

Le Queux William

The Place of Dragons: A Mystery



William Le Queux

The Place of Dragons: A Mystery

«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

The Place of Dragons: A Mystery / W. Le Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	18
CHAPTER V	22
CHAPTER VI	26
CHAPTER VII	30
CHAPTER VIII	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	37

Le Queux William

The Place of Dragons: A Mystery

CHAPTER I

PRESENTS A PROBLEM

"Curious affair, isn't it?"

"Very."

"Now, you're a bit of a mystery-monger, Vidal. What's your theory – eh?"

"I haven't one," I replied with a smile.

"I knew the old boy quite well by sight. Didn't you?" asked my friend, Major Keppell, as we stood gossiping together in the doorway of the *Hôtel de Paris*, high up on the cliff opposite the pier at Cromer.

"Perfectly. His habit was to go down the slope yonder, to the pier each morning at ten, and to remain there till eleven," I said. "I used to watch him every morning. He went as regularly as the clock, wet or fine."

"A bit eccentric, I thought," remarked the Major, standing astride in his rough golfing clothes, and puffing at his briar pipe. "Quite a character for a novel – eh?" and he laughed. "You'll do a book about this strange affair – what?"

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled, as I replied: "Not very likely, I think. Yet the circumstances are, to say the least, extremely curious."

"They are, from all I hear," said my friend. Then, glancing at his wristlet watch, he exclaimed: "By Jove! – nearly seven! I must get in and dress for dinner. See you later."

With this he passed through the swing-doors of the hotel, leaving me standing upon the short sweep of gravel gazing out upon the summer sea, golden in the glorious June sunset.

The Major had spoken the truth. A discovery had been made in Cromer that morning which possessed many remarkable features, and to me, an investigator of crime, it presented an extremely interesting problem – one such as I, Herbert Vidal, had never before heard of.

Briefly related, the facts were as follows. Early in February – four months before – there had arrived in Cromer a queer, wizened, little old man named Vernon Gregory. He was accompanied by his nephew, a rather dandified, overdressed young fellow of twenty-three, named Edward Craig.

Strangers are very few in Cromer in winter, and therefore Mrs. Dean, landlady of Beacon House, on the West Cliff, a few doors west of the *Hôtel de Paris*, where the asphalted footpath runs along the top of the cliff, was very glad to let the new-comers the first-floor front sitting-room with two bedrooms above.

In winter and spring, Cromer, high and bleak, and swept by the wild, howling winds from the grey North Sea, its beach white with the spume of storm, is practically deserted. The hotels, with the exception of the *Paris*, are closed, the boarding-houses are mostly shut, and the landladies who let apartments wait weeks and weeks in vain for the arrival of a chance visitor. In August, however, the place overflows with visitors, all of the best class, and for six weeks each year Cromer becomes one of the gayest little towns on the breezy East Coast.

So, all through the spring, with its grey, wet days, when the spindrift swept in a haze across the promenade, old Mr. Gregory was a familiar figure taking his daily walk, no matter how inclement the weather.

In appearance he was unusual, and seedy. His bony face was long, thin, and grey; a countenance that was broad at the brow and narrowed to a pointed chin. He had a longish white beard, yet his

deep-set eyes with their big bushy brows were so dark and piercing that the fire of youth seemed still to burn within them. He was of medium height, rather round-shouldered, and walked with a decided limp, aided by a stout ash stick. Invariably he wore an old, dark grey, mackintosh cape, very greasy at the collar; black trousers, old and baggy; boots very down at heel; and on his mass of long white hair a broad-brimmed felt hat, which gave him the appearance of a musician, or an artist.

Sometimes, on rare occasions, his well-dressed nephew walked with him – but very seldom were they together.

Craig was a tall, well-set-up young fellow, who generally wore a drab golf-suit, smoked cigarettes eternally, and frequently played billiards at the *Red Lion*. He was also a golfer and well known on the links for the excellence of his play.

Between uncle and nephew there was nothing in common. Craig had dropped a hint that he was down there with his relative "just to look after the old boy." He undoubtedly preferred London life, and it was stated that a few years before he had succeeded to a large estate somewhere on the Welsh border.

The residents of Cromer are as inquisitive as those of most small towns. Therefore, it was not very long after the arrival of this curious couple, that everybody knew that old Mr. Gregory was concealing the fact that he was head of the famous Sheffield armour-plate making firm, Messrs. Gregory and Thorpe, though he now took but little part in the active work of the world-famed house that rolled plates for Britain's mighty "Dreadnoughts."

Cromer, on learning his identity, at once regarded old Gregory's queer figure with due reverence. His parsimonious ways, the clockwork regularity with which he took his morning walk, bought his daily paper at Munday's Library, and took his afternoon stroll up past the coast-guard station, or towards the links, or along the Overstrand or Sheringham roads, were looked upon as the eccentricities of an immensely wealthy man.

In rich men the public tolerate idiosyncrasies, that in poorer persons are declared to betoken either lunacy, or that vague excuse for the contravention of the conventionalities known as "the artistic temperament." Many men have actually earned reputations, and even popularity, by the sheer force of cultivated eccentricities. With professional men eccentricity is one of the pegs on which their astute press-agents can always hang a paragraph.

In the case of Mr. Vernon Gregory, as he limped by, the good shop-keeping public of Cromer looked after him with benevolent glances. He was the great steel magnate who ate frugally, who grumbled loudly at Mrs. Dean if his weekly bill exceeded that of the City clerk and his wife who had occupied the same rooms for a fortnight in the previous July. He was pointed at with admiration as the man of millions who eked out every scuttleful of coal as though it were gold.

Undoubtedly Mr. Gregory was a person of many eccentricities. From his secretary in Sheffield he daily received a bulky package of correspondence, and this, each morning, was attended to by his nephew. Yet the old man always made a point of posting all the letters with his own hand, putting them into the box at the post-office opposite the church.

Sometimes, but only at rare intervals – because, as he declared, "it was so very costly" – Mr. Gregory hired an open motor-car from Miller's garage. On such occasions, Craig, who was a practised motorist, would drive, and the pair would go on long day excursions towards Yarmouth, or Hunstanton, or inland to Holt or Norwich. At such times the old man would don many wraps, and a big blue muffler, and wear an unsightly pair of goggles.

Again, the old fellow preferred to do much of his shopping himself, and it was no uncommon sight to see him in the street carrying home two-pennyworth of cream in a little jug. Hence the good people of Cromer grew to regard their out-of-season visitor as a harmless, but philanthropic old buffer, for his hand was in his pocket for every local charity. His amusements were as frugal as his housekeeping. During the spring his only recreation was a visit to the cinema at the Town Hall

twice a week. When, however, the orchestral concerts commenced on the pier, he became a constant attendant at them.

So small is Cromer, with its narrow streets near the sea, that in the off-season strangers are constantly running into each other. Hence, I frequently met old Gregory, and on such occasions we chatted about the weather, or upon local topics. His voice was strangely high-pitched, thin, but not unmusical. Indeed, he was a great lover of music, as was afterwards shown by his constant attendance at the pier concerts.

His nephew, Craig, was what the people of Cromer, in vulgar parlance, dubbed a "nut." He was always immaculately dressed, wore loud socks, seemed to possess a dozen styles of hats, and was never seen without perfectly clean wash-leather gloves. He laughed loudly, talked loudly, displayed money freely and put on patronizing airs which filled those who met him with an instinctive dislike.

I first made his acquaintance in April in the cosy bar of the *Albion*, where, after a long walk one morning, I went to quench my thirst. Craig was laughing with the barmaid and gingerly lighting a cigarette. Having passed me by many times, he now addressed a casual remark to me, to which I politely responded, and we got into conversation. But, somehow, his speech jarred upon me, and, like his personal appearance, struck an unpleasant note, for his white shoes and pale blue socks, his light green Tyrolese hat, and his suit of check tweeds distinctly marked him as being more of a cad than a gentleman.

I remarked that I had walked to Overstrand, whereupon he asked —

"Did you chance to meet my uncle? He's gone out that way, somewhere."

I replied in the negative.

"Wonderful old boy, you know," he went on. "Walks me clean right out! But oh! such a dreadful old bore! Always talking about what he did in the seventies, and how much better life was then than now. I don't believe it. Do you?"

"I hardly know," was my reply. "I wasn't old enough then to appreciate life."

"Neither was I," he responded. "But really, these eccentric old people ought all to be put in an asylum. You don't know what I have to put up with. I tell you, it's a terrible self-sacrifice to be down in this confounded hole, instead of being on the Riviera in decent sunny weather, and in decent society."

"Your uncle is always extremely pleasant to me when I meet him," I said.

"Ah, yes, but you don't know him, my dear sir," said his nephew. "He's the very Old Nick himself sometimes, and his eccentricities border upon insanity. Why, only last night, before he went to bed, he put on his bed-gown, cut two wings out of brown paper, pinned them on his back, and fancied himself the Archangel Gabriel. Last week he didn't speak to me for two days because I bought a box of sardines. He declares they are luxuries and he can't afford them — he, with an income of forty thousand a year!"

"Rich men are often rather niggardly," I remarked.

"Oh, yes. But with Uncle Vernon it's become a craze. He shivers with cold at night but won't have a fire in his bedroom because, he says, coals are so dear."

I confess I did not like this young fellow. Why should he reveal all his private grievances to me, a perfect stranger?

"Why did your uncle come to Cromer?" I asked. "This place is hardly a winter resort, except for a few golfers."

"Oh, because when he was in Egypt last winter, some fool of a woman he met at the *Savoy* in Cairo, told him that Cromer was so horribly healthy in the winter, and that if he spent six months each year in this God-forgotten place, he'd live to be a hundred. Bad luck to her and her words! I've had to come here with the old boy, and am their victim." Then he added warmly: "My dear sir, just put yourself in my place. I've nobody to talk to except the provincial Norfolk tradespeople, who think they can play a good game at billiards. I've got the absolute hump, I tell you frankly!"

Well, afterwards I met the loud-socked young man more frequently, but somehow I had taken a violent and unaccountable dislike to him. Why, I cannot tell, except perhaps that he had disgusted me by the way he unbosomed himself to a stranger and aired his grievances against his eccentric uncle.

To descend that asphalted slope which led, on the face of the cliff, from the roadway in front of the *Hôtel de Paris*, away to the Promenade, old Gregory had to pass beneath my window. Hence I saw him several times daily, and noted how the brown-bloused fishermen who lounged there hour after hour, gazing idly seaward, leaning upon the railings and gossiping, respectfully touched their caps to the limping, eccentric old gentleman who in his slouch hat and cape looked more like a poet than a steel magnate, and who so regularly took the fresh, bracing air on that breezy promenade.

On that morning – the morning of the twelfth of June – a startling rumour had spread through the town. It at once reached me through Charles, the head-waiter of the hotel, who told me the whole place was agog. The strange story was that old Mr. Gregory had at three o'clock that morning been found by a coast-guard lying near a seat on the top of the east cliff at a point near the links, from which a delightful view could be obtained westward over the town towards Rimton and Sheringham.

The coast-guard had at once summoned a doctor by telephone, and on arrival the medical man had pronounced the mysterious old gentleman dead, and, moreover, that he had been dead several hours.

More than that, nobody knew, except that the dead man's nephew could not be found.

That fact in itself was certainly extraordinary, but it was not half so curious, or startling, as certain other features of the amazing affair, which were now being carefully withheld from the public by the police – facts, which when viewed as a whole, formed one of the most inexplicable criminal problems ever presented for solution.

CHAPTER II IS MAINLY ASTONISHING

In virtue of the facts that I was well known in Cromer, on friendly terms with the local superintendent of police, and what was more to the purpose, known to be a close friend of the Chief Constable at Norwich – also that I was a recognized writer of some authority upon problems of crime – Inspector Treeton, of the Norfolk Constabulary, greeted me affably when, after a very hasty breakfast, I called at the police station.

Treeton was a thin, grey-haired man, usually very quiet and thoughtful in manner, but this staggering affair had quite upset his normal coolness.

"I expect the detectives over from Norwich in half an hour," he said, with a distinct trace of excitement in his tones, as we stood in his bare little office discussing the morning's discovery. "You being such a close friend of the Chief Constable, I don't suppose there'll be any objection whatever to your being present during our investigations."

All the same, his tone was somewhat dubious as he added cautiously, "You won't, of course, give anything to the Press?"

"Certainly not," I replied. "You can rely upon my discretion. This isn't the first mystery I have assisted the police to investigate. This sort of thing is, so to speak, part of my profession."

"Yes," said Treeton, still with some hesitation, "so I understand, Mr. Vidal. But our people are terribly particular, as you know, about admitting unofficial persons into police work. No offence. But we are bound to be very careful."

"If you like, I'll 'phone to the Chief Constable," I suggested.

"No, sir. No need for that," he said hastily. "When the plain-clothes men arrive, I don't think any difficulty will be made as to your accompanying them." Then he added, as if to give the conversation a turn, "It's a very queer business, very. But I mustn't talk about it at present. No doubt you'll soon see for yourself what a strange affair it is."

"What is the curious feature, then?" I inquired anxiously.

"No," said Treeton, with a deprecatory gesture. "No. Mr. Vidal. Don't ask me. You must wait till the officers come from Norwich. They'll have a surprise, I can assure you they will. That's all I can say. I've taken care to have everything kept as it was found so as not to interfere with any clues, finger-prints, or things of that sort."

"Ah," I said. "Then you suspect foul play, eh?"

Treeton flushed slightly, as if annoyed with himself at having let slip the words that prompted my query.

Then he said slowly: "Well, at present we can't tell. But there's certainly something very mysterious about the whole business."

"Where is the body?"

"They've put it in the life-boat house."

"And that young fellow, Craig? I hear he's missing."

The Inspector looked at me with a strange expression on his face.

"Ah," he said briefly, "that isn't the only remarkable feature of this affair by any manner of means." Then impatiently: "I wish they'd come. I 'phoned to Norwich at six o'clock this morning, and now it's nearly ten. They might have come over in a car, instead of waiting for the train."

"Yes," I responded. "That is how so many inquiries are bungled. Red tape and delay. In the meantime a criminal often gets away hours ahead of the sleuths of the law and eventually may escape altogether. I've known a dozen cases where, because of the delay in making expert investigation, the culprit has never been caught."

As I spoke the telephone bell tinkled and Treeton answered the call. The Superintendent at Holt was asking for information, but my companion could give him but very little.

"I am watching the railway-station, sir," said Treeton over the 'phone, "and I've sent word to all the fishermen in my district not to take out any strangers. I've also warned all the garages to let me know if any stranger hires a car. The party we fancy may be wanted won't be able to get away if he's still in the district."

"Which is not very likely," I murmured in a low voice so that my words should not be heard over the wire.

When the conversation over the phone was ended, I sat chatting with Treeton, until, some twenty minutes later, three men, bearing unmistakably the cut of police-officers in plain clothes, entered the station.

Two of them were tall, dark-haired young fellows, dressed in neat navy-blue serge and wearing bowler hats. The third man, Inspector Frayne, as I learnt afterwards, was in dark grey, with a soft grey felt hat with the brim turned down in front.

"Well Treeton," said the Inspector briskly, "what's all the fuss about down here?"

"A case – a very funny case. That's all," replied the local inspector. "I told you over the 'phone all I know about it."

Then followed a brief, low-pitched conversation between the two officers. I saw Frayne look over at me inquisitively, and caught a few snatches of Treeton's words to him. "Great personal friend of the Chief Constable... Yes, quite all right... Writes about crime... No, no, nothing to do with newspapers ... amateur, of course ... decent sort."

I gathered from this that there was going to be no difficulty about my joining the party of police investigators. I was right. In a few moments Treeton brought Inspector Frayne over to me and we were introduced. Then, after a few friendly words, we started for the scene of the startling discovery of the morning.

We slipped out of the station in pairs, so as to avoid attracting attention, which might have led to our being followed and hampered in our movements by a crowd of idle and curious inhabitants.

Proceeding by way of the path which wound round the back of the high-up coast-guard station and so up over the cliff, we soon came to the seat where the body of old Mr. Gregory had been found.

The seat, a green-painted one with a curved back, that had more than once afforded me a comfortable resting-place, was the first out of the town towards the links. It was situate a little way from the footpath amid the rough grass of the cliff-top. Around it the herbage never grew on account of the constant tread from the feet of many daily visitors, so that clear about it was a small patch of bare sand.

On the right, upon the next point of the cliff, was another similar seat, while on the left the path leading back to the town was railed off because it was dangerous to approach too near the crumbling edge.

At the seat stood a very tall, thin, fair-haired young constable who had, since the discovery of old Gregory's body, remained on duty at the spot to prevent any one approaching it. This was done by Treeton's orders, who hoped, and very logically, that if the sand about the seat was not disturbed some tell-tale mark or footprint might be found by the detectives that would give a clue to the person or persons who had visited the seat with old Gregory in the early hours of that fatal morning.

Near the constable were two men with cameras, and at a little distance a small knot of curious idlers, all that remained of the many inquisitive folks who were at first attracted to the spot, but who, finding nothing to satisfy their curiosity, had soon returned to the town.

The morning was bright and calm, the sunlight reflected from a glassy sea, upon the surface of which were a dozen or so fishing-boats lifting their crab-pots, for the crabs of Cromer are far-famed amongst epicures for their excellencies. It was a peaceful, happy scene, that none could have suspected was the setting of a ghastly tragedy.

On arrival, Inspector Frayne, tall, grey-haired, with aquiline, clean-shaven face, assumed an attitude of ubiquitous importance that amused me.

"The body was found lying face downwards six feet beyond the south end of the seat," Treeton explained. "You see this mark in the grass?"

Looking, we all saw distinctly the impression that marked the spot where the unfortunate man had lain.

"No doubt," said the detective inspector, "the old gentleman was sitting on the seat when he was attacked from behind by somebody who sneaked quietly across the footpath, and he fell sideways from the seat. Have you looked for footprints?"

"There are a number of them, as you see," was Treeton's reply. "Nothing has been disturbed. I left all to you."

Gazing around, I saw that there were many prints of soles and heels in the soft sand about the seat. Many people had evidently sat there on the previous day. In the sand, too, some one had traced with a stick, in sprawly capitals, the word "Alice."

Frayne and his two provincial assistants bent and closely examined the prints in question.

"Women's mostly, I should say," remarked the detective inspector after a pause. "That's plain from the French heels, flat golf-shoe soles, and narrow rubber-pads, that have left their marks behind them. Better take some casts of these, Phelps," he said, addressing the elder of his subordinates.

"Forgive me for making a remark," I ventured. "I'm not a detective, but it strikes me that if anybody did creep across the grass from the path, as the Inspector rightly suggested, to attack the old man, he, or she, may have left some prints in the rear there. In the front here the footprints we have been examining are obviously those of people who had been sitting upon the seat long prior to the arrival of the victim."

"I quite agree, Mr. Vidal," exclaimed Treeton, and at this I thought the expert from Norwich seemed somewhat annoyed. "Yes," continued the local inspector, "it's quite possible, as Mr. Frayne said, that somebody did creep across the grass behind the old man. But unfortunately, there have been dozens of people over that very same spot this morning."

"Hopeless then!" grunted Frayne. "Why on earth, Treeton, did you let them swarm over there?" he queried testily. "Their doing so has rendered our inquiry a hundred per cent. more difficult. In all such cases the public ought to be rigorously kept from the immediate neighbourhood of the crime."

"At least we can make a search," I suggested.

"My dear Mr. Vidal, what is the use if half Cromer has been up here prying about?" asked the detective impatiently. "No, those feminine footprints in front of the seat are much more likely to help us. There's bound to be a woman in such a case as this. My motto in regard to crime mysteries is, first find the woman, and the rest is easy. In every great problem the 'eternal feminine,' as you writers put it, is ever present. She is in this one somewhere, you may depend upon it."

I did not answer him, judging that he merely emitted these sentiments in order to impress his listening subordinates with a due sense of his superior knowledge. But the search went on.

From the footpath across the grass to the seat was about thirty feet, and over the whole area all of us made diligent investigation. In one of the patches where the sand was bare of herbage I found the print of a woman's shoe – a smart little shoe – size 3, I judged it to be. The sole was well shaped and pointed, the heel was of the latest fashionable model – rather American than French.

I at once pointed it out to Frayne, but though he had so strongly expressed the opinion that there was a woman in the case, he dismissed it with a glance.

"Some woman came here yesterday evening with her sweetheart, I suppose," he said with a laugh.

But to me that footprint was distinctly instructive, for among the many impressed on the sand before the seat, I had not detected one that bore any resemblance to it. The owner of that American shoe had walked from the path to the back of the seat, but had certainly not sat down there.

I carefully marked the spot, and telling an old fisherman of my acquaintance, who stood by, to allow no one to obliterate it, continued my investigations.

Three feet behind the seat, in the midst of the trodden grass, I came upon two hairpins lying close together. Picking them up, I found they were rather thick, crinkled in the middle, and both of the same pale bronze shade.

Was it possible there had been a struggle there – a struggle with the woman who wore those American shoes – who was, moreover, a fair woman, if those pins had fallen from her hair in the encounter?

I showed the hairpins to Frayne who was busy taking a measurement of the distance from the seat to where the body had been found.

To my surprise, he seemed impatient and annoyed.

"My dear Mr. Vidal," he exclaimed, "you novelists are, I fear, far too imaginative. I dare say there are hundreds of hairpins about here in the grass if we choose to search for them. This seat is a popular resort for visitors by day and a trysting place for lovers after sundown. In the vicinity of any such seat you will always find hairpins, cigarette ends, wrappings from chocolates, and tinfoil. Look around you and see."

"But these pins have not been here more than a day," I expostulated. "They are bright and were lying lightly on the grass. Besides, are we not looking for a woman?"

"I'll admit that they may perhaps have belonged to somebody who was here last evening," he said. "But I can assure you they are no good to us." With this he turned away with rather a contemptuous smile.

I began to suspect that I had in some way antagonized Frayne, who at that moment seemed more intent upon working up formal evidence to give before the coroner, rather than in pushing forward the investigation of the crime, and so finding a clue to the culprit.

I could see that he regarded the minute investigations I was making with undisguised and contemptuous amusement. Of course, he was polite to me, for was I not the friend of the Chief Constable? But, all the same, I was an amateur investigator, therefore, in his eyes, a blunderer. He, of course, did not know at how many investigations of crime I had assisted in Paris, in Brussels, and in Rome – investigations conducted by the greatest detectives in Europe.

It was not to be expected that an officer of the Norfolk Constabulary, more used to petty larceny than to murder, would be so alert or so thorough in his methods as an officer from Scotland Yard, or of the *Sûreté* in Paris.

Arguing thus, I felt that I could cheerfully disregard the covert sneers and glances of my companions; and plunged with renewed interest into the work I had undertaken.

In the sand before the seat, I saw two long, wide marks which told me that old Mr. Gregory must have slipped from his position in a totally helpless condition. That being so, how was it that his body was found several feet away?

Had it been dragged to that spot in the grass? Or, had he crawled there in his death agony?

In the little knot of people who had gathered I noticed a young fisherman in his brown blouse – a tall youth, with fair curly hair, whom I knew well and could trust. Calling him over, I despatched him to the town for a couple of pounds of plaster of Paris, a bucket, some water, and a trowel.

Then I went on methodically with my investigations.

Presently the coast-guard, George Simmonds, a middle-aged, dark-haired man, who was a well-known figure in Cromer, came up and was introduced to Frayne as the man who, returning from duty as night patrol along the cliffs, early that morning, had discovered the body.

I stood by listening as he described the incident to the detective inspector.

"You see, sir," he said saluting, "I'd been along the cliffs to Trimmingham, and was on my way back about a quarter past three, when I noticed a man lying yonder on the grass. It was a fine morning, quite light, and at first I thought it was a tramp, for they often sleep on the cliffs in the warm weather.

But on going nearer I saw, to my surprise, that the man was old Mr. Gregory. I thought he was asleep, and bent down and shook him, his face being downwards on the grass and his arms stretched out. He didn't wake up, so I turned him over, and the colour of his face fair startled me. I opened his coat, put my hand on his heart, and found he was quite dead. I then ran along to our station and told Mr. Day, the Chief Officer, and he sent me off sharp to the police."

"You saw nobody about?" Frayne asked sharply. "Nobody passed you?"

"I didn't see a soul all the way from Trimingham."

"Constable Baxter was along there somewhere keeping a point," remarked Treeton. "Didn't you meet him?"

"Going out I met him, just beyond Overstrand, at about one o'clock, and wished him good morning," was the coast-guard's reply.

"But where is Craig, the young nephew of the dead man?" I asked Treeton. "Surely he may know something! He must have missed his uncle, who, apparently, was out all night."

"Ah! That's just the mystery, Mr. Vidal," replied the Inspector. "Let us go down to the life-boat house," he added, addressing the detective.

As they were moving away, and I was about to follow, the tall fisher-youth arrived with the plaster of Paris and a pail of water.

Promising to be with them quickly, I remained behind, mixed the plaster into a paste and within a few minutes had secured casts of the imprint of the woman's American shoe, and those of several other footmarks, which, with his superior knowledge, the expert from Norwich had considered beneath his notice.

Then, placing my casts carefully in the empty pail, I sent them along to the *Hôtel de Paris* by the same fisher-youth. Afterwards, I walked along the path, passed behind the lawn of the coast-guard station, where the White Ensign was flying on the flagstaff, and then descending, at last entered the life-boat house, where the officers and three doctors had assembled.

One of the doctors, named Sladen, a grey-headed practitioner who had been many years in Cromer, recognized me as I entered.

"Hulloa, Mr. Vidal! This is a very curious case, isn't it? Interests you, of course. All mysteries do, no doubt. But this case is astounding. In making our examination, do you know we've discovered a most amazing fact?" and he pointed to the plank whereon lay the body, covered with one of the brown sails from the life-boat.

"No. What?" I asked eagerly.

"Well – though we all at first, naturally, took the body to be that of old Vernon Gregory, it isn't his at all!"

"Not Gregory's?" I gasped.

"No. He has white hair and a beard, and he is wearing old Gregory's cape and hat, but it certainly is not Gregory's body."

"Who, then, is the dead man?" I gasped.

"His nephew, Edward Craig!"

CHAPTER III

SHOWS LIGHTS FROM THE MIST

"But Edward Craig is a young man – while Gregory must be nearly seventy!" I exclaimed, staring at Dr. Sladen in blank amazement.

"Exactly. I attended Mr. Gregory a month ago for influenza. But I tell you the body lying yonder is that of young Craig!" declared my friend. Then he added: "There is something very extraordinary about the whole affair, for Craig was made up to exactly resemble his uncle."

"And because of it was apparently done to death, eh?"

"That is certainly my theory."

"Amazing," I exclaimed. "This increases the mystery very considerably." Then, gazing around, I saw that the two doctors, who had assisted Sladen in his examination, were talking aside eagerly with the detective, while Mr. Day, a short thick-set man, with his white-covered cap removed in the presence of the dead, had joined the party.

Cromer is a "war-station," and Mr. Day was a well-known figure in the place, a fine active type of the British sailor, who had seen many years afloat, and now, with his "sea-time" put in, was an expert signal-man ashore. He noticed me and saluted.

"Look," exclaimed Dr. Sladen, taking me across to a bench against the side of the life-boat shed. "What do you think of these?" and he took up a white wig and a long white beard.

I examined them. Then slowly replied, "There is much, very much more, in this affair than any of us can at present see."

"Certainly. Why should the young man go forth at night, under cover of darkness, made up to exactly resemble the old one?"

"To meet somebody in secret, no doubt; and that somebody killed him," I said.

"Did they – ah, that's just the point," said the doctor. "As far as we can find there's no apparent cause of death, no wound whatever. The superficial examination we have made only reveals a slight abrasion on the left wrist, which might have been caused when he fell from the seat to the ground. The wrist is much swollen – from a recent sprain, I think. But beyond that we can find nothing."

"Won't you prosecute your examination further?" I asked.

"Certainly. This afternoon we shall make a post-mortem – after I get the order from the coroner."

"Ah. Then we shall know something definite?"

"I hope so."

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Inspector Frayne, addressing us all, "this latest discovery, of the identity of the victim, is a very extraordinary and startling one. I trust that you will all regard the matter as one of the greatest secrecy – at least till after the inquest. Publicity now may defeat the ends of justice. Do you all promise?"

With one accord we promised. Then, crossing to where the body lay, I lifted the heavy brown sail that covered it, and in the dim light gazed upon the white, dead countenance.

Yes. It was the face of Edward Craig.

Frayne at that moment came up, and after two men had taken the covering from the body, commenced to search the dead man's pockets. In the old mackintosh cape was a pouch, from which the detective drew a small wallet of crocodile leather, much worn, together with two letters. The latter were carried to the light and at once examined.

One proved to be a bill from a well-known hatter in Piccadilly. The superscription on the other envelope, of pale blue-grey paper, was undoubtedly in the hand of an educated woman.

Frayne drew from this envelope a sheet of notepaper, which bore neither address nor date, merely the words —

"At Ealing, at 10 p.m., on the twenty-ninth of August, where the two C's meet."

"Ah, an appointment," remarked Frayne. Then, looking at the post-mark, he added: "It was posted the day before yesterday at Bridlington. I wonder what it means?"

"I see it is addressed to Mr. Gregory!" I pointed out, "not to the dead man."

"Then the old man had an appointment on the twenty-ninth of August somewhere in Ealing — where the two C's meet. I wonder where that can be? Some agreed-on spot, I suppose, where two persons, whose initials are C, are in the habit of meeting."

"Probably," was my reply. But I was reflecting deeply.

In the wallet were four five-pound notes; a few of Gregory's cards; a letter from a local charity, thanking him for a contribution of two guineas; and a piece of paper bearing a number of very elaborate calculations, apparently of measured paces.

It seemed as though the writer had been working out some very difficult problem of distances, for the half-sheet of quarto paper was absolutely covered with minute pencilled figures; lengths in metres apparently.

I looked at them, and at a glance saw that old Gregory had either received his education abroad, or had lived for a long time upon the continent when a young man. Why? Because, when he made a figure seven, he drew a short cross-stroke half-way up the downward stroke, in order, as foreigners do, to distinguish it from the figure one.

"I wonder what all these sums can mean?" remarked the detective, as Treeton and I looked over his shoulder.

"Mr. Gregory was a business man," the local police officer said. "These are, no doubt, his things, not his nephew's."

"They seem to be measurements," I said, "not sums of money."

"Perhaps the old man himself will tell us what they are," Frayne remarked. Then again examining the wallet, he drew forth several slips of thin foreign notepaper, which were carefully folded, and had the appearance of having been carried there for a long time. Upon each was written a separate word, together with a number, in carefully-formed handwriting, thus —

"Lavelle 429; Kunzle 191; Geering 289; Souweine 17; Hodrickx 110."

The last one we opened contained the word, "Cromer 900," and I wondered whether they were code words.

"These are rather funny, Mr. Vidal," Frayne remarked, as he slowly replaced them in the wallet. "A little mysterious, eh?"

"No doubt, old Mr. Gregory will explain," I said. "The great puzzle to me is why the nephew should carry the uncle's belongings in his pockets. There was some deep motive in it, without a doubt."

Frayne returned to the body and made further search. There was nothing more in the other pockets save a handkerchief, some loose silver and a pocket-knife.

But, around the dead man's neck, suspended by a fine gold chain, and worn beneath his shirt, was a lady's tiny, round locket, not more than an inch in diameter, and engine-turned like a watch, a thin, neatly-made, old-fashioned little thing.

Frayne carefully unclasped it, and taking it across to the light, opened it, expecting to find a photograph, or, perhaps, a miniature. But there was nothing. It had evidently not been opened for years, for behind the little glass, where once had been a photograph, was only a little grey powder. Something had been preserved there — some relic or other — that had, with age, crumbled into dust.

"This doesn't tell us much," he said. "Yet, men seldom wear such things. Some relic of his sweetheart, eh?" Then he searched once more, and drew from the dead man's hip-pocket a serviceable Browning revolver, the magazine of which was fully loaded.

"He evidently expected trouble, and was prepared for it," Treeton said, as the Norwich detective produced the weapon.

"Well, he certainly had no time to use it," responded Frayne. "Death must have been instantaneous."

"I think not," I ventured. "If so, why was he found several feet away from the seat?"

Again Frayne showed impatience. He disliked any expression of outside opinion.

"Well, Mr. Vidal, we've not yet established that it is a case of murder, have we?" he said. "The young man may have died suddenly – of natural causes."

I smiled.

"Curious," I exclaimed, a moment later, "that he should be made up to so exactly resemble his uncle! No, Inspector Frayne, if I'm not greatly mistaken, you'll find this a case of assassination – a murder by a very subtle and ingenious assassin. It is a case of one master-criminal against another. That is my opinion."

The man from Norwich smiled sarcastically. My opinion was only the opinion of a mere amateur, and, to the professional thief-catcher, the amateur detective is a person upon whom to play practical jokes. The amateur who dares to investigate a crime from a purely independent standpoint is a man to jeer and laugh at – a target for ridicule.

I could follow Frayne's thoughts. I had met many provincial police officers of his type all over Europe, from Paris up to Petersburg. The great detectives of Europe, are, on the contrary, always open to listen to theories or suggestions.

The three doctors were standing aside, discussing the affair – the absence of all outward signs of anything that might have caused death. Until the coroner issued his order they could not, however, put their doubts at rest by making the post-mortem examination. The case puzzled them, and they were all three eager to have the opportunity of deciding how the young man had died.

"The few symptoms offered superficially have some strange points about them," I heard Dr. Sladen say. "Do you notice the clenched hands? and yet the mouth is open. The eyes are open too – and the lips are curiously discoloured. Yes, there is decidedly something very mysterious attaching to the cause of death."

And he being the leading practitioner in Cromer, his two colleagues entirely agreed with him.

After a long conversation, in which many theories – most of them sensational, ridiculous, and baseless – had been advanced, Mr. Day, the Chief Officer of Coast-guard, who had been outside the life-boat house, chatting with some friends, entered and told us the results of some of his own observations regarding the movements of the eccentric Mr. Gregory. Day was a genial, pleasant man and very popular in Cromer. Of course he was in ignorance that the body discovered was not that of the old gentleman.

"I've had a good many opportunities of watching the old man, Mr. Vidal," said the short, keen-eyed naval man, turning to me with his hands in the pockets of his pea-jacket, "and he was a funny 'un. He often went out from Beacon House at one and two in the morning, and took long strolls towards Rimton and Overstrand. But Mrs. Dean never knew as he wasn't indoors, for I gather he used to let himself out very quietly. We often used to meet him a-creepin' about of a night. I can't think what he went out for, but I suppose he was a little bit eccentric, eh? Why," went on the coast-guard officer, "he'd often come into the station early of a mornin', and have a chat with me, and look through the big telescope. He used, sometimes, to stand a-gazin' out at the sea, a-gazin' at nothing, for half an hour on end – lost in thought like. I wonder what he fancied he saw there?"

"Yes," I said. "He was eccentric, like many rich men."

"Well, one night, not long ago," Day went on, "there were some destroyers a-passin' about midnight, and we'd been taking in their signals by flash-light, when, in the middle of it, who should come into the enclosure but old Mr. Gregory. He stood a-watchin' us for ten minutes or so. Then, all

at once he says, 'I see they're signalling to the *Hermes* at Harwich.' This remark gave me quite a start, for he'd evidently been a-readin' all we had taken in – and it was a confidential message, too."

"Then he could read the Morse code," I exclaimed.

"Read it? I should rather think he could!" was the coast-guard officer's reply. "And mark you, the *Wolverene* was a-flashin' very quick. It was as much as I could do to pick it up through the haze. After that, I confess I didn't like him hanging about here so much as he did. But after all, I'm sorry – very sorry – that the poor old gent is dead."

"Did you ever see him meet anybody on his nightly rambles?" I asked.

"Yes, once. I saw him about six weeks ago, about three o'clock one dark, and terrible wet, mornin', out on the cliff near Rimton Gap. As I passed by he was a-talkin' to a tall young man in a drab mackintosh. Talkin' excited, he was, and a-wavin' his arms wild-like towards the sea. The young man spotted me first, and said something, whereupon the old gent dropped his argument, and the two of 'em walked on quietly together. I passed them, believing that his companion was only one of them simple-like fools we get about here sometimes in the summer. But I'd never seen him in Cromer. He was a perfect stranger to me."

"That's the only time you've seen him with any companion on these secret night outings?" I asked.

"Yes. I don't remember ever having seen him in the night with anybody else."

"Not even with his nephew?"

"No, not even with Mr. Craig."

"When he dropped in to chat with you at the coastguard station, did he show any inquisitiveness?" I asked.

"Well, he wanted to know all about things, as most of 'em do," laughed Day. "Ours is a war-station, you know, and folk like to look at the inside, and the flash-lamp I invented."

"The old fellow struck you as a bit of a mystery, didn't he?" Frayne asked, in his pleasant Norfolk brogue.

"Well, yes, he did," replied the coast-guard officer. "I remember one night last March – the eleventh, I think it was – when our people at Weybourne detected some mysterious search-lights far out at sea and raised an alarm on the 'phone all along the coast. It was a very dirty night, but the whole lot of us, from Wells right away to Yarmouth, were at once on the look-out. We could see search-lights but could make nothing of the signals. That's what puzzled us so. I went out along the cliff, and up Rimton way, but could see nothing. Yet, on my way back, as I got near the town, I suddenly saw a stream of light – about like a search-light – coming from the sea-front here. It was a-flashin' some signal. I was a couple of miles from the town, and naturally concluded it was one of my men with the flash-lamp. As I passed Beacon House, however, I saw old Mr. Gregory a-leanin' over the railings, looking out to sea. It was then about two o'clock. I supposed he had seen the distant lights, and, passing a word with him, I went along to the station. To my surprise, I found that we'd not been signalling at all. Then I recollected old Mr. Gregory's curious interest in the lights, and I wondered. In fact, I've wondered ever since, whether that answering signal I saw did not come from one of the front windows of Beacon House? Perhaps he was practisin' Morse!"

"Strange, very strange!" Frayne remarked. "Didn't you discover what craft it was making the signals?"

"No, sir. They are a mystery to this day. We reported by wire to the Admiralty, of course, but we've never found out who it was a-signalling. It's a complete mystery – and it gave us a bit of an alarm at the time, I can tell you," he laughed. "There was a big Italian yacht, called the *Carlo Alberta*, reported next day from Hunstanton, and it may, of course, have been her. But I am not inclined to think so."

CHAPTER IV

OPENS SEVERAL QUESTIONS

Our next step in the inquiry was a domiciliary visit to Beacon House.

While the public, including Mr. Day, were expecting to see his nephew, we, of course, were hoping to find old Gregory.

In this we were disappointed. Already Treeton knew that both men were missing from their lodgings. Yet while the police were watching everywhere for the dandified young man from London, the queer, white-haired old Sheffield steel manufacturer had slipped through their fingers and vanished as though the earth had swallowed him up.

Mrs. Dean's house was a typical seaside lodging-house, plainly and comfortably furnished – a double-fronted house painted pale blue, with large airy rooms and bay windows, which, situated high up and on the very edge of the cliff, commanded extensive views up and down the coast.

The sitting-room occupied by uncle and nephew, proved to be a big apartment on the first-floor, to the left of the entrance. The houses in that row had a front door from the asphalt path along the edge of the cliff and also a back entrance abutting upon the narrow street which ran into the centre of the town. Therefore, the hall went from back to front, the staircase ascending in the centre.

The room in which I stood with the detectives, was large, with a cheerful lattice-work wallpaper, and substantial leather-covered furniture. In the window was placed a writing-table, and upon it a telescope mounted on a stand. A comfortable couch was placed against the wall, while before the fire-place were a couple of deep-seated easy chairs, and a large oval table in the centre.

Indeed, the room possessed an air of homely comfort, with an absence of the inartistic seldom found in seaside apartments. The windows were open and the light breeze from the sun-lit sea slowly fanned the lace curtains. On the writing-table lay a quantity of papers, mostly tradesmen's receipts – all of which the old gentleman carefully preserved – some newspapers, a tin of tobacco, and several pipes.

Beside the fire-place lay a pair of Egyptian slippers in crimson morocco, evidently the property of young Craig, while his straw hat and cane lay upon the couch, together with the fawn Burberry coat which had been one of the common objects in Cromer. Everywhere were signs of occupation. Indeed, the cushions in the easy chairs were crumpled just as if the two men had only a little while before arisen from them, while in the grate were a number of ends of those gold-tipped cigarettes without which Craig was never seen.

Upon a peg behind the door hung another old grey mackintosh belonging to old Gregory – an exact replica of which had been worn by the man who had so mysteriously met his death.

But where was old Gregory? Aye, that was the question.

With Mrs. Dean, a homely person with hair brushed tightly back, and her husband looking on, we began a thorough search of the room, as well as of the two bedrooms on the next floor. The sitting-room was investigated first of all, but in the writing-table we found nothing of interest. One of the drawers had been emptied and a mass of tinder in the grate told a significant tale.

Old Mr. Gregory had burned a lot of documents before disappearing.

Why? Were they incriminating?

Why, too, had he so suddenly disappeared? Surely he would not have done so without knowledge of his nephew's tragic death!

For a full half-hour we rummaged that room and all that was in it, but, alas, found nothing.

In the old man's bedroom stood a battered leathern cabin-trunk bearing many labels of Continental hotels. It was unlocked, and we found it filled with clothes, but strangely enough, not the clothes of an old man, but rather the smart attire of a middle-aged person of fashion.

At first Frayne refused to believe that the trunk belonged to old Gregory. But Mrs. Dean was precise upon the point. That was Mr. Gregory's room.

In the bottom of the cabin-trunk we found a number of folded sheets of foolscap, upon which were written many cryptic calculations in feet and metres; "wave-metres," it was written upon one slip. They seemed to be electrical. Upon other sheets were lists of names together with certain figures, all of which conveyed to us no meaning. Frayne, of course, took possession of them for submission to examination later on.

"May I look at them later?" I asked him.

"Certainly, Mr. Vidal. They seem to be a bit of a puzzle, don't they? They have something to do with electricity, I fancy."

In the corner of the room, opposite the window, stood a large wooden sea-chest, similar to those used by naval officers. It was painted black, and bore, in white, the initials "V. G." It had an old and battered appearance, and the many labels upon it told of years of transit by rail and steamer.

I bent to examine it, but found it securely locked and bound round with iron bands.

"That's very heavy, sir," Mrs. Dean remarked. "He always kept it locked, so I don't know what's inside. When the old gentleman came in, he always went straight over to it as though to ascertain whether the lock had been tampered with."

"Ah, then there's something in there he wished to keep away from prying eyes!" said Frayne. "We must see what it is."

I remarked that the lock was a patent one, but he at once ordered a locksmith to be fetched, while we turned our attention to the adjoining room, the one that had been occupied by young Craig.

It was slightly smaller than the other one, and overlooked the narrow street which ran along the back of the houses towards the church.

We searched the drawers carefully, one after another, but found nothing except clothes – a rather extensive wardrobe. Of cravats, Craig had possessed fully a hundred, and of collars, dozens upon dozens.

Upon his dressing-table stood the heavy silver fittings of a travelling-bag, a very handsome set, and, in a little silver box, we found a set of diamond studs, with several valuable scarf-pins. The device of one of these was some intertwined initials, surmounted by a royal crown in diamonds; apparently a present from some exalted personage.

Presently, however, Treeton, who had remained in Gregory's room assisting in the perquisition, entered with an ejaculation of surprise, and we found that on pulling out the small drawer of the washstand, he had discovered beneath it some papers that had been concealed there.

We at once eagerly examined them, and found that there were slips exactly duplicating those discovered in old Gregory's wallet – slips with names and numbers upon them – apparently code numbers.

Together with these were several papers bearing more remarkable calculations, very similar to those we had found at the bottom of the cabin-trunk. The last document we examined was, however, something very different. It was a letter written upon a large sheet of that foreign business paper which is ruled in small squares.

"Hulloa!" Frayne exclaimed, "this is in some foreign language – French or German, I suppose."

"No," I said, glancing over his shoulder. "It's in Italian. I'll read it, shall I?"

"Yes, please, Mr. Vidal," cried the detective, and handed it to me.

It bore no address – only a date – March 17th, and translating it into English, I read as follows:

—
"Illustrious Master, – The business we have been so long arranging was most successfully concluded last night. It is in the *Matin* to-day, a copy of which I send you with our greeting. H. left as arranged. J. arrives back in Algiers to-morrow, and the Nightingale still sings on blithely. I leave

by Brindisi for Egypt to-night and will wire my safe arrival. Read the *Matin*. Does H. know anything, do you think? Greetings from your most devoted servant, Egisto."

"A very funny letter," remarked Treeton. "I wonder to what it alludes?"

"Mention of the *Matin* newspaper would make it appear that it has been written from Paris," I said. Then, with Frayne's assent, I rapidly scribbled a copy of the letter upon the back of an envelope which I took from my pocket.

A few moments later, the locksmith having arrived, we returned to old Gregory's room, and watched the workman as he used his bunch of skeleton-keys upon the lock of the big sea-chest. For ten minutes or so he worked on unsuccessfully, but presently there was a click, and he lifted the heavy wooden lid, displaying an old brown army blanket, carefully folded, lying within.

This we removed, and then, as our astounded gaze fell upon the contents of the chest, all involuntarily gave vent to loud ejaculations of surprise.

Concealed beneath the rug we saw a quantity of antique ornaments of silver and gold – rare objects of great value – ancient chalices, reliquaries, golden cups studded with precious stones, gold coronets, a great number of fine old watches, and a vast quantity of splendid diamond and ruby jewellery.

The chest was literally crammed with jewels, and gold, and silver – was the storehouse of a magnificent treasure, that must have been worth a fabulous sum.

I assisted Frayne to take out the contents of the chest, until the floor was covered with jewels. In one old brown morocco case that I opened, I found a glorious ruby necklet, with one enormous centre stone of perfect colour – the largest I had ever seen. In another was a wonderful collar of perfectly matched pearls; in a third, a splendid diamond tiara worth several thousand pounds.

"Enough to stock a jeweller's shop," said Frayne in an awed voice. "Why, what's this at the bottom?"

He began to tug at a heavy square wooden box, which, when he had succeeded in dragging it out and we opened it, we found to contain a hand flash-lamp for signalling purposes – one of the most recent and powerful inventions in night-signalling apparatus.

"Ha!" Treeton cried. "That's the lamp which Day suspected had been flashed from these windows on the night of the coast alarm."

"Yes," I remarked reflectively, "I wonder for what purpose that lamp was used?"

"At any rate, the old man has a fine collection of curiosities," said Frayne. "I suppose it was one of his eccentricities to carry them with him? No wonder he was so careful that the lock should not be tampered with!"

I stood looking at that strange collection of valuables. There were pieces of gold and silver plate absolutely unique. I am no connoisseur of antique jewellery, but instinctively I knew that every piece was of enormous value. And it had all been thrown pell-mell into the box, together with some old rags – seemingly once parts of an old damask curtain – in order to prevent the metal rattling. Much of the silver-ware was, of course, blackened, as none of it had been cleaned for years. But the gems sparkled and shone, like liquid drops of parti-coloured fire, as they lay upon the shabby carpet. What could it all mean?

Mrs. Dean, who was standing utterly aghast at this amazing discovery, jumped with nervousness as Frayne suddenly addressed her.

"Did Mr. Gregory have many visitors?"

"Not many, sir," was her reply. "His secretary used to come over from Sheffield sometimes – Mr. Fielder, I think his name was – a tall, thin gentleman, who spoke with an accent as though he were a foreigner. I believe he was a Frenchman, though he had an English name."

"Anybody else?"

"Mr. Clayton, the old schoolmaster from Sheringham, and – oh, yes – a lady came from London one day, a short time ago, to see him – a young French lady," replied Mrs. Dean.

"What was her name?"

"I don't know. It's about a fortnight ago since she came, one morning about eleven, so she must have left London by the newspaper train. She rang, and I answered the bell. She wouldn't let me take her name up to Mr. Gregory, saying: 'She would go up, as she wanted to give him a surprise.' I pointed out his door and she went in. But I don't think the old gentleman exactly welcomed her."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I heard him raising his voice in anger," replied the landlady.

"Was Mr. Craig there?"

"No. He was out somewhere I think. My own belief is that the young lady was Mr. Gregory's daughter. She stayed about an hour, and once, when I opened the door, I heard her speaking with him very earnestly in French, asking him to do something, it seemed like. But he flatly refused and spoke to her very roughly; and at this she seemed very upset – quite brokenhearted. I watched her leave. Her face was pale, and she looked wretchedly miserable, as though in utter despair. But I forgot," added Mrs. Dean. "Three days later I found her photograph, which the old man, who was very angry, had flung into the waste-paper basket. I kept it, because it was such a pretty face. I'll run down and get it – if you'd like to see it."

"Excellent," exclaimed Frayne, and the good woman descended the stairs.

A few moments later she came back with a cabinet photograph, which she handed to the detective.

I glanced at it over his shoulder.

Then I held my breath, staggered and dumbfounded.

The colour must have left my cheeks, I think, for I was entirely unprepared for such a shock.

But I pulled myself together, bit my lip, and by dint of a great effort managed to remain calm. Nevertheless, my heart beat quickly as I gazed upon the picture of that pretty face, that most open, innocent countenance, that I knew so well.

Those wide-open, trusting eyes, that sweet smile, those full red lips – ah!

And what was the secret? Aye, what, indeed?

CHAPTER V IN WHICH THE SHADOW FALLS

"A very charming portrait," Frayne remarked. "I see it was taken in London. We ought to have no great difficulty in discovering the original – eh, Treeton – if we find it necessary?"

I smiled to myself, for well I knew that the police would experience considerable difficulty in ascertaining the identity of the original of that picture.

"Are you quite sure, Mrs. Dean, that it was the same lady who came to visit Mr. Gregory?" I asked the landlady.

"Quite positive, sir. That funny little pendant she is wearing in the photograph, she was wearing when she came to see the old gentleman – a funny little green stone thing – shaped like one of them heathen idols."

I knew to what she referred – the small green figure of Maat, the Goddess of Truth – an ancient amulet I had found, while prying about in the ruins of a temple on the left bank of the Nile, a few miles beyond Wady-Halfa – the gate of the Sudan. I knew that amulet well, knew the hieroglyphic inscription upon its back, for I had given it to her as a souvenir.

Then Lola – the mysterious Lola, whose memory had occupied my thoughts, both night and day, for many and many a month – had reappeared from nowhere, and had visited the eccentric Gregory.

In that room I stood, unconscious of what was going on about me; unconscious of that glittering litter of plate and jewels; of fifteenth century chalices and gem-encrusted cups; of sixteenth century silver, much of it ecclesiastical – probably from churches in France, Italy, and Spain – of those heavy nineteenth century ornaments, that wonderful array of diamonds and other precious stones, in ponderous early-Victorian settings, which lay upon the faded, threadbare carpet at my feet.

I was thinking only of the past – of that strange adventure of mine, which was now almost like some half-forgotten dream – and of Lola, the beautiful and the mysterious – whose photograph I now held in my nerveless fingers, just as the detective had given it to me.

At that moment a constable entered with a note for his inspector, who took it and opened it.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, turning to Frayne. "Here's another surprise for us! I made inquiries this morning of the Sheffield police concerning old Mr. Gregory. Here's their reply. They've been up to Messrs. Gregory and Thorpe's works, but there is no Mr. Gregory. Mr. Vernon Gregory, senior partner in the firm, died, while on a voyage to India, nearly a year ago!"

"What?" shrieked Mrs. Dean in scandalized tones. "Do you mean to say that that there old man, my lodger, wasn't Mr. Gregory?"

"He may have been *a* Mr. Gregory, but he certainly was not Mr. Vernon Gregory, the steel manufacturer," responded Treeton, calmly.

"Well, that beats everything!" she gasped. "Then that old man was a humbugging impostor – eh?"

"So it seems," Frayne replied.

"But it can't be true? I can't believe it! He was a real gentleman. See, here, what he had got put away in that old box of his. Them there Sheffield police is mistook, I'm sure they be. There'll be some good explanation of all this, I'll be bound, if 'tis looked for."

"I sincerely hope so," I remarked. "But at present I certainly don't see any."

Truth to tell, I was utterly staggered and confounded, the more so, by that report from Sheffield. I confess I had all along believed old Gregory to be what he had represented himself as being to the people of Cromer.

Now I realized that I was face to face with a profound and amazing problem – one which those provincial police-officers, patient and well-meaning as they were, could never hope to solve.

Yes, old Vernon Gregory was an impostor. The reply from the Sheffield police proved that beyond a doubt. Therefore, it also followed that the man lying dead was certainly not what he had represented himself to be – nephew of the great steel magnate.

But who was he? That was the present great question that baffled us.

The photograph I held in my hand bore the name: "Callard, Photographer, Shepherd's Bush Road." But I knew that whatever inquiries were made at that address, the result would be negative. The mysterious Lola was an elusive little person, not at all likely to betray her identity to any photographer.

There were reasons for her secrecy – very strong reasons, I knew.

So I smiled, when Frayne announced that he should send the picture up to London, and put through an inquiry.

I picked up some pieces of the jewellery that was lying at my feet. In my hand I held a splendid golden coronet in which were set great emeralds and rubies of enormous value. Even my inexpert eye could see that the workmanship was very ancient, and the stones but roughly cut and polished. I judged it to be a crown which had adorned the head of some famous Madonna in an Italian or Spanish church; a truly regal ornament.

Again stooping, I picked up a small heavy box of blackened repoussé silver of genuine Italian Renaissance work, and opening it, found it filled with rings of all kinds, both ancient and modern. There were signet rings bearing coats of arms; ladies' gem rings; men's plain gold rings; and rings of various fancy devices.

One I picked out was distinctly curious. A man's flat gold ring set with eight finely-coloured turquoises at equal intervals. It looked brighter and newer than the others, and as I fingered it, a small portion of the outer edge opened, revealing a neatly enamelled inscription in French, "Thou art Mine." On further examination I found that each of the spaces in which a turquoise was set, opened, and in each was also a tender love passage, "I love you," "Faithful and True," and so on, executed probably a century ago.

Yes, each piece in that wonderful collection was unique – the treasure of one who was undoubtedly a connoisseur of gems and antiques. Indeed, in no national collection had I ever seen a display more remarkable than that flung out so unceremoniously upon the carpet, around that mysterious flash-lamp.

While one of the detectives, at Frayne's order, began repacking the treasure, I went with the two inspectors to a sitting-room on the ground-floor, where, with the door closed, we discussed the situation.

Outside, upon the path in front of the house, were a knot of curious persons, among them Mr. Day, and his subordinate officer who had made the tragic discovery.

"Well," exclaimed Frayne, slowly rubbing his chin, "it's a very curious case. What will you do now, Treeton?"

"Do?" asked the local officer. "Why, I've done all I can do. I've reported it to the Coroner, and I suppose they'll make the post-mortem to-day, and hold the inquest to-morrow."

"Yes, I know," said the other. "But we must find this old man, Gregory. He seems to have been pretty slick at getting away."

"Frightened, I suppose," said Treeton.

"What. Do you think he killed his nephew?" queried the man from Norwich.

"Looks suspiciously like it," Treeton replied.

"Yes, but why did Craig go out disguised as the old man – that's the question?"

"Yes," I repeated. "That is indeed the question."

"And all that jewellery? The old man is not likely to leave that lot behind – unless he's guilty," said Frayne. "Again, that visit of the young lady. If we could only get track of her, she'd have something to tell us without a doubt."

"Of course," said Treeton. "Send the photograph to London, and find out who she is. What a bit of luck, wasn't it, that Mrs. Dean kept the picture she found in the waste-paper basket?"

I remained silent. Yes, if we could only discover the original of that photograph we should, no doubt, learn much that would be startling. But I felt assured that we should never find trace of her. The police could follow in her direction if they chose. I intended to proceed upon an entirely different path.

What I had learned in that brief hour, had staggered me. I could scarcely realize that once again I was face to face with the mystery of Lola – the sweetest, strangest, most shadowy little person I had ever met in all my life. And yet she was so real, so enchanting, so delightful – such a merry, light-hearted little friend.

Lola!

I drew a long breath when I recalled that perfect oval face, with the wonderful blue eyes, the soft little hand – those lips that were made for kisses.

Even as I stood there in the plainly-furnished sitting-room of that seaside lodging-house, I remembered a strangely different scene. A fine, luxurious chamber, rich with heavy gilt furniture, and crimson damask, aglow under shaded electric lights.

I saw her upon her knees before me, her white hands grasping mine, her hair dishevelled upon her shoulders, pleading with me – pleading, ah! I remembered her wild, passionate words, her bitter tears – her terrible confession.

And this provincial detective, whose chief feats had been confined to cases of petty larceny, speed limit, and trivial offences, dealt with by the local Justices of the Peace, actually hoped to unravel a mystery which I instinctively felt to be fraught with a thousand difficulties.

Any swindler, providing he has made sufficient money by his tricks, has bought a place in the country, and has been agreeable to the Deputy-Lieutenant of the County, can become one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace. Some such are now and then unmasked, and off to penal servitude have gone, men who have been the foremost to inflict fines and imprisonment on the poor for the most trivial offences – men who made the poaching of a rabbit a heinous crime.

I venture to assert that the past of many a J. P. does not bear investigation. But even when glaring injustices are exposed to the Home Secretary, he is often afraid to order an inquiry, for political reasons. It is always "Party" that must be first considered in this poor old England of ours to-day.

What does "Party" mean? Be it Liberal, Unionist, Conservative, Labour, anything, there should at least be honesty, fair dealing, plain speaking and uprightness. But alas, this is an age of sham in England. Journalists, novelists, preachers, playwrights, are afraid to speak the truth frankly, though they know it, and feel it. It is "Party" always. Many a criminal has escaped conviction before our County Benches because of "Party," and for the same reason many innocents have been condemned and suffered.

This case of Mr. Vernon Gregory was a provincial case. The amusing farce of local investigation, and local justice, would no doubt be duly played. The coroner always agrees with the evidence of his own family doctor, or the prominent local medico, and the twelve honest tradesmen forming the jury are almost invariably led by the coroner in the direction of the verdict.

Oh, the farce of it all! I hold no brief for France, Belgium, Germany, or any other continental nation, for England is my native land. But I do feel that methods of inquiry on the continent are just, though minutely searching, that there Justice is merciful though inexorable, that her scales weigh all evidence to the uttermost gramme.

These reflections passed through my mind as I stood in that lodging-house room, while the two police officers discussed as to their further procedure in the amazing case with which they had been called upon to deal. I could not help such thoughts arising, for I was dubious, very dubious, as to the thoroughness of investigation that would be given to the affair by the local authorities. Slackness,

undue delay, party or personal interests, any one of these things might imperil the inquiry and frustrate the ends of justice.

I knew we were confronted by one of the greatest criminal problems that had ever been offered for solution, calling for the most prompt, delicate and minute methods of investigation, if it was to be handled successfully. And as I contrasted the heavy, cumbrous, restricted conditions of English criminal procedure with the swift, far-reaching methods in use across the Channel, I felt that something of the latter was needed here if the mystery of Craig's death was ever to be solved.

CHAPTER VI

MYSTERY INEXPLICABLE

The town of Cromer was agog, when, next day, the coroner held his inquiry.

The afternoon was warm, and the little room usually used as the police court was packed to suffocation.

The jury – the foreman of which was a stout local butcher – having viewed the body, the inquest was formally opened, and Mrs. Dean, the first witness, identified the remains as those of her visitor, Mr. Edward Craig.

This, the first intimation to the public that Mr. Gregory was not dead after all, caused the greatest sensation.

In answer to the coroner, Mrs. Dean explained how, with his uncle, old Mr. Gregory, Craig had taken apartments with her. She had always found him a quiet, well-conducted young gentleman.

"Was he quite idle?" asked the grave-faced coroner.

"No. Not exactly, sir," replied the witness, looking round the closely packed room. "He used to do a good deal of writing for his uncle, more especially after the young man, Mr. Gregory's private secretary, had been over from Sheffield."

"How often did he come?"

"At intervals of a week or more. He always carried a small despatch-box, and on those occasions the three would sit together for half the day, doing their business, with the door closed – and," added the landlady vigorously, "Mr. Craig had no end of business sometimes, for he received lots of telegrams. From what I heard him say one day to his Uncle, I believe he was a betting man, and the telegrams were results of races."

"Ah, probably so," remarked the coroner. "I believe you have not seen the elder gentleman since the tragic evening of his nephew's death?"

"No, sir. The last I saw of Mr. Gregory was when he wished me 'good-night,' and went to bed, as was his habit, about half-past ten, on the night previous."

"And, where was the deceased then?"

"My servant Anne had taken up his hot water, and he had already gone to bed."

"And, did you find next day that the beds had been slept in?"

"Mr. Craig's had, but Mr. Gregory's hadn't," was the reply. Whereat the eager, listening crowd buzzed and moved uneasily.

The grave-faced county official holding the inquiry, having finished writing down the replies to his questions upon blue foolscap, looked across to the row of twelve tradesmen, and exclaimed in his sharp, brusque manner —

"Have the jury any questions to put to this witness?"

"I'd like to ask, sir," said the fat butcher, "whether this Mr. Gregory was not a very eccentric and extraordinary man?"

"He was," replied the good woman with a smile. "He always suspected that people was a-robbin' him. He'd strike out threepence from my weekly bill, and on the very same day, pay six or seven shillings for a pound of fresh strawberries."

"During the night you heard nobody leave your house?"

"No, neither me, nor my husband, heard any sound. Of course, our dog knew both of 'em, and was very friendly, so he'd make no noise."

"I would like to ask you, Mrs. Dean," said another juryman, the thin-faced manager of a boot-shop, "whether Mr. Craig was in the habit of receiving any strangers?"

"No," interrupted the coroner, "we are not here to inquire into that. We are here solely to establish the identity of the deceased and the cause of his death. The other matters must be left to the police."

"Oh! I beg pardon sir," ejaculated the offending jurymen, and sat back in his chair with a jerk.

George Simmonds, a picturesque figure in his coast-guard uniform, was called next, and minutely described how he had found deceased, and had, from his dress, believed him to be old Mr. Gregory. Afterwards he was cross-examined by the foreman of the jury as to whom he had met during his patrol that night, and what he knew personally about the dead man.

"I only know that he was a very nice young gentleman," replied the coast-guard. "Both he and his uncle often used to pass the time o' day with us out against the flagstaff, and sometimes they'd have a look through the glass at the passing ships."

The police evidence then followed, and, after that Dr. Sladen, the chief medical man in Cromer, took the oath and made the following statement, in clear, business-like tones, the coroner writing it down rapidly.

"Henry Harden Sladen, Doctor of Medicine, 36, Cliff Avenue, Cromer. I was called to see deceased by the police, at about half-past four on the morning of the twelfth of June. He was lying upon a public seat on the East Cliff, and on examination I found that he had been dead about two hours or more."

"Any signs of violence?" inquired the coroner, looking up sharply at the witness, and readjusting his gold-rimmed glasses.

"None whatever."

"Yes, Dr. Sladen?"

"Yesterday afternoon," continued the witness, "I made a post-mortem examination in conjunction with Dr. Copping, of Cromer, and found the body to be that of a young man about twenty-five years old, of somewhat athletic build. All the organs were quite normal. There was an old wound under the left shoulder, apparently a bullet wound, and two rather curious scars on the right forearm, which, we agreed, had been received while fencing. We, however, could find no trace of disease or injury."

"Then to what do you attribute death?" inquired the coroner.

"Well, I came to the conclusion that the young man had been suddenly asphyxiated, but how, is a perfect mystery," responded the doctor. "It would be difficult to asphyxiate any one in the open air without leaving any mark of strangulation."

"I take it that you discovered no mark?"

"Not the slightest."

"Then you do not think death was due to natural causes?"

"It was due to asphyxiation – a rapid, almost instantaneous death it must have been – but it was not due to natural causes."

"Briefly put, then, you consider that the deceased was the victim of foul play?"

"Yes. The young man was murdered, without a doubt," replied the doctor, slowly. "But so ingeniously was the crime committed, that no trace of the methods by which death was accomplished has been left. The assassin, whoever he was, must have been a perfect artist in crime."

"Why do you think so?" asked the coroner.

"For several reasons," was the reply. "The victim must have been sitting upon the seat when suddenly attacked. He rose to defend himself and, as he did so, he was struck down by a deadly blow which caused him to stagger, reel, and fall lifeless some distance away from the seat. Yet there is no bruise upon him – no sign of any blow having been struck. His respiratory organs suddenly became paralysed, and he expired – a most mysterious and yet instant death."

"But is there no way, that you – as a medical man – can account for such a death, Dr. Sladen?" asked the coroner dryly.

"There are several ways, but none in which death could ensue in such circumstances and with such an utter absence of symptoms. If death had occurred naturally we should have been quickly able to detect the fact."

After one or two pointless questions had been put to the witness by members of the jury, his place was taken by his colleague, Dr. Copping, a pushing young medico who, though he had only been in Cromer a year, had a rapidly-growing practice.

In every particular he corroborated Dr. Sladen's evidence, and gave it as his professional opinion that the young man had met with foul play, but how, was a complete mystery.

"You do not suspect poison, I take it?" asked the coroner, looking up from his writing.

"Poison is entirely out of the question," was Dr. Copping's reply. "The deceased was asphyxiated, and died almost instantly. How it was done, I fail to understand and can formulate no theory."

The public, seated at the back of the court, were so silent that one could have heard the dropping of the proverbial pin. They had expected some remarkable revelations from the medical men, but were somewhat disappointed.

After the evidence of Inspector Treeton had been taken, the coroner, in a few brief words, put the matter before the jury.

It was, he said, a case which presented several very remarkable features, not the least being the fact that the nephew had gone out in the night, dressed in his uncle's clothes and made up to resemble the elder man. That fact made it evident that there was some unusual motive for going out that night on the part of the deceased man – either a humorous one, or one not altogether honest. The latter seemed the most reasonable theory. The young man evidently went out to keep a tryst in the early morning, and while waiting on the seat, was suddenly attacked and murdered.

"Well, gentlemen," he went on, removing his glasses, and polishing them with his handkerchief, "it is for you to return your verdict – to say how this young man met with his death, to-day, or, if you consider it advisable, you can, of course, adjourn this inquiry in order to obtain additional evidence. Personally, I do not see whence any additional evidence can come. We have heard the depositions of all concerned, and if you decide that it is a case of wilful murder, as both Dr. Sladen and Dr. Copping have unhesitatingly stated it to be, the rest must be left to the police, who will no doubt use their utmost endeavours to discover the identity of this 'artist in crime,' as Dr. Sladen put it, who is responsible for this young man's death. So far as I am concerned, and I have acted as coroner for this district for twenty-three years, I have never before held an inquiry into a case which has presented so many puzzling features. Even the method by which the victim was done to death is inexplicable. The whole thing, gentlemen, is inexplicable, and, as far as we can discern, there is no motive for the crime. It is, of course, for you to arrive at a verdict now, or to adjourn for a week. Perhaps you will consult together."

The twelve Norfolk tradesmen, under the leadership of the obese butcher, whispered together for a few moments and were quickly agreed.

The coroner's officer, a tall constable, standing near the door, saw that the foreman wished to speak, and shouted: "Silence!"

"We will return our verdict at once, Mr. Coroner," said the butcher. "We find that deceased was murdered."

"That is your verdict, eh? Then it will read, 'that deceased was wilfully murdered by some person or persons unknown.' Is that what you all agree?" he asked in his quick, business-like manner.

"Yes, sir. That is our verdict," was the response.

"Any dissentients?" asked the official. But there was none.

"Then the rest must be left to the police," said the coroner, resuming his writing.

At those words, the public, disappointed at the lack of gory details, began to file out into the street, while the jury were discharged.

Who was the murderer? That was the question upon every one's tongue.

And where was Vernon Gregory, the quaint, eccentric old fellow who had become such a notable figure in Cromer streets and along the asphalted parade. What had become of him?

The police had, of course, made no mention in their evidence of the search in the rooms occupied by the two men – of the discovery of the splendid treasure of gold and jewels – or of the fact that the real Mr. Vernon Gregory had died while on a voyage to India.

With Frayne, I walked back to the police-station, where we found that no trace had yet been discovered of the old man. He had disappeared swiftly and completely, probably in clothes which in no way resembled those he habitually wore, for, as his pocket-book and other things were found in the cape worn by his nephew, we assumed that they were actually the uncle's. Therefore, it would be but natural that old Gregory would have left the house wearing clothes suitable to a younger man.

The fact that Lola had visited him told me much.

Gregory, whoever he was, was certainly no amateur in the art of disguise. In all probability he now presented the appearance of a man of thirty or so, and in no way resembled the eccentric old gentleman who looked like a poet and whose habits were so regular.

That there was a mystery, a strange, amazing mystery, I knew instinctively. Edward Craig had, I felt confident, fallen the victim of a bitter and terrible vengeance – had been ingeniously done to death by one whose hand was that of a relentless slayer.

So, as I walked past the grey old church of Cromer, back to the *Hôtel de Paris*, I pondered deeply.

My own particular knowledge I kept a fast secret to myself. Among that heterogeneous collection of treasures had been one object which I recognized – an object I had seen and handled once before, in very different circumstances.

How came it in that old sea-chest, and in the possession of the man who was now exposed as an impostor?

Mr. Day, the chief officer of the coast-guard, passed me by and saluted. But I was so preoccupied that I scarcely noticed him.

I had crossed by the path leading through the churchyard, and arrived at the corner of Jetty Street – a narrow, old-fashioned lane which leads along to the cliff-top in front of the *Hôtel de Paris*, and where an inclined slope goes down to the pier.

Suddenly, on raising my eyes at a passer-by, my gaze met that of a tall, thin, pale-faced, rather gentlemanly man in a dark grey suit, and wearing a grey felt hat.

The stranger, without noticing me, went on with unconcern.

But in that second I had recognized him. We had met before, and in that instant I had fixed him as the one man who knew the truth regarding that remarkable secret I had now set out to investigate.

I halted aghast, and half-turned upon my heel to greet him.

CHAPTER VII

TELLS OF TWO MEN

The stranger, whose age was about forty-five, went on in the direction of the post-office in the Church Square.

Should I dash back, overtake him and claim acquaintance? Or should I keep my knowledge to myself, and watch in patience?

A single second had I in which to decide. And I decided.

I turned back upon my heel again as though I had not recognized him.

But what could that man's presence mean in that little East Coast town? Aye, what indeed?

I tried to think, to conjecture, to form some theory – but I was too confused. Lola had been there – and now that man who had just passed!

Along the narrow, old-fashioned Jetty Street I strode for some yards, and then turned and retraced my steps till I saw him across the old churchyard entering the post-office.

Treeton was coming up in my direction, little dreaming how near he was to the one man who knew the truth. I smiled to myself at the ignorance of the local police. And yet my own knowledge was that of a man who had led a strange cosmopolitan life, who had mixed with all classes on the Continent, who had trodden the streets of more than one capital in disguise, and who had assisted the *Sûreté* in half a dozen countries.

I smiled at Treeton as he went by, and he smiled back. That man in the post-office yonder was a remarkable personage. That I well knew. What would any agent in the *brigade mobile* of Paris have given to be in my place at that moment – to be able to enter the Cromer post-office and lay hands upon Jules Jeanjean – the notorious Jules Jeanjean, of all men!

My thoughts were of Lola. Phew! Had ever man such a strange reverie as I had in those moments when I halted, pretending to look into the shop-window of the jeweller at the corner – yet all the time watching in the direction of the door of the post-office!

To go back would betray recognition, so I was compelled to go forward – to the hotel.

I did not, however, allow the grass to grow beneath my feet. That night, instead of dining at the hotel, I ate a sandwich in the bar of the *Albion*, and soon discovered that the man I had seen passing Cromer Church was living in apartments in the Overstrand Road, the aristocratic quarter of Cromer, close to the Doctor's steps.

I had kept careful watch all the evening. First, quite unconcernedly, he had strolled along the East Cliff, past the seat where the man, now dead, had sat early on that fatal morning. I had followed, and had watched.

He paused close by, ostensibly to light a cigarette with a patent lighter, then, after covertly making observations, he went on away to the edge of the links, and up the path near the *Links Hotel*, where he gained the Overstrand Road.

The evening was clear and bright, the sundown across the North Sea a blaze of crimson and gold. There were many promenaders along that well-trodden path, yet it required the exercise of all my cunning to escape the observation of the shrewd and clever man I was following.

At eight o'clock he entered his lodging. Half an hour later, as I lounged past, I saw him seated at dinner between two elderly women, laughing with that easy-going cosmopolitan air – that foreign charm of his, which had carried him through so many strange adventures.

Then I waited – waited until dusk deepened into night. Silent, and without wind, the summer air was fresh and invigorating after the oppressiveness of the day. The street-lamps were lit, yet I still remained watching, and ever on the alert.

The Norfolk constabulary were observing the old, slow, stereotyped, routine methods of police investigation, as I had expected them to do.

I alone had scented the clue to the mystery.

Not a sign had been seen of the cunning old fugitive. Telegrams had been dispatched by the dozen. Scotland Yard had been, of course, "informed," but information from the country is there but lightly considered. Therefore, in all probability, the shrewd old man, who had so cleverly imposed upon the good people of Cromer, was by that time across the Channel.

But, would he leave that splendid treasure of his behind?

All through that evening I waited in patience in the Overstrand Road – waited to see if Jules Jeanjean would come forth again.

At half-past ten, when the moon was shining brightly over the calm sea, I saw him come out, wearing a soft grey felt hat and light drab overcoat. He laughed at the neat maid who opened the door for him, and instinctively put his hand to his hat to raise it, as foreigners so often do.

Instead of walking towards the town, as I had expected, he turned in the direction of Suffield Park, the pretty suburb of Cromer, and actually passed within a few yards of where I was crouching behind the laurel hedge of somebody's front garden.

I allowed him to get some distance ahead, then, treading lightly upon my rubber heels, swiftly followed.

He made in the direction of the great Eastern Railway Station, until he came to the arch where the line crosses the road, when from the shadow there crept silently another figure of a man.

At that hour, and at that point, all was deserted. From where I stood I could see the lights of the great *Links Hotel* high up, dominating the landscape, and nearer were the long, slowly-moving shafts of extreme brilliance, shining from the lighthouse as a warning to mariners on the North Sea.

Jules Jeanjean, the man of a hundred adventures, met the stranger. It was a tryst, most certainly. Under the shadow of a wall I drew back, and watched the pair with eager interest. They whispered, and it was apparent that they were discussing some very serious and weighty matter. Of necessity I was so far away that I could not distinguish the features of the stranger. All I could see was that he was very well dressed, and wore dark clothes, a straw hat, and carried a cane.

Together they walked slowly in the shadow. Jeanjean had linked his arm in that of the stranger, who seemed young and athletic, and was talking very earnestly – perhaps relating what had occurred at the inquest that afternoon, for, though I had not seen him there, I suspected that he might have been present.

I saw Jeanjean give something to his companion, but I could not detect what it was. Something he took very slowly and carefully from his pocket and handed it to the young man, who at first hesitated to accept it, and only did so after Jeanjean's repeated and firm insistence.

It was as though the man I had recognized that afternoon in Cromer was bending the other by his dominant personality – compelling him to act against his will.

And as I stood there I wondered whether after all Jeanjean had actually recognized me when we met in Church Square – or whether he had been struck merely by what he deemed a chance resemblance, and had passed me by without further thought.

Had he recognized me I do not think he would have dared to remain in Cromer a single hour. Hence, I hoped he had not. The fact would render my work of investigation a thousandfold easier.

Presently, after a full quarter of an hour's conversation, the pair strolled together along the moonlit road back towards the town, which at that hour was wrapped in slumber.

By a circuitous route they reached the narrow street at the back of the house where old Mr. Gregory and his nephew had lived, and, after passing and repassing it several times, returned by the way they had come.

Near the railway bridge, where Jeanjean had first met the stranger, both paused and had another earnest conversation. More than once in the lamplight I had caught sight of the man's face, a keen

face, with dark moustache, and sharp, dark eyes. He had a quick, agile gait, and I judged him to be about eight-and-twenty.

Presently the two walked out beyond the arch, and I saw the younger man go behind a hedge, from which he wheeled forth a motor-cycle that had been concealed there. They bade each other adieu, and then, starting his engine, the stranger mounted the machine, and next moment was speeding towards Norwich without having lit his lamp, possibly having forgotten to do so in his hurry to get away.

The Frenchman watched his friend depart, then, leisurely lighting a cigarette, turned and went back to the house in Overstrand Road where he had taken up his temporary abode.

It was half-past two when the night-porter at the *Hôtel de Paris* admitted me, and until the sun had risen over the sea, I sat at my open window, smoking, and thinking.

The discovery that Jules Jeanjean was in that little East Coast town was to me utterly amazing. What was his business in Cromer?

A wire to the *Sûreté* in Paris, stating his whereabouts, would, I knew, create no end of commotion, and Inspector Treeton would no doubt receive urgent orders by telegram from London for the arrest of the seemingly inoffensive man with the jaunty, foreign air.

The little town of Cromer, seething with excitement over the mysterious murder of Edward Craig, little dreamed that it now harboured one of the most dangerous criminals of modern times.

Next day, in the hotel, I was asked on every hand my opinion in regard to the East Cliff murder mystery. The evidence at the inquest was given verbatim in the Norwich papers, and every one was reading it. By reason of my writings, I suppose, I had earned a reputation as a seeker-out of mystery. But to all inquirers I now expressed my inability to theorize on the affair, and carefully preserved an attitude of amazed ignorance.

I scarce dared to go forth that day lest I should again meet Jeanjean, and he should become aware of my presence in Cromer. Had he recognized me when we met? I was continually asking myself that question, and always I came to the conclusion that he had not, or he would not have dared to keep his tryst with the mysterious motor-cyclist.

Were either of the pair responsible for Edward Craig's death? That was the great problem that was before me.

And where was Gregory? If he were not implicated in the crime, why had he absconded?

I examined the copy of that curious letter signed by Egisto, but it conveyed nothing very tangible to me.

Frayne and his men were still passing to and fro in Cromer, making all kinds of abortive inquiries, and were, I knew, entirely on the wrong scent. Like myself, they were seeking the motive which caused the sudden disappearance of old Gregory. They were actually looking for him in the county of Norfolk! I knew, too well, that he must be already safely far away, abroad.

Frayne called in to see me after luncheon, and sat up in my room for an hour, smoking cigarettes.

"I'm leaving the rooms that were occupied by Craig and his uncle just as they are," he said to me. "I'm not touching a thing for the present, so that when we find Gregory we can make him give explanations of what we have secured there. I thought first of taking that sea-chest and its contents over to Norwich with me, but I have now decided to seal up the room and leave everything as it is."

"I understand," I replied, smiling to myself at his forlorn hope of ever finding Mr. Vernon Gregory. For, the further my inquiries had gone, the more apparent was it that the old man was a very wily customer.

"We've made one discovery," said the detective as he lit a fresh cigarette.

"Oh, what's that?" I inquired.

"A young fisherman, named Britton, has come forward and told me that on the night of the murder he was going along the road to Gunton, at about midnight, when he met a man on a motor-cycle, with an empty side-car, coming from the direction of Norwich. The man dismounted and asked

Britton how far it was to Cromer. The fisherman told him, and the fellow rode off. Britton, who had been to see his brother, returned just before two, and met the same motor-cyclist coming back from Cromer, and travelling at a very high speed. He then had somebody in the side-car with him. In the darkness Britton could not get a very good view of the passenger, but he believes that it was a woman."

"A woman!" I echoed, somewhat surprised.

"Yes, he was sure it was a woman," Frayne said. "One good point is, that Britton is able to give a fairly good description of the motor-cyclist, whose face he saw when the fellow got off his machine to speak to him. He pictures him as a sharp-faced man, with a small black moustache, who spoke broken English."

"A foreigner, then?"

"Evidently." Then Frayne went on to remark, "It was foolish of this fellow Britton not to have come forward before, Mr. Vidal. But you know how slow these Norfolk fishermen are. It was only after he was pressed by his friends, to whom he related the incident, that he consented to come to the police-station and have a chat with me."

"Well – then you suspect the motor-cyclist and the woman?"

"Not without some further proof," replied the detective, with a look of wisdom on his face. "We don't know yet if the passenger in the side-car was a woman. Britton only believes so. The foreigner evidently only came into Cromer to fetch a friend."

"But could not any foreigner come into Cromer to fetch a lady friend?" I queried.

"Yes. That's just why I do not attach much importance to the young fellow's story."

"Does he say he could recognize the cyclist again?"

"He believes so. But, unfortunately, he's not a lad of very high intelligence," laughed Frayne. To my companions the statement of that young fisherman evidently meant but little. To me, however, it revealed a very great deal.

CHAPTER VIII

REMAINS AN ENIGMA

Six days had gone by.

The funeral of the unfortunate Edward Craig had taken place, and locally the sensation caused by the tragic discovery had died down.

The weather was beautifully warm, the sea calm, and gradually a few holiday-makers were appearing in the streets; women in summer blouses, knitted golf coats and cotton skirts, with flannel-trousered men. They were of the class who are compelled to take their holidays early, before their employers; with them came delighted children carrying spades and buckets.

Fearing recognition by the notorious Frenchman, I was greatly handicapped, for I was compelled to remain in the hotel all day, and go forth only at night.

Frayne and his men had locked and sealed the rooms which had been occupied by old Gregory and Craig, and had returned to Norwich. In their place had come a plain-clothes man who, as far as I could gather, lounged about the corners of the streets, and chatted idly with the constables in uniform.

The plain-clothes man in our county constabulary system is not an overwhelming success. His only real use seems to be mostly that of a catcher of small boys who go out stealing fruit.

By dint of judicious inquiry, made by my manservant, Rayner, whom I had summoned from London, I had discovered something regarding the foreign gentleman, who had taken apartments in the Overstrand Road.

Rayner could always keep a secret. He was a fair-haired, bullet-headed chap of thirty-two whom I had found, eight years before the date of this story, wandering penniless in the streets of Constantinople. I had taken him into my service, and never once had occasion to regret having done so. He was a model of discretion, and to a man constantly travelling, like myself, a veritable treasure.

Sometimes upon my erratic journeys on the Continent I took him with me, at others he remained at home in my little flat off Berkeley Square. If I ever called upon him to make inquiries for me, to watch, or to follow a suspected person, he obeyed with an intelligence that would, I believe, have done credit to any member of that remarkable combination of brains – the Council of Seven, of New Scotland Yard.

Living an adventurous life, as he had done, his wits had been sharpened, and his perception had become as keen as that of any detective. Therefore, I had called upon him, under seal of secrecy, to assist me in the investigation of many a mystery.

Knowing his value, I had wired to him to come to Cromer. He arrived when I was out. First, he looked through my traps, folded my trousers and coats, arranged my shirts and ties in order with professional precision, and when I returned, entered my room, saying briefly —

"I'm here, sir."

I threw myself into a chair and told him all that had occurred – of course, under strictest secrecy.

Then I gave him minute instructions as to making inquiries of the servants at the house in the Overstrand Road. A servant can always get useful information from other servants, for there is a freemasonry among all who are employed in domestic capacities.

Therefore, it was with interest that I sat in my room, overlooking the sea, on the following day, and listened to Rayner's report.

In his straw hat, and well-cut grey tweed suit, my man made a very presentable appearance. It was the same suit in which he went out to Richmond with his "young lady" on Sundays.

"Well, sir," he said, standing by the window, "I've managed to get to know something. The gentleman is a Belgian doctor named Paul Arendt. He has the two best rooms in the house and is the

only visitor staying there at present. They say he's a bit eccentric; goes out at all hours, but gives lots of money in tips. Seemingly, he's pretty rich."

"Has he had any visitors?" I asked quickly.

"One. Another foreigner. An Italian named Bertini, who rides a motor-cycle."

"Has he been there often?"

"He came last Monday afternoon – three days ago," my man replied.

"Anything else?"

"Well, sir, I managed to make friends with the maidservant, and then, on pretence of wanting apartments myself, got her to show me several rooms in the house in the absence of her mistress. Doctor Arendt was out, too, therefore I took the opportunity of looking around his bedroom. I'd given the girl a sovereign, so she didn't make any objection to my prying about a bit. Arendt is a rather suspicious character, isn't he, sir?" asked Rayner, looking at me curiously.

"That's for you to find out," I replied.

"Well, sir, I have found out," was his quick answer. "In the small top left-hand drawer of the chest of drawers in his room I found a small false moustache and some grease-paint; while in the right-hand drawer was a Browning revolver in a brown leather case, a bottle of strong ammonia, and a small steel tube, about an inch across, with an india-rubber bulb attached to one end."

"Ah!" I said. "I thought as much. You know what the ammonia and rubber ball are for, eh?"

The man grinned.

"Well, sir, I can guess," was his reply. "It's for blinding dogs – eh?"

"Exactly. We must keep a sharp eye upon that Belgian, Rayner."

"Yes, sir. I took the opportunity to have a chat with the maid about the recent affair on the East Cliff, and she told me she believed that the dead man and Doctor Arendt were friends."

"Friends!" I echoed, starting forward at his words.

"Yes, sir. The girl was not quite certain, but believes she saw the Belgian doctor and young Mr. Craig walking together over the golf-links one evening. It was her Sunday out and she was strolling that way just at dusk with her sweetheart."

"She is not quite positive, eh?" I asked.

"No, sir, not quite positive. She only thinks it was young Mr. Craig."

"Did Craig or Gregory ever go to that house while our friend has been there?"

"No, sir. She was quite positive on that point."

"What does the doctor do with himself all day?" I asked.

"Sits reading novels, or the French papers, greater part of the day. Sometimes he writes letters, but very seldom. According to the books I noticed in his room, he delights in stories of mystery and crime."

I smiled. Too well I knew the literary tastes of Jules Jeanjean, the man who was fearless, and being so, was eminently dangerous, and who was passing as a Belgian doctor. He, who had once distinguished himself by holding the whole of the forces of the Paris police at arms' length, and defying them – committing crimes under their very noses out of sheer anarchical bravado – was actually living there as a quiet, studious, steady-going man of literary tastes and refinement – Doctor Paul Arendt, of Liège, Belgium.

Ah! Some further evil was intended without a doubt. Yet so clever were Jeanjean's methods, and so entirely unsuspecting his actions, that I confess I failed to see what piece of chicanery was now in progress.

My next inquiry was in the direction of establishing the identity of the motor-cyclist.

That night Rayner kept watchful vigil instead of myself, for I had been up five nights in succession and required sleep. But though he waited near the house in the Overstrand Road from ten o'clock until four in the morning, nothing occurred. Jeanjean had evidently retired to rest and to sleep.

After that we took it in turns to watch, I having made it right with the night-porter of the hotel, for a pecuniary consideration, to take no notice of our going or coming.

For a whole week the notorious Frenchman did not emerge after he entered the house at dinner-time. I was sorely puzzled regarding the identity of that motor-cyclist. Would he return, or had he left the neighbourhood?

Early one morning Rayner, having taken his turn of watching, returned to say that Bertini, with his motor-cycle, had again met the "foreign gentleman" at the railway bridge – the same spot at which I had seen them meet.

They had remained about half an hour in conversation, after which the stranger had mounted and rode away again on the Norwich road, while Jeanjean had returned to his lodgings.

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.