office at the theatre now, after our interview. He says Odell would have put him wise before, but he saw the pars (in his own papers!) for the first time yesterday morning on the way back from the West Indies, where he'd been on a short business trip. Queer place for such a man to go on a business trip! But the whole thing is dashed queer. Now he's off again like a whirlwind to England for *another* 'short business trip,' so he told Julius. But J. let drop one little item of information about a woman, or rather a girl. *Can* that be where *you* come in on this? *Have you taken this girl away?* Anyhow, whatever you've done, the consequences seem likely to be serious. Julius is inclined to call a halt, bribe, wheedle or bluster the star into throwing up his part at the first rehearsal, by way of an excuse, and to put on Chumley Reed's *Queen Sweetheart*, which he kept up his sleeve in case *The Key* failed. But, of course, it *couldn't* fail, unless it was burked. The whole cast was wild over *The Key*. Julius himself was wild, and is sick at having to turn it down. But Odell's too big for him. And I guess O – has offered to stand the racket for the loss of wasted scenery, which has been begun on an elaborate scale. (Think of the great casino act at Monte Carlo!) Unfortunately, I'm constituted so I can't help seeing both sides of the shield and putting myself in others' places. I'm sorry for Julius. But I'm twenty times sorrier for Carr Price. For you, too, my dear fellow, of course. But I stand to lose more than you do on this deal.

"I told you confidentially last June just what depends on the success of *The Key*, and I've counted on that success as certain. So did *she*. I wish to Heaven she weren't so conscientious – yet no, I love her all the better for what she is. I shan't ask her to break the promise she gave her father, who, you may remember, is Governor of my own State, not to be engaged definitely till I've made good. But if I'm to have even my *chance* to make good snatched away, it's hard lines. I wish to the Lord my dear girl weren't such a howling swell, with such an important parent! No use hustling around to other managers. Your book went like hot cakes here. So would your play, but no man will pit himself against Roger Odell, if Odell means fighting. And there's no doubt he does mean it – unless you can undo whatever the fool thing is you've done.

"Probably this letter will go to England in the same ship with Odell. If you're well enough by the time it reaches you, to crawl about, can't you see him? I've told Felborn that when you set your wits to work you're as much of a wonder as your Prime Minister in *The Key*. I've worked him up to some sort of superstitious belief in you. The next thing is, to make him merely *put off* the rehearsal on some pretext, and do nothing one way or the other till I get a cable. I shan't sleep or eat till I hear whether there's any hope of your straightening things with Odell. – Yours, C.P."

"Straightening things with Odell!" That might have been simple, if things had ever been crooked with Odell. But I had never met, I had never seen him. All I knew was what I had read, and vaguely heard from Americans: that Roger Odell was a millionaire, still a young man, a popular fellow who had made most of his money out of mines and had bought up an incredible number of newspapers in order to make his power felt in the world. But what grudge had he against me? How did he know that I existed? I decided that I owed it to myself as an expert even more than to Price and his girl, who was a "governor's daughter," to turn on the searchlight.

It was nearly my time for an outing. Lady Emily Boynton was coming in about an hour to collect me in her car, take me to the park and there let me try a combination of legs and crutches. But in my

room was a telephone. In general I cursed the noisy thing. To-day I blessed it. I 'phoned to the doctor that, instead of his coming to me, I should prefer to call on him, explaining my reason when we met. Next I rang up Lady Emily to say that I was going to Harley Street. She mustn't trouble to send, as I was ordering a taxi in a hurry. And lest she should disobey, I hobbled off before her car could arrive – my first independent expedition since I had been interned by Violet.

I hoped that Roger Odell might be caught at some hotel in London, and resolved not to stop going till I found him. I began at the Savoy, and it seemed that luck was with me when I learned that he had arrived the night before. He had gone out, however, directly after breakfast, leaving no word as to his return. This was a blow, especially as it appeared that he had hired a powerful automobile; and even American millionaires do not hire powerful automobiles to run about town.

They take taxis.

I gave myself a minute's reflection, and decided that it would be tempting Providence to intern myself again before seeing Odell, or else definitely failing to see him. I refused to leave my name, saying that I would call later; and on the way to keep my Harley Street appointment stopped my taxi at a post office. Thence I sent a cable to Carr Price —

"Count on me to make everything right with Odell. Postpone rehearsals if necessary, but assure Felborn he can safely prepare production. Will wire further details. – JOHN HASLE."

Perhaps Price and Felborn would have considered this assurance premature had they known the little I possessed to go upon. But I had confidence in myself, and felt justified in rushing off a cheerful message. Delay and uncertainty were the two fatal obstacles to our scheme. It seemed fair to presume that, as I've never met nor harmed Odell, his objection to me must be founded on some misunderstanding which a few frank words ought to clear up. All I had to do was to see him; and I *would* see him if I had to camp at his door for a week.

Having got off my cable I called on the doctor, explaining to him, as man to man, that I was being killed with kindness, buried under flowers and jellies, as Tarpeia was buried under shields and bracelets. "I must get out from under," I said, "or I shall fade like a flower or dissolve into a jelly myself. Can't you save me?"

"I thought you were enjoying life," he replied. "You're well enough, as a matter of fact, to do almost anything except go back to the front. Your legs won't run to that, my boy, for the next six months at least. If you're such an ungrateful beggar that you want to leave Lady Haslemere's paradise and all its lovely houris, save yourself. Don't put the responsibility on me."

"Coward!" I said. (I would have hissed it, but, except in novels, it is physically impossible to hiss the word "coward.")

"The same to you," he retorted. "Get someone to send you on some mission and I'll back you up. I'll certify that you're strong enough to undertake it, if it doesn't depend on your legs, and is not too strenuous."

"I may need to run over to America," it suddenly occurred to me to say, as if by inspiration. "I should have to depend on brains, not legs. Would New York be too strenuous?"

"I hear they're pretty strenuous over there, but – well –"

"You don't know what I go through every day at that confounded home for milksops when your back is turned," I pleaded, as he hesitated. That settled it. We both laughed, and I knew he'd see me through. Five minutes before nothing had been further from my mind than a trip to New York; but now I felt that it had been my secret intention from the first. It was strongly impressed upon me that I should have to go. Why, I could not tell. But the thing would happen.

It was two o'clock and luncheon time when I got back to the Savoy, but Odell had not returned. I wired (I would not 'phone lest I should be unearthed like a fox from his hole) to the convalescent home, saying that all was well and I had the doctor's authority to stop out as long as I liked. I then ate a substantial meal and inquired again at the desk. No Odell. I said I would wait. Would they kindly let me know, in the reading-room, when Mr. Odell arrived? I being wounded and in khaki, they waived

suspicion of a nameless caller. I was given the freedom of the Savoy, and I waited. I waited three hours, and read all the magazines and papers. Then I wandered into the foyer and ordered tea. While I was having it, up trotted a sympathetic clerk with a flurried manner to inform me that Mr. Odell was not coming back at all. A telegram had just been received, saying that important business called him home at once. He was on his way by automobile to Liverpool, whence he would sail next morning on the *Monarchic*. His luggage was to be forwarded by messenger in time to go on board the ship.

For a few seconds I felt as if what remained of my tea had been flung in my face, scalding hot. But by the time I'd thanked my informant, paid my waiter and picked up my crutches, I knew why I had had that presentiment. I taxied to Cook's and learned that, owing to the war, I could get a cabin on any ship I liked. From Cook's to the doctor's; found him going out, dragged him home with me, and utilised his services in wrestling with the matron and nurses. "The play of my book is being produced in New York, and I must be there, dead or alive," I explained. This seemed to them important, even unanswerable. It would not to my sister-in-law. But she was having influenza at home, and I sneaked off before she knew (having got leave from the War Office), sending her a grateful, regretful telegram from Liverpool.

Even the amateur sleuth doesn't let a ship carry him away to sea without making sure that his quarry is on board. Roger Odell's name was not on the passenger list, but neither was mine; we were late comers. Nevertheless, I knew he was certain to have a good cabin, and I inquired casually of a steward on the promenade deck whether he had "Seen Mr. Odell yet?" He fell into my trap and answered that he had not, but his "mate" would be looking after the gentleman who was in the bridal suite.

I pricked up my ears, remembering that, according to Carr Price, there was a girl in the case. Something unexpected had happened to upset Odell's plans in England. Could he be running off with anybody's wife or daughter?

"I didn't know that Mr. Odell was on his honeymoon," I ventured as a feeler.

The steward looked nonplussed, then grinned. "Oh, you're thinking of the bridal suite, sir!" he patronised my ignorance. "There's nothing in *that*. Probably the gentleman wired for the best there was. He's alone, sir. Do you wish to send word to him? I can fetch my mate – "

I broke in with thanks, saying that I would see Mr. Odell later. No doubt I would do so; but how I should recognise him was the question. Meanwhile, I limped about the deck, hoping to come across a chair labelled "Odell," and vainly searching I met a deck-steward. He took pity on my lameness, and offered to get me a chair at once. "Where would you like to sit, sir?"

I wanted to say, "Put me next to Mr. Roger Odell," but that was too crude a means towards the end. I looked around, hesitating and hoping – in a way I have which sometimes works well – for an inspiration, and my wandering eyes arrived at a girl. Then they ceased to wander. She was extraordinarily pretty, and therefore more important than twenty Roger Odells. She was just settling into her deck-chair. To the right was another chair, with a rug and a pillow on it. To the left was an unfilled space.

"There's room over there," I said. "It seems a well-sheltered place."

"It is, sir," replied the steward. Without allowing an eye to twinkle, he solemnly plumped down my chair at the left of the girl, not too near, yet not too far distant. She glanced up, as if faintly annoyed at being given a neighbour, but seeing my crutches, melted and gave me a brief yet angelic look of sympathy. If she had been a nurse in my sister-in-law's home I should never have left it. For she was one of those girls who, if there were only half a dozen men remaining in the world at the end of the war, would be certain to receive proposals from at least five. She was the type of the Eternal Feminine, the woman of our dreams, the face in the sunset and moonbeams. Perhaps you have seen such a face in real life – just once.

The girl had on a small squirrel toque and a long squirrel coat. She was wrapped in a squirrel rug to match. She had reddish-brown hair. All the girls who can take the last men in the world away

from all the other women have more or less of that red glint in their hair. Yet she seemed far from anxious to take the man who came striding along the deck and stopped in front of her as the ship got under way.

What she did was to look up and cry out a horrified "Oh!" Her cheeks, which had been pale, flamed red. She half threw off her fur rug, and would have struggled out of her chair if the man had not appealed to her mercy.

"Don't run away from me, Grace," he said, "after all these months."

The name "Grace" suited the girl, or rather expressed her. The man stared with hungry eyes. I was sorry for him. Somehow, I seemed to know how he felt. He had an American voice and looked like an American – that good, strong type of American who can hold his own anywhere: not tall, not short, not slim, not stout, not very dark, not very fair; square-jawed, square-shouldered; aggressive-featured, kind-eyed; one rebellious lock of brown hair falling over a white forehead.

"But – I *have* been running away from you all these months. I've been doing nothing else. I could do nothing else," she reproached him. They had both forgotten me. Besides, I was not obtrusively near.

"Don't I know you've been running away – to my sorrow?" he flung back at her. "I heard of you in the West Indies. I went there to hunt you down. You'd gone. I dashed home. You hadn't come back. I was told – I won't say by whom – that you were in England. I ran over and got on your track yesterday; flashed off to Bath in a fast auto; reached there just as you'd left for Liverpool to sail on this ship. So now I'm here."

She looked up at him, tears on her lashes. "Oh, Rod!" was all she said. It did not need that name to tell me who he was, but eyes and voice told me something more. She was not flirting with him. She was not pretending to wish that he had not come. With all her heart and soul she did wish it, yet —*she loved him*. I wondered if he knew that, or if not how much he would give to learn it.

"You can't get away from me this time," he said, not truculently, but pleadingly, as if he were afraid she might somehow slip out of his hands. "We'll have five days and a half – I hope six – together. If I can't persuade you in five days and a half – "

"You couldn't in five hundred years and a half! Rod, what do you *think* of me? Do you suppose I want you to *die*?"

"Do you suppose I'm *afraid*?"

"No. But I am – for you. Nothing on this earth can induce me to change my mind. You only make us both miserable by keeping on. Oh, Rod, here comes Aunt Marian! This is her chair."

Roger Odell glanced in the direction the girl's eyes gave him. I did likewise. A woman was coming, a tall woman in brown. A generation ago she would have been middle-aged; in our generation such women are young. She looked about thirty-eight, and so I put her down as ten years older. She was dusky olive, with a narrow face, banded black hair, and a swaying throat: rather a beautiful Leonardo da Vinci sort of woman.

Evidently she was as much astonished to see Odell as the girl had been, but she had a different way of showing it. She did not seem to mind his presence when she got over her surprise. She shook hands and let him put her into her chair, tucking the brown fur rug around her body and under her slim feet. I thought she seemed more Italian than American. She was very agreeable to Odell, in a cool, detached way, but when she inquired if he ought not to be going below to lunch, even a man of his determination was obliged to take the hint. "We are having something brought to us on deck," she explained. "Come back if you like when you have finished."

My lameness gave me an excuse for troubling the deck steward, who fetched me a plate of cold chicken at about the time when more elaborately furnished trays were placed before the two ladies. They had more to eat than I, but they finished sooner; at least, it was so with the younger. There was no sea on, yet she left her luncheon almost untouched, and after five minutes' playing with it went indoors. No sooner had she got safely away than Odell came back to accept the invitation given by "Aunt Marian," only to find it no longer worth his acceptance. (Recalling her words, I realised that

she had never expected "Grace" to stay.) Odell asked for a chair, nevertheless, and had it put next to hers, evidently meaning to annex the place permanently. These were the right tactics, of course. Even I should have adopted them; but they were opposed to a more subtle and deadly strategy. "Grace" proceeded to prove that being on board the same ship with her did not mean being in her society. She did not appear on deck again. Odell was forced to realise that he had made the girl a prisoner in her cabin.

That afternoon the list of passengers was given out, and I searched eagerly for her name. I had not far down the alphabet to go. There she was among the "C's" – "Miss Grace Callender." The name was an electric shock; and seeing it I could guess but too easily why the girl might love a man and run away from him.

Nobody who read the newspapers three years ago could have helped knowing who Grace Callender was; and if they forgot, she would certainly have been recalled to their minds a year and a half later. I, at least, had not forgotten. I owed to the "Callender-Graham Tragedy" one detail which had helped to make the success of my novel, and had suggested its name, *The Key*. Miss Callender was (and is) an American heiress, but England has its own reasons for being interested in American heiresses. Therefore, at the time of the two great sensational events in Grace Callender's life, London papers gave long paragraphs to the story.

Her parents – cousins – were both killed in a motor accident in France while she was a schoolgirl at home in charge of her aunt, a half-sister of the father, Graham Callender. Both parents were rich, having, for their lifetime, the use of an immense fortune, or rather the income derived from it. The principal could not be touched by them, but passed to their only child. This arrangement had come about through a family quarrel in the previous generation; but, as Graham Callender and his wife were of opinion that injustice had been done, they wished their daughter to atone for it by her marriage. Half the money ought rightly to have gone to Philip Callender-Graham, a cousin who had been disinherited in their favour. He had died poor, leaving a couple of sons a few years older than Grace. The two had been educated at Graham Callender's expense, and had spent their holidays at his houses in town and country. Grace had grown up to look upon both almost as brothers, though they were only her second cousins. She was fond of the pair – a little fonder of Perry, the elder, than of his younger brother Ned. As for the brothers themselves, it appeared later that both were in love with Grace; but Ned kept his secret and let Perry win the prize. The engagement of Grace Callender and Perry Callender-Graham was announced on the girl's nineteenth birthday. One night a few months later, and just one week before the day fixed for the wedding, Perry Callender-Graham was found dead in a quiet side street near Riverside Drive.

There were no marks of violence on his body, and apparently he had not been robbed. In his pockets were several letters which could have no bearing on the cause of his death, an empty envelope, a sum of money, a jewel-case containing a diamond pendant, probably intended as a gift for his fiancée, and two keys which seemed to be new. Both were latchkeys: one rather large and long, looking as if it might belong to the front door of a house; the other was small, not unlike the key to the door of the dead man's flat. Neither fitted any door of the private hotel in which he lived, however, and consequently suggested mystery. But as three specialists certified death by natural causes, the police came to regard the keys as of no importance. The doctors testified to a condition known as "status lymphaticus," which cannot be diagnosed during life, but which may cause a slight shock to be fatal. It was thought that Callender-Graham – whose body lay close to a street crossing – might have started back to save himself from being run over by a swift automobile suddenly turning the corner, and in the shock of falling have died of heart failure.

Grace Callender was grieved and distressed, but not prostrated with sorrow, as she would have been over the loss of an adored lover. Everyone who knew her knew that she had been going to marry her cousin not because she was in love, but in order to give him the fortune wrongfully diverted from his father. In these peculiar circumstances, many people prophesied the thing which happened a year

later: her engagement to Ned Callender-Graham, through whom the restitution could equally well be made. He seemed to be a popular fellow, even better liked in general than his dreamy, poetical brother; and as his friends guessed that he had unselfishly stood in the background for Perry's sake, all were pleased with his good fortune. The engagement went on for six months; and then a week before the wedding was to take place, Ned Callender-Graham was found dead in the same street and almost on the same spot where his brother had fallen a year and a half before.

This extraordinary coincidence was rendered even more remarkable by the fact that nearly every detail of the first tragedy was repeated in the second. Not only had the brothers met their death in the same street, and almost on the eve of marriage with the same girl, but, according to doctors' evidence, they had died in the same way and at practically the same hour. Ned, like Perry, was afflicted with status lymphaticus. There was no trace of violence on his body. He had not been robbed, for his pockets were full of money. He carried his brother's watch which Perry's will had left to him – the watch which Perry had worn on the night of his death – and two or three letters, together with an empty envelope. Stranger than all, perhaps, he had in his possession two new latchkeys – duplicates of the keys found in his dead brother's pocket.

This time, owing to the almost miraculous resemblance between the cases, foul play was suspected. But it seemed that the brothers had no enemies and, so far as could be learned, no serious rivals with Miss Callender. The girl and her aunt clung to the belief that Perry and Ned had died natural deaths, and that the ghastly coincidence was no more than a coincidence. Miss Marian Callender's theory was that Ned had fallen a victim to his love for his brother, a too sensitive conviction of guilt in taking Perry's place, and an unhappy superstition which he had confided to her – though, naturally, not to her niece. He believed himself to be haunted by his brother's spirit, which influenced him to do things he did not wish. He said one day that he doubted if Perry would ever let him marry Grace, but would contrive to break off the engagement in some way, even if all went well until the last moment. Miss Marian Callender suggested that the apparently mysterious keys were the same keys which Perry had possessed, they having been given, with other souvenirs of the dead man, to his brother; that it was characteristic of Ned to keep them by him, as well as the watch, in a kind of remorseful loyalty to the brother he had superseded; and that the same half-affectionate, half-fearful superstition had led him that night into the street where Perry had fallen. Once there – at an hour the same as that of Perry's death a week before his appointed marriage – in all probability Ned had imagined himself confronted by his brother's accusing ghost. The two were known to be temperamentally as well as physically alike, though Ned was undoubtedly stronger physically. It was not strange if Perry had a peculiar weakness of the heart that Ned should have the same; and the shock of a fancied meeting with Perry's spirit at such a time and such a place might easily have been too great for a man already at high nervous tension. Others than Miss Marian Callender talked freely with reporters and detectives, repeating her story that Ned Callender-Graham had felt oppressed with a sense of guilt, that he had worried himself into an emotional state which he had tried to hide, and that he had attended spiritualistic séances. All this, together with the fact that there was no evidence of murder, caused the second verdict to be the same as the first. But Grace Callender found herself so stared at and pointed at, and gossiped about wherever she went, that her life became a burden. She knew that terrible nicknames were fastened upon her, that she was called "Belladonna" and "The Poison Flower," as if her promise to marry had brought death upon her lovers. She heard women whispering behind her back, "If I were a man I simply shouldn't *dare* be engaged to her in spite of her millions"; and what she did not hear she imagined. She in her turn grew superstitious, or so it was said. She began to feel that there must be something fatal about her; that a curse which the father of Perry and Ned was said to have pronounced on her parents in his first fury at losing a fortune had been visited on her. Though she had twice come near her wedding she had never yet deeply loved a man; nevertheless, because of the "curse" and in fear of it, she resolved to give up all hope of happiness in love, never to marry, nor even engage herself again.

All this I remembered distinctly, not alone because my memory is a blotting-pad for such cases, but because the story had captured my imagination, and because I had used the detail of the keys for my own book, only substituting one for two.

"By Jove!" I said. "The key! Now, can that be the clue to Roger Odell's veto?"

I set myself deliberately to think the matter over from this new point of view. Evidently he was desperately in love with Grace Callender. Could the mere fact that I had named a book of mine *The Key*, and turned my plot upon a mysterious key found in a dead man's pocket, have inspired Odell with revengeful rage? Except for the title, and the key in the pocket, there was nothing in my book or in Carr Price's play which bore even the vaguest likeness to the Callender-Graham tragedy. I didn't see how the most loyal lover could feel that I had "butted in" upon what to him was sacred; still, the new idea had some substance in it. Not only had I hit on a possible clue to the man's enmity, but into my mind from another direction suddenly flashed so astounding a ray of light that I was almost blinded. I could hardly wait to try weapons with Odell.

How to get at him and hold him, so to speak, at my mercy was the next difficulty. I had to think that out too, and I did it by process of deduction. For reasons of my own, I had not yet secured a seat in the dining-saloon, but now I limped down below with my inspiration. Others had made their arrangements and gone, but I managed to catch the head steward.

"I suppose you're assigning seats for people who want to sit alone at these small tables?" I began.

"We have assigned only one such, sir," he cautiously admitted. "All we're able to give."

"Why all?" I wanted to know. "There are plenty of tables and only a few passengers."

"Yes, sir, that's true. But also, there's only a few stewards. We haven't enough to spare for scattering around."

"Is Mr. Roger Odell the one fortunate person to whom you've been able to give a table to himself?" I threw out this question like a lasso.

"Why, yes, sir, as a matter of fact he is," the caught steward confessed. "We've several tables with parties of two or three, but for one alone –"

"I may wish to be alone just as much as Mr. Odell does," I argued. "But the next best thing to being alone is to sit with another man who wants to be alone. Then there's no fear of too much conversation. Put me at Mr. Odell's table." As I spoke I slipped a five-pound note into a surprised but unresisting hand. (I had to bribe high to outbribe a millionaire.) Even as his fingers closed mechanically on the paper the steward's tongue began to stammer, "I – I'm afraid he may object, sir."

"He may at first; but not after three minutes. All I ask is to be put at the table when Mr. Odell is seated, and without his knowing beforehand that he's obliged to have a companion. If he still objects after three minutes of my company I've had my money's worth. I'll leave him in possession of the table; you can put me where you like."

It was a bargain. The steward pointed out the table selected by Odell.

I was dressed and ready for dinner before the bugle sounded, but did not go down until I thought that most of the passengers would be already seated. Hovering in the doorway, I saw that Odell was already in his place. Then I made straight for the table and sat down in the chair opposite his.

He had been gloomily eating his soup, and looked up from it with a glare.

"I think you must be making a mistake," he remarked with an effort at civility. "I asked to be alone."

"So did I," I said.

"But not at this table."

"At this very table."

"Then I'll leave it to you."

"Please don't," I said. "If one of us goes, I'll be the one, as I'm the last comer. But will you meanwhile be kind enough to answer two easy questions? First, are you Mr. Roger Odell of New York?"

"Yes, to question number one. If the next's as easy, perhaps I'll answer that too."

(He looked faintly amused. The space between his straight black eyebrows was growing visible again. I had still two minutes and a half out of the three.)

"Thank you," I said. "The next should be even easier. Why have you warned Julius Felborn that if he brings out Carr Price's play, *The Key*, you'll quash it?"

The man's face changed. From half-amused boredom it expressed white rage. "You are that fellow John Hasle," he said. His voice was low and in control, but his look was vitriolic. All the same, I liked him. He was a man, and I had a man's chance with him.

"Yes, I'm that fellow John Hasle. Let me introduce myself," I replied.

"You've hunted me down. You said you wanted to sit alone. That was not true."

"I said, 'I asked to sit alone.' I wanted to sit with you. It was my way of getting to do it. I took not only the table and the opportunity, but my ticket to New York with the same object. I think I have the right to inquire what's your motive for wishing to injure me and to expect that you'll answer. If you think differently, I'll get up at once and go. But I believe I shall have succeeded in spoiling your appetite."

"You're a cool hand," he said, with no softening of the eyes which gave me look for look. "Sit still. If you get up and hobble away on those crutches you'll have the whole room gaping at us." (Not for the first time were my crutches a blessing in disguise:) "Whether you've a right to question me or not, I don't mind telling you that I think Americans are better at detective literature than any Englishman, speaking generally, and a whole lot better than John Hasle, speaking particularly."

"I think," said I, "that I shall be able to prove my detective powers to you later on, speaking very particularly."

"Ah, indeed! In what way?"

"'Later on' was what I said."

"All right. I'm in no hurry."

"I am. Because several matters have got to be settled before I can progress much further. For one thing, you haven't answered my second question. Your opinion of my book or my British limitations as a detective has nothing to do with your attitude toward the play."

"If you know so much, perhaps you know more."

"Frankly, I don't. I ask you to tell me the rest as frankly."

"Very well. Perhaps the medicine will go to the spot quicker if you understand what it's for. It sounds sort of melodramatic, and maybe it is so; but my wish – my intention – to strangle your play at birth, or crush it afterwards, has revenge for its motive."

"Revenge for what?"

"For the cruel act of a member of your family to a member of mine."

"There's only one other member of my family beside myself – my brother."

"Exactly! That's the man. There's only one other member of *my* family beside myself. That's my adopted sister. I care more for her than anyone else in the world – except one. Through your brother, my sister's health and her hopes are both ruined. If you didn't know before, you know now what you're up against."

"I assure you I didn't know," I said. "This is the last thing that occurred to me. I admit I thought of something else –"

"Oh, is there something else? It's not needed. Still, you may as well out with it, so I can put another black mark against the name."

"I'll tell you, when I'm ready to talk of the detective test I spoke of. But about my brother injuring your adopted sister. There must be some mistake –"

"Not on your life, if you're Lord John Hasle and your brother's the Marquis of Haslemere."

"I can't deny that."

"It's a pity!"

"So *he* often says. He's not proud of me as an author. He'd be still less proud of me on the stage. You'll be doing him a real service if you prevent *The Key* from being produced, and so keep the family name out of the papers in connection with the theatre."

"Oh, will I?" Odell echoed. He looked rather blank for a moment; then gathered himself and his black eyebrows together. "You're mighty intelligent, aren't you?" he sneered.

"I've always thought so. I'm glad you agree. But there's no use our rotting on like this. We're wasting time. Will you tell me what Haslemere can possibly have done?"

"Yes! What he positively *did* do!" the man broke out fiercely, then controlled himself and glanced quickly round the room as if looking for someone. But not even Miss Marian Callender had come into the saloon. Both she and her niece must have been dining in their own suite. "Lord Haslemere wrote a letter to your British Lord Chamberlain, or whatever you call his High Mightiness, and caused him to have my sister's presentation at Court cancelled three days before it should have come off in May last year."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "What an extraordinary thing to do!"

"What a monstrous, what a beastly thing to do! A defenceless girl. A beautiful girl. One of the best on earth. It broke her heart – the humiliation of it, and the shock. She wasn't very strong, and she'd been looking forward to making her bow to your Royalties. Lord knows why she should have cared so much. But she did. She loved England. She has English blood in her veins. She had a sort of loyal feeling to your King and Queen. That is what she got for it. She's never been the same since, and I doubt if she ever will be. All her friends knew she was going to be presented – and then she wasn't. The damned story leaked out somehow, and has been going the rounds ever since. That's why, if your play is produced in New York, I shall see it gets what it deserves – or, anyway, what your family deserves."

"How do you know Haslemere wrote that letter?" I asked.

"My sister got it from a woman who was to present her – a friend of Lord Haslemere's wife. She'd seen the letter."

"Then she must have seen some reason alleged."

"She did. That to his certain knowledge Miss Madeleine Odell wasn't a proper person to be introduced to their Majesties. Maida not a proper person! She's a saint."

"What lie about her could have been told to my brother?"

"I know what lie was told, because it has been told to others. It's blighted her life for years, go where she would on our side of the water. She hoped it wouldn't have got so far as England; and if it hadn't, she'd have settled down in that country to enjoy a little peace. But there it was, like a snake in the grass! The thing I'd give my head to find out is, *who spread the lie?*"

"You don't know, then?"

"No, I don't. It's a black mystery."

"Better let me use my despised detective talents to solve it."

"Oh, *that's* what you've been working up to, is it?"

"No. How could it be, as I hadn't heard the story when I began to work? But I'm willing to take it on as an extra by and by. My brother and I are scarcely friends. I'm not responsible for his act, and whatever the motive, I don't excuse it. Why go out of his way to hurt a woman? Yet I may be able to atone."

"Never!"

"Never's a long word. But just here the time has come to mention the two things I promised to tell you 'later on.' I thought what you had against me might be the name and the plot of my book, dramatised by Carr Price."

"What the devil is the name or plot of your play to me?"

"Ah, that was what I wanted to know. It occurred to me as possible that you resented the incident of a key being found in a dead man's pocket, and the title of the book and play which might recall a certain double tragedy to the public mind."

The blood rushed to the man's face. He understood instantly, and did not choose to pretend ignorance. "How dare you presume that I have a right to resent any such reference?" he challenged me.

"I dare, because of the second of the two things I reserved to tell you later: the wish I have to prove my detective powers for your benefit. I couldn't help seeing to-day your meeting on deck with Miss Callender. I couldn't help hearing a few words. Because I play at being a detective I keep my wits about me. Also I have a good memory for names and stories connected with them. Mr. Odell, will you separate me in your mind from my brother and give Carr Price's play a chance for its life if I tell you who killed Perry and Ned Callender-Graham, and prove to Miss Callender that there's no reason why she need be afraid to give her love to any man?"

Odell stared as if he thought I had gone mad or he was dreaming.

"Who *killed* Perry and Ned Graham?" he repeated. "No one killed them."

"You are wrong," I said quietly.

"That's your opinion!" he blurted out.

"That's my opinion. And if I'm right, if those two were murdered, and if the murderer or murderers can be found, won't Miss Callender feel she may safely marry a man she loves without delivering him up to danger?"

"Yes," Odell admitted. "Great Heaven, *if* you were right!"

"Supposing I am, and can prove it?"

"There's nothing on God's earth I wouldn't do for you."

"Well," I said, "I believe there's something in that opinion of mine. Don't dream that now I am getting at this truth I would bury it even if you did worse than crush my play. I'll go on, anyhow, but –"

"You say you are getting at the truth," he broke in. "What do you think – what do you know? But how can you, a stranger, *know* anything?"

"A stranger to you and those connected with the case, but not to the case itself. You may thank that despised detective instinct of mine for my keen interest in its details."

"If you thought you'd unearthed the clue to a mystery, why didn't you advertise yourself by pointing it out to the police a year and a half ago?"

"I certainly should if I'd got hold of it then, though not for the motive you suggest, Mr. Odell. My publishers were giving me all the publicity I wanted. As it happens, I picked up the clue in question only – a short time ago."

"Only a few hours ago" were the words which all but slipped out. I bit them back, however. My line with a keen business man like Roger Odell was not to give away something for nothing. It was to sell – for a price.

He tried to keep his countenance, but his eyes lit. I saw that my hint, like a spark to gun-cotton, had set him aflame with curiosity. Already, in spite of himself, he began to look on me less as an enemy than an agent; perhaps (a wonderful "perhaps" he could not help envisaging) a deliverer.

"For God's sake, speak out and say what you mean!" The appeal was forced from him. He looked half ashamed of it.

"I can't do that – yet," I returned. "I might tell you my suspicions; but that wouldn't be fair to myself, or you, or – anyone concerned. I must land first. Once off the ship, twenty-four hours are all I shall need to find – I won't say the '*missing* link,' because I have reason to think it will not be missing, but the link I can't touch this side of New York. I will make a rendezvous with you at the end of that time, either to tell you I've put two and two together with the link, or else to confess that the ends of the chain can't be made to fit."

Odell stared at me hungrily.

"You want only twenty-four hours to do what the best police in the world haven't done in a year and a half," he growled at me. "You think something of yourself, don't you?"

"You see, I've known myself for a long time," I said modestly. "You've only just been introduced to me, and were prejudiced to begin with. About that rendezvous – do you consent to my appointing the place?"

"Yes," he agreed. "Your hotel?"

"No. In the manager's private office at the Felborn Theatre; the time, twenty-four hours after we get away from the dock. That will be the most convenient place for both of us in case of my success, for Julius Felborn and Carr Price can be called in to fix a date for the first rehearsal of *The Key*."

The man could not keep back a laugh. It was harsh and short; but it was a score for me and he knew it. "The Felborn Theatre let it be," he said grimly.

The weather was fine and we made almost a record trip in point of time. There was nothing for Odell to regret in the briefness of the voyage, for Grace Callender remained in her cabin till he sent a message by her aunt, promising not to try for a word or a look if she came on deck. After that she appeared again, as if to show appreciation, and Odell didn't abuse her confidence. He kept himself to the other side of the deck; but there was no reason why I should give up my place near the two ladies. After the first night's dinner *en tête-à-tête*, Odell and I had no more meals together; consequently, the Misses Callender, aunt and niece, were unaware of our acquaintanceship. They had no reason to shun their lame neighbour, and my crutches gave me their sympathy, as they have given me various other blessings. Instead of my picking up a dropped book, as a man usually contrives to do if he yearns to know a girl on shipboard, Grace Callender retrieved one for me. After that, I was permitted, even encouraged, to draw my deck-chair closer to theirs and "tell them things about the war." I noticed that the girl caught eagerly, nervously, at any subject which could hold her attention for a moment, even that of my book and Carr Price's play. I, having the secret clue, guessed that she was for ever trying to escape from a thought too engrossing. Her aunt, Miss Marian Callender, had the clue also; and often I caught her long dark eyes – eyes like those of La Gioconda – fixed with almost painful intentness on Grace. "She knows that her niece is thinking about Odell," I told myself. Evidently she approved the girl's decision to put him out of her life. If she had been Odell's friend and sympathiser, a woman of her superior age and strong personal charm (for she had a sort of hypnotic charm, like a velvet-petalled flower with a penetrating perfume) could surely have influenced an impressionable girl, especially one so devoted to her as Grace Callender was.

It was nine o'clock on an April morning when we escaped from the custom-house men and spun away from the White Star docks in a glittering grey car. When I say "we," I refer to myself and the two Misses Callender. They had befriended me to the extent of recommending me to an hotel and offering to motor me to it; and I was malicious enough to hope that Odell might see me going off with them. There was little doubt in my mind that he did so, and none at all of what feelings must have been roused by the sight. These would have been still more poignant had he known that it was Grace who impulsively invited me, Marian who merely followed with a polite echo. They lived in a large old-fashioned house in Park Avenue, where the car dropped the ladies and by their order took me on to the Hotel Belmont. There Carr Price was waiting, for when – the day before our landing – the Callenders had mentioned the Belmont I marconied him to meet me at the hotel.

"Why did you wire 'Don't come to the dock?'" he asked almost resentfully.

"Because I thought it might annoy Roger Odell if I dangled you under his nose," I explained.

"Roger Odell's nose!" Price gasped. "Where – where –"

"Was it? On the *Monarchic*. And I didn't pull it; neither did he pull mine. I even have hopes that the two features may come to terms. To-morrow, at exactly this hour, you're due to know why. But meanwhile I want you to promise me patience, blind faith and – unquestioning help. There's no time to waste over it, so here goes! Who's the most influential man you know in New York?"

"George Gould," he said.

"Pooh! a mere millionaire. He's no use to me. Do you know anyone in the police force – high enough up to do you a favour?"

Price pondered for an instant. "I know Sam Yelverton. Is that name familiar to you?"

"It is. Think we'll find him in now if you take me to call?"

"If this is our lucky day we shall."

"Let's put it to the test. I've noticed that New York has taxis as well as London."

"And you'll notice the difference when you've paid for one. But this is on me."

The omen of luck was good, for we found our man at the police head-quarters, and, true to his promise, Carr Price sat as still and expressionless as an owl while I did the talking. I had been introduced to the great Sam Yelverton by my own request as the author of *The Key*, and it really was a stroke of luck that he had read and liked it. He looked interested when I said that I'd got an idea for my book from a *cause célèbre* in New York – "The Callender-Graham affair," I explained.

"Ah, the latchkeys in the dead men's pockets!" he caught me up.

"Exactly. Now it's a question of a play by Mr. Price, on the same lines as my book and with the same title, soon, *very* soon, to be produced at the Felborn Theatre. It will be of the greatest assistance to him and to me in working out an important detail if I can have Ned Callender-Graham's latchkeys – anyhow, the smaller one – in my hands for a few hours to-day. Indeed, I'm afraid we can't get much 'forrarder' if you refuse."

(This was the literal truth, for, unless I could obtain the more important of those two keys and do with it what I hoped to do, I should be unable to "deliver the goods" to Roger Odell. I should stand with him where I had stood before the "hold up" interview, and the play would be pigeon-holed indefinitely. Price's eyes were starting from his head, but he kept his tongue between his teeth.)

Mr. Yelverton seemed amused. "I guess I may be able to manage that," he said, "if one or both of those keys are still in our hands, as I believe they are. If I do the trick for you I'll expect a box for the play on the first night, eh?"

"It's a bargain, isn't it, Carr?" said I.

The dazed Price assented.

"Oh, and by the way, Mr. Yelverton" – I arrested the famous man as he picked up the receiver of his desk telephone – "if the letters and the empty envelopes found on the bodies of the two brothers are still among your police archives, would it be possible for me to have a look at them?"

Yelverton – a big man with a red face and the keenest eyes I ever saw, deep set between cushiony lids – threw me a quick glance. "You do remember the details of that case pretty well, Lord John!" he said.

"I'm an amateur follower in your famous footsteps," I reminded him. He smiled, called up a number and began telephoning. I admired the clear way in which he put what he wanted – or what I wanted – without wasting a word. He asked not only for the keys, but for the whole dossier in the double case of the Callender-Graham brothers. Then came a moment of waiting in which my heart ticked like a clock; but I contrived to answer Mr. Yelverton's mild questions about our weather on shipboard. At last a sharp ring heralded an end of suspense.

"Sorry, Lord John," the big man began, taking the receiver from the generous shell of his ear. "They're sending round the dossier, but our chaps have got none of the Callender-Graham 'exhibits in their possession – haven't had for nearly a year. I feared it was likely to be so. You see, there was no proof that any crime had been committed on either of the two brothers; in fact, the theory was against it. When the police definitely dropped the case – or cases – the family was entitled to all personal property of the deceased. Everything found on the body of Ned Callender-Graham was handed over to the relatives by their request, as had been done a few weeks after the elder brother's death, even the letters and those empty envelopes you were intelligent enough to single out for observation. We had done the same, naturally, but, in every sense of the word" – he grinned – "there was nothing in 'em."

"The keys on Ned's body were handed over to the Misses Callender, then?" I inquired, stiffening the muscles of my face to mask my disappointment.

"Yes. Perhaps, as you remember so much, you recall the fact that the first two keys were given to the relatives. Miss Marian Callender and her niece believed that Ned had Perry's keys in his pocket, which would mean there were but the two. The Callender ladies are the sole surviving relatives, or, anyhow, the nearest ones. But I've saved my bit of good news from head-quarters till the last. They 'phoned that there are duplicate keys. I thought I recalled something of the sort. Not sure but I suggested making them myself. That pretty millionairess girl might get herself engaged a third time, and if there were any more dead men found with latchkeys in their pockets, sample specimens might be very handy for our fellows."

Sam Yelverton finished with a laugh; but I couldn't echo it. I thought of Odell, of Grace Callender's lovely face and her young, spoilt life. I remembered the cruel nicknames "Belladonna" and "Poison Flower." If even the police prepared for a third tragedy, in case she thought again of marriage, no wonder the poor girl refused the man she loved.

"Will duplicates do for you, or do I lose my stage-box?" the big man asked.

I said aloud that I thought duplicates would answer my purpose, and silently to myself I said that they must do so.

Ten minutes later a policeman of some rank (what rank I couldn't tell, he being my first American specimen) brought in a parcel of considerable size. It contained many affidavits concerning the Callender-Graham tragedy; and on the top of these documents was a small, neatly labelled packet containing two keys.

The larger was entirely commonplace; and even the smaller one was at first glance a rather ordinary latchkey, of the Yale order. To an experienced and observant eye, however, it was of curious workmanship.

"Not a Yale, you see," said Yelverton, taking a magnifying glass from a small drawer of his tidy desk and passing it on to me. "What do you make of the thing?"

"Foreign, isn't it?" I remarked carelessly.

"Yes, we thought so. German – or Italian. Both the brothers had travelled abroad. On a Yale you would read the words 'Yale paracentric,' and a number. There's neither name nor number on that." He flung a gesture toward the key in my hand.

"May I take it away and keep it till to-morrow morning, to work out my plot with?" I asked. "The big one I don't care about. I give you my word I'll send this back in twenty-four – no, let's say twenty-five hours. I have an engagement for the twenty-fourth hour."

"All right," replied Yelverton good-naturedly. "You might bring the box-ticket with you. Ha, ha!"

"I will," I laughed. "And as to the dossier, may I sit somewhere out of your way and glance through it in case there's anything we can work up to strengthen the realism of our scenario? Of course, we'll guarantee to use nothing that might recall the Callender-Graham case to the public or dramatic critics."

"You can sit in the outer office and browse over the bundle till lunch-time, if you like," said Yelverton. "There's a table there in a quiet corner. I shall be off on business before you finish, I expect. See you later – at the Felborn Theatre, your first night. Wish you luck."

I thanked him and got up. Carr Price followed suit.

"Weren't you a bit premature mentioning the Felborn?" he reproached me in the next room, beyond earshot of Mr. Yelverton's secretaries and stenographers.

"No," I reassured him. "To-morrow, at this time or a little later, you'll know why. Meanwhile, don't worry, but take my word – and a taxi to the theatre. Tell Felborn I'm on the spot, and there's a truce between Odell and me, an armistice of twenty-four" – I pulled out my watch – "no, twenty-two

and a half hours. Ask him to lend me his private office to-morrow morning from nine till ten o'clock. After that time you and he had better hold yourselves ready to be called in to discuss dates."

"You're either the wonder child of the British Empire or its champion fool," remarked Price somewhat waspishly, as he prepared to leave me alone with the Callender-Graham dossier.

"You've got till to-morrow to make up your mind which," said I, sitting down to my meal of manuscripts in order not to waste a minute out of the twenty-two and a half hours which remained to me. It would not have been wise to add that I didn't know which myself.

Many of the papers I passed over rapidly. Others gave me information that I couldn't have got from Odell without a confession of ignorance, or from the Misses Callender without impertinence. Among the latter was one summarising much of the family history; and, profiting by some smart detective's researches, I learned a good deal about Miss Grace Callender and her almost equally interesting aunt.

Even before the girl reached the age of sixteen, it seemed, she had begun to have offers of marriage. After her parents' death, when she was not quite fifteen, she had lived for a while with Miss Marian Callender at the house in Park Avenue left to her by her father. She had been taught by French governesses, German governesses and English governesses, but all had failed to prevent a kind of persecution by young men fascinated with the child's beauty or her money. At last Miss Callender senior had sent her niece to a boarding-school in the country where the supervision was notoriously strict, and had herself gone to Italy, her mother's native land, for a few months' visit. Eight or nine years before this Marian Callender had fallen in love with an Italian tenor, singing with enormous success in New York. The lady's half-brother – Grace's father – had objected to the marriage, and for that reason or some other the two had parted. Gossips said that the singer, Paolo Tostini, had not cared enough for Marian Callender to take her without a *dot*; and all she had come from her millionaire half-brother. At Graham Callender's death Marian's friends were surprised that she was left a yearly allowance (though a magnificently generous one) only while she "continued unmarried and acted as Grace's guardian." In the event of Grace's marriage, the girl was free to continue half the same allowance to her aunt if she chose. This was generally considered unjust to Marian, and the only excuse for the arrangement seemed to be that Graham Callender feared Paolo Tostini might come forward again if the woman he had jilted were left with a fortune.

The police of New York had apparently thought it worth while to ferret out further facts in connection with the singer, who had not again returned to America. They learned that the once celebrated tenor had lost his voice and had spent his money in extravagance, as many artists do. He was living in comparative poverty with his father (a skilled mechanic and inventor of a successful time lock for safes) and his younger brother in Naples at the time of Miss Marian Callender's visit to Italy, and Grace's school life. Although these facts were inquired into only after some years had passed, and the two brothers Callender-Graham had died, Marian's movements must have been easily traced, for it was learned that she had openly visited the Tostinis at their small villa between Posilipo and Naples. The family had also called and dined at her hotel, where they were not unknown. After that their circumstances had apparently improved, and it appeared not improbable that Marian Callender had helped her late lover's people.

When she returned to New York it was to find that Grace was being bombarded with love letters at school, and that the hotel in the village near by had for its principal clients a crowd of young men whose whole business in life was lying in wait for the heiress. In consequence, Marian brought her niece back to the house in Park Avenue; and soon after, before the girl had been allowed to come out in society, Antonio, the younger brother of Paolo Tostini, arrived in New York. His business was that of an analytical chemist. He had first-rate recommendations, and was an extremely brilliant, as well as singularly good-looking young man, some (who remembered the tenor) thought even handsomer than Paolo. Antonio Tostini, thanks to his own ability and the introductions he had from Miss Callender and others, got on well both in business and society. No one was surprised,

and no one blamed her, when Marian Callender threw the clever young Italian and Grace Callender together – except that the girl was young to make up her mind, and her dead father had favoured a match with one of the disinherited cousins.

From these rough notes, crudely classifying Antonio Tostini's courtship of Grace Callender, I gathered that the young Italian had fallen desperately in love with the girl. He had assured friends whom they had in common that even if, to marry him, she were obliged to give up her fortune, he would still think himself the happiest man on earth to win her. Grace's aunt, who had tried to keep the girl out of other men's way, evidently favoured her old love's brother. She chaperoned a yachting party, of which Grace and Antonio were the most important members, a party in which the Callender-Grahams were not included, though they wished for invitations. This match-making effort on Marion's part stifled all suspicion that she discouraged Grace from marrying in order to retain a charming home, a large, certain income, and all kinds of other luxuries for herself. She had taken Grace's refusal of Antonio Tostini almost as hard as he had taken it himself. She had even been ill for several weeks when for the third time Grace had sent him away, and he returned in despair to Italy. It was not long after this affair (the dossier informed me) that, in accordance with her father's desire, the girl engaged herself to Perry Callender-Graham, and Marian consented to the inevitable. Her affection and support during the tragic experiences that followed had given great comfort to Grace, and, so far as was known, Antonio Tostini had had the good taste never to appear on the scene again.

Here were many details which I had been anxious, but not decently able, to learn, as the Misses Callenders' shipboard friendship had confined itself to lending me books, telling me what to do in New York, inviting me to call, listening to talk about the war or the play, and allowing me to snapshot them on deck.

Having looked through the dossier, I took my departure with the key. It was only a duplicate, yet I couldn't rid myself of a queer, superstitious feeling for the thing, as if it were offered to me by the unseen hand of a dead man.

I taxied back to my hotel and mentioned to a clerk that I wanted to see houses and flats in the direction of Riverside Drive. Could he direct me to an agent who would have the letting of apartments in that neighbourhood? If my foreign way of expressing myself amused him, he hid his mirth and looked up in a big book the addresses of several agents.

I had not cared to be too specific in my questions, but I chose the address nearest the street I wanted, taxied there, found the agent, and inquired if there were anything to be let. It was the street in which Perry Callender-Graham and Ned, his brother, had met their death.

"I have been recommended to that particular street by an American friend in England," I said. "He has told me that it's very quiet. There are several apartment houses in it, are there not?"

"Yes," replied a spruce young man who looked willing to let me half residential New York. "But it's a favourite street; I'm afraid there's nothing doing there now. As for houses, they're all owned, or have been rented for many years. A little farther north or south –"

"Hold on," I pulled him back. "Somebody might be induced to let. My friend was telling me about a charming flat – oh, apartment you call it? – in that street which a friend of *his* took – let me see, it must have been three years ago or thereabouts. Anyhow, not later. He had reason to believe I might get that very flat. Stupid of me! I can't remember the number or name – whichever it was – of the house. I know the flat was a furnished one, however; and if your agency –"

"Oh, if the apartment was furnished, and changed hands three years ago, there's only one it *could* be, if you're sure it's in that street?"

"I'm sure," I replied. I staked all on that sureness, though logically – But I would not let my mind wander to any other deduction than the one to which, for better or worse, I pinned my faith.

"We had the letting of a furnished apartment in the Alhambra, as the house is named, put into our hands three years ago on the 30th of last month," said the youth, referring to a book. "To my certain knowledge no other furnished one was to be had in the street at that time, and there hasn't

been since. Isn't likely to be either, so far as I can see. That was the grand chance. German-American lady and gentleman, Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Lowenstein, going unexpectedly to Europe, and glad to get rid of their apartment to a good tenant at a nominal price."

"You found the good tenant?" I asked.

"We did, sir – or the tenant found us. Wanted a furnished apartment, not too large or expensive, in a quiet street, quietness the great consideration. Above all, the proprietors mustn't want to use the place again for at least five years. That just fitted in, because our clients were anxious to let for seven years; the husband had a business opening in Hamburg. The new tenant took the place for that period; and as there's a long time to run yet, I shouldn't have thought there was much hope for you. However, your friend may have private information."

"Does the new tenant live there altogether?" I wanted to know.

"Only comes up from the country occasionally. Expensive fad, to rent a New York apartment that way. But what's money *for*? Some people have it to burn."

"Quite so," I admitted. "Have you ever met the tenant?"

"Only once – when the apartment was engaged; fixed up in one interview. The rent comes through the post."

"It must be the apartment my friend talked about!" I exclaimed.

"Can't be any other. Is the name of your friend's friend Paulling?"

"Why, yes, I have the impression of something like that. By the way, I might be able to find an old photograph, to make quite sure. Would you recognise it?"

"I might – and I mightn't. Three years is a long time."

"Well, I'll do my best through some acquaintances," I finished. "If we're speaking of the same person, you may be able to introduce me and save the delay of communicating with my friend in England."

Each was flattering himself on his discretion, the whole catechism having been gone through without the question on either side, "Is the person a man or a woman?" Eventually we parted with the understanding that I should return later if, after looking at the Alhambra from the outside, I fancied it as much as I expected to do. And then I was to bring the photograph with me.

So far so good. But the next steps were not so simple.

I stopped my taxi at the corner (not to advertise myself with unnecessary noise) and limped the short distance which Perry Callender-Graham and his brother Ned must have travelled on the secret errands that led them to their death. The Alhambra was neither as picturesque nor as imposing as its name suggested. It was just a substantial brick building, six or seven storeys in height, with facings of light-coloured stone, and large, cheerful windows. Luckily for my lame leg, the entrance was but a step above the street level. As I arrived the door was opened by a chocolate-brown negro in chocolate-brown livery. He helped a smart nurse to pass out with a baby in a white and gold chariot, and while he was thus engaged I hobbled into the hall. A hasty glance at a name board on the wall opposite gave me the list of occupants and the floor on which each tenant lived. Evidently there were two flats to each storey. T. Paulling had an apartment on the third, so also had G. Emmett. I had to risk something, and so when the brown hall-porter turned to me (which he did with embarrassing swiftness) I risked inquiring for Mr. Emmett. I believed, I added, that he was expecting me.

"That's all right, sir. He's in," was the welcome reply, with a compassionate grin at the crutches which guaranteed the harmlessness of an unknown visitor. "I'll take you in the elevator."

Up we shot to the third floor, where I feared that my conductor might insist on guiding me to the door of Mr. Emmett. Fortunately, however, someone rang for the lift and the porter shot down again, directing me to the right.

The instant he was out of sight I turned to the left, and, with the police key in my hand, I stood before the door of T. Paulling.

My blood leaped through my veins, and the hand that tried the key in the lock shook with the rush of it. I heard its pounding in my ears, and through the murmurous sound the question whispered, "What if the key won't fit? Down goes the whole theory. You'll have to confess yourself a fool to Roger Odell."

As I blundered at the lock in haste and fear that someone might pass, or that this might be one of T. Paulling's rare days at the flat, I was aghast at my late self-confidence. Face to face with the test, it seemed impossible that my-boast to Odell and Carr could succeed. I felt callow and stupid, altogether incompetent. The key seemed too large and the wrong shape, which meant that the mystery of the brothers' death was closed to me, like the door. A voice not far off made my nerves jump, and – the key slipped into the lock! From somewhere above or below came the sound of voices, but I could not be seen from the lift. Almost before I knew what I was doing or what had happened, I was on the other side of the door, in a dark and stuffy vestibule.

The sound of voices was suddenly stilled. It was as if with a single step I had won my way into another world. I drew a long breath of relief after the strain, for the silence and darkness said that the tenant was not at home, and I might hope to have the flat to myself.

I groped for an electric switch, touched it, and flooded the vestibule with light. It was small, with nothing to distinguish it from any other vestibule of any other well-furnished flat. Beyond led a narrow corridor which, when lit, showed me several doors. I opened the nearest, switched on another light, and found myself on the threshold of a moderate-sized sitting-room or study, with bookshelves ranged along one of the walls. The window was so heavily curtained that I had no fear of the sudden illumination being noticed from the street. The air was heavy and smelled of moth powder. The mahogany table in the centre of the room and the desk under the window were coated with thin films of dust, but everything was stiffly in order: no books lying about, no woman's work, no trace of cigarette ash, dropped glove, nor pile of newspapers with a tell-tale date.

I walked over to the desk and, pulling out the swivel chair, sat down. In the silver inkstand the ink had dried. In a pen-rack were two pens, one stub, the other an old-fashioned quill, both almost new, but faintly stained with ink. Neither, it struck me, could have been used more than once or twice. There were several small drawers; all were empty. No paper nor envelopes, no sealing-wax nor seal, not so much as an end of twine. But the blotting-pad – the only movable thing on the desk beside the inkstand and pen-rack – was more repaying. It also appeared to be nearly new. Just inside the soft green leather cover lay two sheets of plain, unmonogrammed grey-blue paper with two envelopes to match. I annexed one of the latter and made a mental note that, in the police dossier of the Callender-Graham case the empty envelope found in the pocket of the younger brother was said to be blue-grey in colour and of thick texture. No record had been kept concerning the colour of the envelope in Perry's pocket, as little importance had been attributed to it, until the coincidence of the second envelope was remarked later.

The blotting-pad was as new-looking as the pens. The two uppermost sheets were of unspotted white, but the middle pages had both been used, and traces were visible of two short notes having been pressed against the paper while the ink was still very wet. Apparently these documents had had neither heading nor signature, and consisted of a few lines only. On another page a longer letter began "Dearest," and had been signed with an initial. There was no mirror in the room in which to reverse these writings, and, carefully separating the used sheets from their unsoiled fellows, I folded and slipped them into an inner pocket. There was nothing else in the room which could help me, with the exception, perhaps, of the books; and most of these were in sets, bound in a uniform way. These had a book-plate and the monogram "M.L.," no doubt meaning Maurice Lowenstein. Of new novels or other publications there were none: an additional proof (if it had been needed after the clue of the dried ink and almost unused blotter) that the new tenants were seldom in the place.

Having deduced this fact, I then went through the remaining six rooms of the flat without any discoveries, and finally reached, in its due order, the problem I had left for the last. This was the

examination of the lock which the dead brothers' latchkeys had fitted. The work had to be done with the door open, and therefore I waited until the hour when most people lunch. It would look like burglarious business, what I had to do, and it was important not to be interrupted or arrested.

The hands of my watch were at one o'clock as mine were on the latch which, if I were right, could with a single click solve the Callender-Graham mystery. If I were wrong, not only were four out of my twenty-four hours wasted, but my theory fell to the ground and broke into pieces past mending.

I opened the door of the flat and made sure that, for the moment, no one was in the hall. Then, bending down with my back to possible passers-by, I whipped out a magnifying glass and pocket electric torch which I had bought on my way to the agent's.

During the next five minutes I had good cause to thank Heaven for the mechanical bent that had turned my mind to motors and aeroplanes.

The same evening, at a little after six, a "commuter's" train landed me at the station of a small Long Island town almost too far away from New York to be labelled suburban. Big automobiles and small runabouts were there to meet the tired business men who travelled many miles for the sake of salt breezes and the latest thing in Elizabethan houses. I was more tired than any business man; also, I had encountered as many setbacks as successes, but nobody and nothing came to welcome me. I was able, however, to get a place in an old-fashioned horse-drawn vehicle whose mission was to pick up chance arrivals. There were several of us, and as my rate of locomotion was slow, by the time I had hobbled off the platform the one seat left was beside the driver. I was not sorry, as the other men appeared to be strangers in Sandy Plain, and having said I would go to the hotel (for the sake of saying something), I asked my companion if he knew anybody named Paulling.

"There's two families of that name hereabouts," he replied.

"My Paullings," I hazarded, "are retiring people, don't make friends, and are away a good deal."

"Ah, they'd be the Paullings of Bayview Farm!" returned the driver. "There's no others answer that description around here that I ever heard of, and I've lived at Sandy Plain since before the commuters discovered it."

"Yes, I mean the Paullings of Bayview Farm," I caught him up.

"The farm's about a mile and a half past Roselawn Hotel," my seat mate went on. "I can take you there after I drop the other folks."

I thanked him and said he might come back for me if he cared to after I had dined, and inquired casually if the Paullings were staying at their farm just then.

The driver shook his head. He didn't know. Few persons did know much about the Paullings, who weren't old residents, but had rented Bayview Farm two or three years ago. Maybe the hotel folks might be able to tell me whether I was likely to find them.

They could not do so, I soon learned. Mr. Paulling was said to be an invalid, though he never called in the local doctor. He was often at home alone for weeks together, except for a man-servant, a foreigner as reserved as himself, whom he had brought with him to Sandy Plain. There was another servant sometimes – a woman – also a foreigner; but when the Paullings were both away a Mrs. Vandermans, a country dressmaker who lived in a cottage near by, looked after the house, going in occasionally to see that all was well.

I asked as many questions as I dared, but learned little; and as soon as dusk had begun to fall I started off in the nondescript vehicle which had returned for me. The driver spent most of the twenty minutes it took him to reach the farm in explaining that it wasn't really a farm except in name. Nothing was left of it but the house and two or three acres of orchard; all the rest had been sold off in lots by the owner before he let it to the Paullings. What "city folks" admired in it was beyond the knowledge of my companion, but when we arrived at the gate and saw the far-off house gleaming white behind a thick screen of ancient apple trees, I realised the attractions of the place, especially for such tenants as I believed the Paullings to be. The farm-house, with its wide clapboarding, its neat green shutters, and its almost classic "colonial" porch hung with roses, had the air of being on terms of long familiar

friendship with the old-fashioned garden and the great trees which almost hid it from its neighbours and the road. Its front windows, closed and shuttered now, would look out when open over sloping lawns and flowerbeds to distant blue glints of the sea; and altogether Bayview Farm seemed an ideal retreat for persons who could be sufficient to themselves and each other.

Those shuttered windows, however, hinted at disappointment for me. Not a light showed, behind one of them, and when I had rung the bell of the front door, and pounded vainly at the back, I had to make up my mind that the Paullings were either away or determined to be thought so. "Mrs. Vandermans 'll know all about 'em," my conductor comforted me. "She lives next door, a quarter of a mile farther on."

We drove the quarter mile, only to be struck by another blow. The one person at home in Mrs. Vandermans' cottage was that widowed woman's mother, very old, very deaf, half blind, knowing little about anything, and nothing at all about the tenants of Bayview Farm.

"My darter's gone to my son's in Buffalo," she quavered when I had screamed at her. "He's sick, but she'll be back to-morrow to look after me. She knows them Paullings. You come again to-morrow afternoon if you want to talk to her."

"You seem sure disappointed," remarked my companion, as he drove me and my crutches back to Roselawn Hotel.

"I am," I admitted; but the words were as inadequate as most words are. I was bowled over, knocked out, or so I told myself in my first depression. Nothing was of any use to me after to-morrow morning at nine o'clock.

On my way back to New York in a slow train I gloomily thought over the situation. Certain startling yet not unexpected discoveries made early in the day had elated me too soon. I had collected evidence, but only circumstantial evidence. I had no absolute proof to give Roger Odell, and nothing less would suffice. I had counted on getting hold of proof at Sandy Plain, from which place on Long Island (I had learned from the agent) cheques came regularly each quarter to pay the rent of the flat in the Alhambra – cheques sometimes signed T. Paulling, sometimes M. Paulling. One had arrived only a few days before with the former signature, so I had reason to hope that T. Paulling might be unearthed at Sandy Plain.

I could, I told myself, write to Roger Odell and ask for a delay, but that would kill such feeble faith in me as I had forcibly implanted in him. He would think me a fraud, and believe that I had been trying to gain time in order to spring some trick upon him. Besides, the Paullings might come to New York, if they were not already there, and discover that some person unknown was on their track and had been tearing sheets out of their blotting-book. No, I must keep my appointment with Roger Odell or face the prospect of complete failure. But how to convince him of what I was myself convinced, with the disjointed bits of evidence in my possession? Just as my train came to a stop with a slight jolt in the Pennsylvania station, I saw as in an electric flash a way of doing it. Perhaps it was the jolt that gave the flash.

I could not wait to get back to my hotel. I inquired of a porter where I could get a messenger boy. He showed me. I begged two sheets of paper and two envelopes. They were pushed under my hand. I scratched off six lines to Roger Odell: "Don't think when you get this I'm going to ask you to put off our interview. On the contrary, I ask you to advance it. Please be in Julius Felborn's private office at a quarter to nine instead of nine. This is vitally important. If he has a large safe in his office, get the key or combination so that you can open it. Small safe no use. – Yours hopefully, J.H."

I finished this scrawl and sent it away by messenger to the club where Odell had said I might 'phone, if necessary, up to one o'clock that night. It was only just eleven.

The second letter was longer and more troublesome to compose. It was to Grace Callender, and I trusted for its effect to the kindness she professed for me. Her aunt also had been friendly and had shown interest in the prospects of Carr Price's play. Neither, however, dreamed that success depended in any way upon Roger Odell.

"DEAR MISS GRACE," I wrote, – "You will think the request I'm going to make of you and Miss Callender a very strange one, but you promised that if you could help me you would do so. Well, extraordinary as it may seem, *you can make my fortune if you* will both come to the Felborn Theatre at the unearthly hour of nine to-morrow morning, and ask to be shown into Mr. Felborn's private office. I shall be there, waiting and hoping to see you two ladies arrive promptly, as more than I can tell depends upon that. You happened to mention in my presence something about dining out to-night and returning rather late, so I feel there is a chance of your getting this and sending me a line by the messenger to the Belmont. He will wait for you, and I will wait for him. – Yours sincerely, JOHN HASLE."

An hour later the answer came to my hotel. "Of course we'll both be there on the stroke of nine. Depend upon us," Grace Callender replied.

"Thank Heaven!" I mumbled. Yet I was heavy with a sense of guilt. If it had been only for punishment, or only for my own advancement, I could not have done what I planned to do. No man could. But Grace Callender's happiness was at stake.

Roger Odell was five minutes before his time in Felborn's office next day, yet he found me on the spot. I saw by his face that his well-seasoned nerves were keyed not far from breaking-point. But he kept his rôle of the superior, indifferent man of the world. He hoped I didn't see the strain he was under, and I hoped that I hid my feelings from him. Each probably succeeded as well as the other.

"Well, what have you got to tell me?" he asked, when we were alone together in Julius Felborn's decorative private office.

"I've nothing to tell you," I said. "Nevertheless, I believe you will hear something if you've done as I suggested. Have you got the key or the combination of that big safe in the wall behind the desk?"

"I have the combination for to-day. Felborn was at the club last night when your letter came, and I asked him for it. There aren't many favours he wouldn't grant me. But what has Julius Felborn's safe to do with the case?"

"Please open it. We haven't much time to spare." I looked at my watch. In a quarter of an hour the Misses Callender ought to be announced. If they failed me after all – but I would not think of that "if."

Odell manipulated the combination, and the door of the safe swung open. I saw that there was room for a man inside, and explained to Odell that he must be the man. "It's absolutely necessary for you to hear for yourself," I insisted, "all that's said in this room during the next half-hour. If you didn't hear with your own ears, you'd never believe, and nothing would be said if you were known to be listening."

"You want me to eavesdrop!" he exclaimed, ready to be scornful.

"Yes," I admitted. "If you can call it eavesdropping to learn how and by whom Perry and Ned Callender Graham were done to death."

Without another word Odell stepped into the safe.

"With the door ajar you can hear every word spoken in this room," I said. "In a few minutes you'll recognise two voices – those of Miss Grace and Miss Marian Callender. I tell you this that you mayn't be surprised into making an indiscreet appearance. Remember your future's at stake and that of the girl you love. All you have to do is to keep still until the moment when the mystery is cleared up."

"How can it be cleared up by either of those two?" Odell challenged me, anger smouldering in his eyes.

"It will be cleared up while they are in the room," I amended. "Further than that I can't satisfy you now. By Jove! there goes the 'phone! I expect it's to say they're here, though it's five minutes before the time."

My guess was correct, and my answer through the telephone, "Let them come up at once," passed on the news to the man behind the door of the safe. I went out to the head of the stairs to meet

my visitors, and led them into Felborn's office. The two were charmingly though very simply dressed, far more *les grandes dames* in appearance than they had been on shipboard, and their first words were of amused admiration for the Oriental richness of Julius Felborn's office. It was evident that, whatever their secret preoccupations were, both wished to seem interested in their bizarre surroundings and in my success which they had come to promote. I made them sit down in the two most luxurious chairs the room possessed. Thus seated, their backs were toward the safe, and the light filtered becomingly through thin gold silk curtains on to their faces. I placed myself opposite, on an oak bench under the window. If the door of the safe moved, I could see it over the fashionable small hats of the ladies with their haloes of delicate, spiky plumes.

When I got past generalities I blurted out, "I've a confession to make. I won't excuse myself or explain, because when I've finished – though not *till* then – you'll understand. On shipboard I talked of my book, and told you it was called *The Key*, but I didn't tell you that the title and one incident in the story were suggested – forgive my startling you – by the murder of Perry and Ned Callender-Graham."

"Oh!" exclaimed Grace, half rising, "you asked us here to tell us *that*? It doesn't seem *like* you, Lord John."

"Give me the benefit of the doubt and hear me to the end," I pleaded, grieved by her stricken pallor and look of reproach as she sank into the chair again. Marian was pale also, even paler than usual, but her look was of anger, therefore easier to meet.

"You must not use the word 'murder,'" she commented, a quiver in her voice. "Your doing so shows that you've very little knowledge of the case."

"I beg your pardon," I said. "On the contrary, it precisely shows that I have knowledge of it. The brothers were murdered by the same hand, in the same way, and for the same motive."

Marian rose up, very straight and tall. "It would be more suitable to give your theories to the police than to us. I cannot stay and let my niece stay to listen to them."

"I shall have to give not my theories, but my knowledge, my proof, to the police," I warned her; "only it's better for everyone concerned for you to hear me first."

"You've brought us to this place under false pretences!" Marian cried, throwing her arm around the girl's waist. "It's not the act of a gentleman. Come, Grace, we'll go at once."

"For your own sakes you must not go," I insisted. "If you stay and hear me through some way may be found to save the family name from public dishonour."

"Dearest, we *must* stay," Grace said steadily, when the older woman urged her toward the door.

Marian looked at her niece with the compelling look of a Fate, but the girl stood firm. Gently she freed herself from the clinging arm and sat, or rather fell, into the big cushioned chair once more. Her aunt hesitated for a moment, I could see, whether or not to use force, but decided against the attempt. With a level gaze of scorn for me, she took her stand beside Grace's chair, her hand clenched on the carving of its high back. I realised the tension of her grip, because her grey suede glove split open across a curious ring she always wore on the third finger of her left hand, showing its great cabochon emerald. I had often noticed this stone, and thought it like the eye of a snake.

"Say what you wish to say quickly, then, and get it over," she sharply ordered.

"The double murder was suggested and carried out by a man, but he had accomplices, and his principal accomplice was a woman." (Miss Callender's command excused my brusqueness.) "They had the same interest to serve; purely a financial interest. It was vital to both that Miss Grace Callender shouldn't marry – unless she married a person under their influence who would share with them. They preferred some such scheme, but it fell through. That drove them to extremes. Now I'll tell you something about this couple – this congenial husband and wife. Afterwards I'll give you details of their plot. They were married secretly years ago, and lived together when they could, abroad and on this side. The man was rich once, but lost his money – and the capacity to make it – by losing his health. Life wasn't worth living to either unless they could have the luxury they'd been used to. They took an

old house on Long Island – Bay View Farm, near Sandy Plain. The man lived there for several months each year under the name of Paulling. His wife paid him flying visits. She provided the money, and had a banking account in the town. At Bay View Farm, when Miss Grace first engaged herself to her cousin, the two thought out their plot to suppress Perry. It took them some time to elaborate it, but a week before the wedding they were ready. The woman, still under the name of Paulling, engaged a furnished flat in New York, near Riverside Drive. She took this flat for a term of years, realising it might be needed more than once as time went on. In this apartment, in a house called the Alhambra, she sat down one day at her desk and wrote an anonymous letter to Perry Callender-Graham. She asked him to call at that address at midnight the next night and learn a secret concerning his cousin Grace's birth, which would change everything for them both if it came out. Her handwriting was disguised by the use of a quill pen, which used so much ink that most of the words left traces on the blotter. The envelope and paper were blue-grey, and thick. Inside was enclosed a small latchkey and a key to the front door of the house, for the hall-porter would be in bed by the time she named. Perry Callender-Graham could not resist the temptation to keep the appointment. He went to the Alhambra, let himself in, was seen by nobody, walked up to the third floor, and fitted the latchkey into the door on the right side of the hall. As he tried to turn the key something sharp as a needle pricked his forefinger. He was startled, yet he went on trying to unlock the door. The key turned all the way round, but the door stuck. It seemed to be bolted on the inside. He began to feel slightly faint, but he was so angry at being cheated that he pushed the electric bell, determined to get in at any cost. No answer came, however, and at last he gave up in despair. Some vague idea of warning the police and of going to see a doctor came to his mind, but he was already a dying man. Before he got as far as the street corner he fell dead. Exactly the same thing happened in the case of Ned, when every effort to frighten him into breaking his engagement had failed, when his love for his brother, his sensitive conscience and his superstitious fear had all been played upon in vain. Even the same formula was used for the anonymous letter, with a slightly different wording. That was safe enough, for if Perry had mentioned the first letter to Ned he would have told the police at the time of Perry's death; it would have been a valuable clue. It wasn't necessary to make new keys, for the two originals had been returned – 'to the family.' They were sent anonymously to Ned as they'd been sent to Perry, and he also yielded to curiosity.

"The same ingenious lock, made for the plotters by a skilled mechanic (whom they had reason to trust), shot out its poisoned needle at the first turn of the latchkey in his hand. As for the poison, it, too, was supplied by a trusted one – one who had something to gain and vengeance to take as well. As the mechanic specialised in lock-making, so did the chemist employed specialise in poisons. The one he chose out of his repertory had two virtues: first, it began to stop the heart's action only after coursing through the blood for twenty or thirty minutes. Anything quicker might have struck down the victim in front of the door and put the police on the right track. Secondly, the poison's effect on the heart couldn't be detected by post-mortem, but presented all the symptoms of status lymphaticus, enlargement of the thyroid gland and so on. As for the lock, the second turn of the key caused the needle to retire; and for a further safeguard, an almost invisible stop, resembling a small screw-head, could hold the needle permanently in place inside the lock, so that the door might be opened by a latchkey and the existence of a secret mechanism never suspected, except by one who knew how to find it. The mechanism is in working order still, ready for use again, in case Miss Grace Callender should change her mind and decide to marry."

"Who is it you are accusing, Lord John?" Grace stammered in a choked voice.

I glanced from the drooping figure in the chair to the tall figure standing erect and straight beside it. Marian Callender no longer grasped the oak carving. The hand in the ragged glove was crushed against her mouth, her lips on the emerald which had pressed through the torn suede. The woman gave no other sign of emotion than this strange gesture.

"I accuse Paolo Tostini, with his father, his brother, and his wife – known still as Miss Marian Callender – as his accomplices," I said.

Grace uttered a cry sharp with horror, yet there was neither amazement nor unbelief in the pale face which she screened with two trembling hands. The story I had told – hastily yet circumstantially – had prepared her for the end. But the keen anguish in the girl's voice snapped the last strand of Odell's patience. He threw the iron door of the safe wide open, and in two bounds was at Grace's side. I saw her hold out both arms to him. I saw him snatch her up against his breast; and then I turned to Marian Tostini, who had not moved from her place beside the big carved chair. She was staring straight at me, her dark eyes wide and unwinking as the eyes of a person hypnotised. The hand in the torn glove had dropped from her lips again and clasped the carving. She seemed to lean upon the chair, as if for support. Her fingers clutched the wood. The grey suede glove was slit now all across its back, but the snake-eye of the emerald had ceased to shoot out its green glint. The stone hung from its setting like the hinged lid of a box, showing a very small gold-lined aperture.

"There need be – no stain on the name of – Callender – if you are as clever in hiding the secret as you've been – in finding it out," she said, with a catch in her breath between words.

"What have you done?" I asked.

"You know – don't you – you who know everything? The ring was my Italian mother's – and her mother's before her. Who can tell how long it has been in our family? It was empty when it came to me, but –"

"But you put into it some of the same poison Antonio Tostini made up for Perry and Ned Callender-Graham?"

"Do you think you can force me to accuse the Tostinis? You shall not drag a word from me. When Paolo hears I am dead he will die also, before you can find him. Antonio you cannot touch. He is in Italy. Thank Heaven their father is dead! And now I think – I had better go home or – or to my doctor's. Grace and Roger Odell – wouldn't like me to die here. It might – start scandal. I am feeling – a little faint."

"Aunt Marian!" Grace sobbed. But Odell held the girl in his arms and would not let her go.

"Take Miss Callender away, Odell – quickly," I advised. "I'll attend to – Mrs. Tostini."

Like one who walks in a dream I shut the safe on my way to the desk, and telephoned downstairs for a taxi. "One of the ladies who called has been taken ill, I must drive her to a doctor's," I explained.

"You think of everything," Marian Tostini said. She laughed softly. "My heart has always been weak."

"Taxi is here, sir," a voice called up through the 'phone.

"Very well. We'll be down at once. Tell Mr. Felborn his office is free. Now, Miss Callender – I mean Mrs. Tostini, let me help you."

"I'm afraid I must say 'Yes,'" she smiled. "My heart – beats so slowly. Tell me, Lord John, as we go – how did you find out – the secret? It seemed so – well hid!"

"I guessed part, and bluffed the rest. I had to," I confessed, half guiltily. The woman could make no ill use of such a confession now. "I found the flat – and the lock – and two sheets of blotting paper. I made out the anonymous letters, and one to your husband. I showed the snapshot I got of you on shipboard to the house-agent. But he couldn't be sure – said Mrs. Paulling wore a veil when he saw her. The name 'Paulling' was a clue too – enough like Paolo to be suggestive. Some criminals love to twist their own names about. And Paolo Tostini is a criminal. He has brought you to this –"

"If there is guilt, I am the guilty one," she said calmly. "So sorry. I have to lean on you a little. Ah! it's good to be downstairs – and in the air. My doctor's name is Ryland. His address is The Montague, East 44th Street. It's so near – we can get there, I think, in time. You'll tell him – nothing?"

"I'll tell him nothing," I echoed.

As I put her into the taxi I noticed that she had snapped the emerald back in its setting, and the green snake-eye glinted up harmlessly once more from the limp hand in the torn glove.

EPISODE II

THE GREY SISTERHOOD

LORD JOHN'S FIRST ADVENTURE IN LOVE

When applause forced the curtain up again and again on the last scene of our play – Carr Price's and mine – I wasn't looking at the stage, but at a girl in the opposite box. The box was Roger Odell's, and I was sure that the girl must be his adopted sister Madeleine. But because of the insult she had suffered through my brother, I might not visit the box uninvited.

If Grace had been with her husband and sister-in-law there might have been hope. But the wedding had been private, because of Miss Marian Callender's death, and it was not to be supposed that the bride would show herself at the theatre, even as a proof of gratitude to me. I was in Governor Estabrook's box, with him and Carr Price, and the girl whose engagement to Price depended, perhaps, on the success of this night; but I thanked my lucky stars – that I was invited by Grace to dine after the theatre, *en famille*.

"Surely I shall meet *Her*," I tried to persuade myself. "She's here with Roger, to show that she bears no grudge against my family. She can't stop away from supper when I'm to be the only guest."

This hopeful thought repeated itself in my head whenever I was thwarted by finding my eyes avoided by the girl – the wonderful girl who, with her lily face, and parted blonde hair rippling gold-and-silver lights was like a shining saint. She was so like a saint that I would have staked my life on her being one, which made me more furious than ever with Haslemere. I felt if she would give me one of her white roses lying on the red velvet of the box-rail, it would be worth more to me than the Victoria Cross I was wearing for the first time that night.

"Author! Author!" everybody shouted, as the curtain went down for the tenth time. I heard the call in a half-dream, for at that instant Madeleine Odell dropped the opera-glasses through which she had been taking a look at the audience. They fell on the boxrail among the roses, and pushed off one white beauty, which landed on the stage close to the footlights; but I had no time to yearn for that rose just then. I had thought only for the girl, who shrank back in her chair as if to hide herself. Startled, Roger bent down with a solicitous question. Thus he screened his sister from me, as a black cloud may screen the moon; and my impulse was to search the house for the cause of her alarm.

The audience as a whole had not yet risen, therefore the few on their feet were conspicuous, and I picked out the man who had seemingly annoyed Miss Odell. Just a glimpse I had of his face before he turned, to push past the people in his row of orchestra chairs. It was a strange face.

"That man has some connection with the mystery of Madeleine Odell's life!" was my thought. I knew I had to follow the fellow, and there wasn't a second to lose, because, though he was perhaps twice my age, I had to get about with a crutch and he had the full use of his long, active legs. Before I'd stopped to define my impulse I was on my feet, stammering excuses to Governor Estabrook and his daughter.

"You mustn't leave now. We're wanted on the stage!" Carr Price caught my arm; but he muttered, "For God's sake, don't stop me," told him that here was some matter of life or death for me, and he stood back. After that, I must have made the cripple's record; and I reached the street in time to see the quarry step into a private car. I knew him by the back of his head, prominent behind the ears and thatched with sleek pepper-and-salt hair; but as he bent forward to shut the door, he stared for half a second straight into my eyes. His were black and long – Egyptian eyes, and the whole personality of the man suggested Egypt; not the Arabianised Egypt of to-day, but rather the Egypt which left

its tall, broad-shouldered types sculptured on walls of tombs. He made me think of a magnificent mummy "come alive," and dressed in modern evening clothes.

After the meeting of our eyes the man turned to his chauffeur for some word, and the theatre lights seemed to point a pale finger at a scar on the brown throat. The length of that thin throat was another Egyptian characteristic, and though the collar was higher than fashion decreed, it wasn't high enough to cover the mark when his neck stretched forward. It was the queerest scar I ever saw, the exact size and shape of a human eye. And on the white neck of Miss Odell I had noticed a black opal with a crystal centre, representing the eye of the Egyptian god Horus. This fetish was the only jewel she wore; and if I hadn't already been sure of some association between her and the man now escaping, that eye would have convinced me.

Roger Odell had forced on me the gift of an automobile, and Price and I had motored Governor Estabrook and his daughter to the theatre; but as it was waiting in the procession which had just begun to move, my only hope of following the man was to hail a passing taxi. I was about to try my luck, when a hand jerked me back.

"Good heavens, Lord John, are you going to leave us in the lurch? The audience are yelling their heads off!" panted Julius Felborn.

I would have thrown him off, but the second's delay was a second too much. The dark car was spinning away with its secret – which might be a double secret, for I caught a glimpse of a grey-clad woman. Somebody grabbed the taxi I'd hoped to hail, and it was too late to do anything except note the licence number. Since my war-experience and wounds, I've lost – temporarily, the doctors say – my memory for figures. It is one form which nerve-shock takes; and fearing to forget, I made a note with a pocket pencil, on my shirt cuff.

"A man like that is no needle in a haystack," I consoled myself. "I can't fail to lay my hand on him if he's wanted." Then, making the best of the business, I allowed Felborn to work his will. He dragged me back into the theatre, and on to the stage, where I bowed and smirked at the side of Price. Queer, how indifferent the vision of a girl made me to this vision of success! But I'd never fallen in love at first sight before, or, indeed, fallen in love at all in a way worth the name.

The vision was still there when I looked up, though it would soon be gone, for Roger had put on his sister's cloak, and both were standing. The girl shrank into the background; but as I raised my eyes perhaps the S.O.S. call my heart sent out compelled some faint answer. Miss Odell leaned forward and it seemed that she threw me a glance with something faintly resembling interest in it. Perhaps it was only curiosity; or maybe she was looking for a rosebud she had lost. I couldn't let the flower perish, or be collected by some Philistine; so I bent and picked it up. I trusted that she would not be angry, but when I raised my head the vision and the vision's brother had both disappeared.

This was the happiest night of Carr Price's life, because Governor Estabrook had journeyed from his own state with his daughter to see the play. If he could, he would have kept me to supper in order that I might talk to the Governor while he talked to the fascinating Nora; but I had yet to learn whether there was a chance of its being the happiest night of my life, and I flashed off in my new car at the earliest moment, to find out. Down plumped my heart, however, when only Grace and Roger appeared to welcome me.

As soon as I dared, I invented an excuse to ask for the absent one; or rather, I blurted out what was in my mind. "I hoped," I stammered, "to see Miss Odell again – if only for a few minutes. I felt sure it was she at the theatre. And I wanted to beg – that she'd let me try to atone – to compel Haslemere to atone."

"Oh, she's sorry not to meet you," Roger broke in, "But she's not strong. And she – er – was rather upset in the theatre. She doesn't go out often; and she never takes late supper. She's probably in bed by this time – "

"Oh, Roger, do let me tell him the truth!" exclaimed Grace. "Think how he helped us in our trouble? What if he could help Maida? You must admit he has a mind for mysteries, and if he could put an end to the persecution which has spoiled her life, Maida wouldn't join the Sisterhood."

"She's going to join a Sisterhood?" I broke out, feeling as if a hand had squeezed my heart like a bath sponge.

"Yes," said Grace, glancing at Roger. "You see, Rod, it slipped out!"

"I suppose there's no harm done," he answered. "Only, it's for Maida to talk of her affairs. Lord John's a stranger to her."

"But," I said on a strong impulse, "I've taken the liberty of falling in love with Miss Odell, without being introduced, and in spite of the fact that she has a right to despise my family. This is the most serious thing that's ever happened to me. And if she goes into a Sisterhood the world won't be worth living in. Give me a chance to meet her – to offer myself –"

"Great Scott!" cried Roger. "And the British are called a slow race!"

"Offer myself as her knight," I finished. "Do you think I'd ask anything in return? Why, after what Haslemere did –"

"Oh, but who knows what might happen some day?" suggested Grace. "Rod, I *shall* make Maida come down."

Without waiting to argue, she ran out of the room. She was gone some time, and the secret being out, Roger talked with comparative freedom of his adopted sister's intentions. The Sisterhood she meant to join was not a religious order, but a club of women banded together for good work. At one time the Grey Sisters, as they called themselves, had been a thriving organisation for the rescue of unfortunate girls, the reformation of criminals, and the saving of neglected children; but the Head Sister – there was no "Mother Superior" – had died without a will, a promised fortune had gone back to her family, and had not a lady of wealth and force of character volunteered for the empty place, the Sisterhood might have had to disband. The new Head Sister had persuaded Madeleine Odell to join the depleted ranks. They had met in charity work, which was Maida's one pleasure, and the mystery surrounding the woman had fired the interest of the girl whose youth was wrecked by mystery. The New York home of the Sisterhood had been given up, owing to lack of money, but the new Head Sister, whose life and fortune seemed dedicated to good works, had taken and restored an old place on Long Island. More recruits were expected, and various charities were on the programme.

"It's a gloomy den," said Roger, "and stood empty for years because of some ghost story. But this friend of Maida's has a mind above ghosts. They're going to teach women thieves to make jam, and child pickpockets to be angels! No arguments of mine have had the slightest effect on Maida since she met this foreign woman.

"The child has vowed herself to live with the Sisterhood – I believe it consists at present of no more than five or six women – for a year. After that she can be free if she chooses. But I know her so well that my fear is, she *won't* choose. I'm afraid after all she's suffered she won't care to come back to the world. And the sword hanging over our heads is the knowledge that Maida's pledged herself to go whenever the summons comes."

If Roger's talk had been on any subject less engrossing, I should not have heard a word. As it was, I drank in every one. Yet the soul seemed to have walked out of my body and followed Grace upstairs. It was as if I could see her pleading with my white-rose vision of the theatre; but I was far enough from picturing the scene as it really was. Afterward, when I heard Maida Odell's story, I knew what strange surroundings she had given herself in the rich commonplaceness of that old home which had been hers since childhood.

"The shrine" adjoined her bedroom, I know now, and for some girls would have been a boudoir. But the objects it contained put it out of the "boudoir" category. There were two life-size portraits, facing each other on the undecorated walls, on either side the only door; there was also a portrait of Roger's father; and opposite the door stood on end a magnificent painted mummy-case such as a

museum would give a small fortune to possess. Even without its contents the case would have been of value; but behind a thick pane of glass showed the face of a perfectly preserved mummy, a middle-aged man no doubt of high birth, and of a dynasty when Greek influence had scarcely begun to degrade the methods of embalming. When I saw these treasures of Madeleine's and learned what they meant in her life, I said that no frame could have been more inappropriate for such a girl than such a "shrine."

Grace told me afterwards that she induced Maida to put on her dress again and come downstairs, only by assuring her that "Poor Lord John was dreadfully hurt." That plea touched the soft heart; and my fifteen minutes of suspense ended with a vision of the White Rose Girl coming down the Odells' rather spectacular stairway, with Grace's arm girdling her waist.

We were introduced, and Maida gave me a kind, sweet smile which was the most beautiful present I ever had. How it made me burn to know what her smile of love might be!

Supper was announced; indeed, it had been waiting, and we went into the oak-panelled dining-room where the girl was more than ever like a white flower seen in rosy dusk. At the table I could hardly take my eyes off her face. She was more lovely and lovable than I had thought in the theatre. Each minute that passed, while I talked of indifferent things, I spent in mentally "working up" to the Great Request – that she would show her forgiveness by accepting my help. At last, after butler and footman had been sent out, and words came to my lips – some sort of inspiration they seemed – a servant returned with a letter.

"For Miss Odell, by district messenger," he announced, offering the envelope on a silver tray.

"Is there an answer?" Maida asked, her face flushing.

The footman replied that the messenger had gone; and with fingers that trembled, Maida opened the envelope. Quite a common envelope it was, such as one might buy at a cheap stationer's; and the handwriting, which was in pencil, looked hurried. "I have to go to-morrow morning," the girl said simply. She spoke to Roger, but for an instant her eyes turned to me.

"Oh, darling," cried Grace, springing up as Maida rose, "it's not fair – such short notice! Send word that you can't."

"The only thing I *can't* do, dear, is to break my promise," the girl cut in. "I must go, and she asks me to travel alone to Salthaven. That's the nearest station for the Sisterhood House. She gives me the time of the train I'm to take – seven o'clock. After all, why isn't one day the same as another? Only, it's hard to say good-bye."

To leave my love thus, and without even the chance to win her, which instinct whispered I might have had, seemed unbearable. But there was no other course. She gave me her hand. "Could it be that she was sorry?" I dared ask myself. But before I had time to realise how irrevocable it all was, I stood outside Odell's closed door. I stared at the barrier for a minute before getting into my car, and tried to make the oak panels transparent. "I won't let her go out of my life like this," I said. "I'll fight."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.