The Unprincipled Affair of the Practical Joker

THE *Zambesi*, they said, was expected to dock at six in the morning. Mrs Ruyslaender booked a bedroom at the Magnifical, with despair in her heart. A bare nine hours and she would be greeting her husband. After that would begin the sickening period of waiting—it might be days, it might be weeks, possibly even months—for the inevitable discovery.

The reception-clerk twirled the register towards her. Mechanically, as she signed it, she glanced at the preceding entry:

'Lord Peter Wimsey and valet—London—Suite 24.'

Mrs Ruyslaender's heart seemed to stop for a second. Was it possible that, even now, God had left a loophole? She expected little from Him—all her life He had shown Himself a sufficiently stern creditor. It was fantastic to base the frailest hope on this signature of a man she had never even seen.

Yet the name remained in her mind while she dined in her own room. She dismissed her maid presently, and sat for a long time looking at her own haggard reflection in the mirror. Twice she rose and went to the door—then turned back, calling herself a fool. The third time she turned the handle quickly and hurried down the corridor, without giving herself time to think.

A large golden arrow at the corner directed her to Suite 24. It was 11 o'clock, and nobody was within view. Mrs Ruyslaender gave a sharp knock on Lord Peter Wimsey's door and stood back, waiting, with the sort of desperate relief one experiences after hearing a dangerous letter thump the bottom of the pillar-box. Whatever the adventure, she was committed to it.

The manservant was of the imperturbable sort. He neither invited nor rejected, but stood respectfully upon the threshold.

'Lord Peter Wimsey?' murmured Mrs Ruyslaender.

'Yes, madam.'

'Could I speak to him for a moment?'

'His Lordship has just retired, madam. If you will step in, I will enquire.'

Mrs Ruyslaender followed him into one of those palatial sitting-rooms which the Magnifical provides for the wealthy pilgrim.

'Will you take a seat, madam?'

The man stepped noiselessly to the bedroom door and passed in, shutting it behind him. The lock, however, failed to catch, and Mrs Ruyslaender caught the conversation.

'Pardon me, my lord, a lady has called. She mentioned no appointment, so I considered it better to acquaint your lordship.'

'Excellent discretion,' said a voice. It had a slow, sarcastic intonation, which brought a painful flush to Mrs Ruyslaender's cheek. 'I never make appointments. Do I know the lady?'

'No, my lord. But—hem—I know her by sight, my lord. It is Mrs Ruyslaender.'

'Oh, the diamond-merchant's wife. Well, find out tactfully what it's all about, and, unless it's urgent, ask her to call to-morrow.'

The valet's next remark was inaudible, but the reply was:

'Don't be coarse, Bunter.'

The valet returned.

'His lordship desires me to ask you, madam, in what way he can be of service to you?'

'Will you say to him that I have heard of him in connection with the Attenbury diamond case, and am anxious to ask his advice.'

'Certainly, madam. May I suggest that, as his lordship is greatly fatigued, he would be better able to assist you after he has slept.'

'If to-morrow would have done, I would not have thought of disturbing him to-night. Tell him, I am aware of the trouble I am giving— '

'Excuse me one moment, madam.'

This time the door shut properly. After a short interval Bunter returned to say, 'His lordship will be with you immediately, madam,' and to place a decanter of wine and a box of Sobranies beside her.

'Cabled you, did she? And so here we are on the same boat. Odd how things turn out, what? I only got my sailing orders at the last minute. Chasing criminals—my hobby, you know.'

'Oh, really?' Mr Storey licked his lips.

'Yes. This is Detective-Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard—great pal of mine. Yes. Very unpleasant matter, annoying and all that. Bag that ought to have been reposin' peacefully at Paddington Station turns up at Eaton Socon. No business there, what?'

He smacked the bag on the table so violently that the lock sprang open.

Storey leapt to his feet with a shriek, flinging his arms across the opening of the bag as though to hide its contents.

'How did you get that?' he screamed. 'Eaton Socon? It—I never— '

'It's mine,' said Wimsey quietly, as the wretched man sank back, realising that he had betrayed himself. 'Some jewellery of my mother's. What did you think it was?'

Detective Parker touched his charge gently on the shoulder.

'You needn't answer that,' he said. 'I arrest you, Philip Storey, for the murder of your wife. Anything that you say may be used against you.'

do remember one thing. He had an odd scar—crescent-shaped—under his left eye.'

'That settles it,' said Lord Peter. 'I thought as much. Did you recognise the—the face when we took it out, superintendent? No? I did. It was Dahlia Dallmeyer, the actress, who is supposed to have sailed for America last week. And the short man with the crescent-shaped scar is her husband, Philip Storey. Sordid tale and all that. She ruined him, treated him like dirt, and was unfaithful to him, but it looks as though he had had the last word in the argument. And now, I imagine, the Law will have the last word with him. Get busy on the wires, superintendent, and you might ring up the Paddington people and tell 'em to let me have my bag, before Mr Thomas Owen tumbles to it that there's been a slight mistake.'

'Well, anyhow,' said Mr Walters, extending a magnanimous hand to the abashed Mr Simpkins, 'it was a top-hole race—well worth a summons. We must have a return match one of these days.'

Early the following morning a little, insignificant-looking man stepped aboard the trans-Atlantic liner *Volucria*. At the head of the gangway two men blundered into him. The younger of the two, who carried a small bag, was turning to apologise, when a light of recognition flashed across his face.

'Why, if it isn't Mr Storey!' he exclaimed loudly. 'Where are you off to? I haven't seen you for an age.'

'I'm afraid,' said Philip Storey, 'I haven't the pleasure— '

'Cut it out,' said the other, laughing. 'I'd know that scar of yours anywhere. Going out to the States?'

'Well, yes,' said the other, seeing that his acquaintance's boisterous manner was attracting attention. 'I beg your pardon. It's Lord Peter Wimsey, isn't it? Yes. I'm joining the wife out there.'

'And how is she?' enquired Wimsey, steering the way into the bar and sitting down at a table. 'Left last week didn't she? I saw it in the papers.'

'Yes. She's just cabled me to join her. We're—er—taking a holiday in—er—the lakes. Very pleasant there in summer.'

Mrs Ruyslaender lit a cigarette, but had barely sampled its flavour when she was aware of a soft step beside her. Looking round, she perceived a young man, attired in a mauve dressing-gown of great splendour, from beneath the hem of which peeped coyly a pair of primrose silk pyjamas.

'You must think it very strange of me, thrusting myself on you at this hour,' she said, with a nervous laugh.

Lord Peter put his head on one side.

'Don't know the answer to that,' he said. 'If I say, "Not at all," it sounds abandoned. If I say, "Yes, very," it's rude. Supposin' we give it a miss, what? and you tell me what I can do for you.'

Mrs Ruyslaender hesitated. Lord Peter was not what she had expected. She noted the sleek, straw-coloured hair, brushed flat back from a rather sloping forehead, the ugly, lean, arched nose, and the faintly foolish smile, and her heart sank within her.

'I—I'm afraid it's ridiculous of me to suppose you can help me,' she began.

'Always my unfortunate appearance,' moaned Lord Peter, with such alarming acumen as to double her discomfort. 'Would it invite confidence more, d'you suppose, if I dyed my hair black an' grew a Newgate fringe? It's very tryin', you can't think, always to look as if one's name was Algy.'

'I only meant,' said Mrs Ruyslaender, 'that I don't think *anybody* could possibly help. But I saw your name in the hotel book, and it seemed just a chance.'

Lord Peter filled the glasses and sat down.

'Carry on,' he said cheerfully; 'it sounds interestin'.'

Mrs Ruyslaender took the plunge.

'My husband,' she explained, 'is Henry Ruyslaender, the diamond merchant. We came over from Kimberley ten years ago, and settled in England. He spends several months in Africa every year on business, and I am expecting him back on the *Zambesi* to-morrow morning. Now, this is the trouble. Last year he gave me a magnificent diamond necklace of a hundred and fifteen stones— '

'The Light of Africa—I know,' said Wimsey.

She looked a little surprised, but assented. 'The necklace has been stolen from me, and I can't hope to conceal the loss from him. No duplicate would deceive him for an instant.'

She paused, and Lord Peter prompted gently:

'You have come to me, I presume, because it is not to be a police matter. Will you tell me quite frankly why?'

'The police would be useless. I know who took it.'

'Yes?'

'There is a man we both know slightly—a man called Paul Melville.'

Lord Peter's eyes narrowed. 'M'm, yes, I fancy I've seen him about the clubs. New Army, but transferred himself into the Regulars. Dark. Showy. Bit of an ampelopsis, what?'

'Ampelopsis?'

'Surburban plant that climbs by suction. *You* know—first year, tender little shoots—second year, fine show—next year, all over the shop. Now tell me I am rude.'

Mrs Ruyslaender giggled. 'Now you mention it, he is *exactly* like an ampelopsis. What a relief to be able to think of him as that.... Well, he is some sort of distant relation of my husband's. He called one evening when I was alone. We talked about jewels, and I brought down my jewel-box and showed him the Light of Africa. He knows a good deal about stones. I was in and out of the room two or three times, but didn't think to lock up the box. After he left, I was putting the things away, and I opened the jeweller's case the diamonds were in—and they had gone!'

'H'm—pretty bare-faced. Look here, Mrs Ruyslaender, you agree he's an ampelopsis, but you won't call in the police. Honestly, now—forgive me; you're askin' my advice, you know—is he worth botherin' about?'

'It's not that,' said the woman, in a low tone. 'Oh, no! But he took something else as well. He took—a portrait—a small painting set with diamonds.'

'Oh!'

'Yes. It was in a secret drawer in the jewel-box. I can't imagine how he knew it was there, but the box was an old casket, belonging to my husband's family, and I fancy he must have known about the drawer and—well, thought that investigation might prove profitable. Anyway, the evening the diamonds went the portrait went too, and he knows I daren't try to get the necklace back because they'd both be found together.'

'I see,' said the Eaton Socon superintendent. 'Well, that's your statement. Now, about this Thomas Owen— '

'Oh,' cried Lord Peter Wimsey, 'never mind Thomas Owen. He's not the man you want. You can't suppose that a bloke who'd committed a murder would want a fellow tailin' after him to Birmingham with the head. It stands to reason that was intended to stay in Paddington cloakroom till the ingenious perpetrator had skipped, or till it was unrecognisable, or both. Which, by the way, is where we'll find those family heirlooms of mine, which your engaging friend Mr Owen lifted out of my car. Now, Mr Simpkins, just pull yourself together and tell us who was standing next to you at the cloakroom when you took out that bag. Try hard to remember, because this jolly little island is no place for him, and he'll be taking the next boat while we stand talking.'

'I can't remember,' moaned Simpkins. 'I didn't notice. My head's all in a whirl.'

'Never mind. Go back. Think quietly. Make a picture of yourself getting off your machine—leaning it up against something— '

'No, I put it on the stand.'

'Good! That's the way. Now, think—you're taking the cloakroom ticket out of your pocket and going up—trying to attract the man's attention.'

'I couldn't at first. There was an old lady trying to cloakroom a canary, and a very bustling man in a hurry with some golf-clubs. He was quite rude to a quiet little man with a—by Jove! yes, a hand-bag like that one. Yes, that's it. The timid man had had it on the counter quite a long time, and the big man pushed him aside. I don't know what happened, quite, because mine was handed out to me just then. The big man pushed his luggage in front of both of us and I had to reach over it—and I suppose—yes, I must have taken the wrong one. Good God! Do you mean to say that that timid little insignificant-looking man was a murderer?'

'Lots of 'em like that,' put in the Hatfield superintendent. 'But what was he like—come!'

'He was only about five foot five, and he wore a soft hat and a long, dust-coloured coat. He was very ordinary, with rather weak, prominent eyes, I think, but I'm not sure I should know him again. Oh, wait a minute! I

'Cheerio!' said the other, wiping his lips and much mollified. 'Only too charmed to be of use. Remember it in my favour, officer, next time you catch me speeding.'

'Very fortunate we spotted him,' said the superintendent complacently, as they continued their way into Hatfield. 'Quite providential, as you might say.'

'I'll come across with it,' said the wretched Simpkins, sitting handcuffed in the Hatfield police-station. 'I swear to God I know nothing whatever about it—about the murder, I mean. There's a man I know who has a jewellery business in Birmingham. I don't know him very well. In fact, I only met him at Southend last Easter, and we got pally. His name's Owen—Thomas Owen. He wrote me yesterday and said he'd accidentally left a bag in the cloakroom at Paddington and asked if I'd take it out—he enclosed the ticket—and bring it up next time I came that way. I'm in transport service, you see—you've got my card—and I'm always up and down the country. As it happened, I was just going up in that direction with this Norton, so I fetched the thing out at lunch-time and started off with it. I didn't notice the date on the cloakroom ticket. I know there wasn't anything to pay on it, so it can't have been there long. Well, it all went just as you said up to Finchley, and there that boy told me my strap was loose and I went to tighten it up. And then I noticed that the corner of the bag was split, and it was damp—and—well, I saw what you saw. That sort of turned me over, and I lost my head. The only thing I could think of was to get rid of it, quick. I remembered there were a lot of lonely stretches on the Great North Road, so I cut the strap nearly through—that was when I stopped for that drink at Barnet—and then, when I thought there wasn't anybody in sight, I just reached back and gave it a tug, and it went—strap and all; I hadn't put it through the slots. It fell off, just like a great weight dropping off my mind. I suppose Walters must just have come round into sight as it fell. I had to slow down a mile or two farther on for some sheep going into a field, and then I heard him hooting at me—and—oh, my God!'

He groaned, and buried his head in his hands.

'Was there something more than just the portrait, then? A portrait in itself isn't necessarily hopeless of explanation. It was given you to take care of, say.'

'The names were on it—and—and an inscription which nothing, *nothing* could ever explain away. A—a passage from Petronius.'

'Oh, dear!' said Lord Peter, 'dear me, yes. Rather a lively author.'

'I was married very young,' said Mrs Ruyslaender, 'and my husband and I have never got on well. Then one year, when he was in Africa, it all happened. We were wonderful—and shameless. It came to an end. I was bitter. I wish I had not been. He left me, you see, and I couldn't forgive it. I prayed day and night for revenge. Only now—I don't want it to be through me!'

'Wait a moment,' said Wimsey, 'you mean that, if the diamonds are found and the portrait is found too, all this story is bound to come out.'

'My husband would get a divorce. He would never forgive me—or him. It is not so much that I mind paying the price myself, but— '

She clenched her hands.

'I have cursed him again and again, and the clever girl who married him. She played her cards so well. This would ruin them both.'

'But if *you* were the instrument of vengeance,' said Wimsey gently, 'you would hate yourself. And it would be terrible to you because he would hate you. A woman like you couldn't stoop to get your own back. I see that. If God makes a thunderbolt, how awful and satisfying—if you help to make a beastly row, what a rotten business it would be.'

'You seem to understand,' said Mrs Ruyslaender. 'How unusual.'

'I understand perfectly. Though let me tell you,' said Wimsey, with a wry little twist of the lips, 'that it's sheer foolishness for a woman to have a sense of honour in such matters. It only gives her excruciating pain, and nobody expects it, anyway. Look here, don't let's get all worked up. You certainly shan't have your vengeance thrust upon you by an ampelopsis. Why should you? Nasty fellow. We'll have him up—root, branch, and little suckers. Don't worry. Let's see. My business here will only take a day. Then I've got to get to know Melville—say a week. Then I've got to get the doings—say another week, provided he hasn't sold them yet, which isn't likely. Can you hold your husband off 'em for a fortnight, d'you think?'

'Oh, yes. I'll say they're in the country, or being cleaned, or something. But do you really think you can—?'

'I'll have a jolly good try, anyhow, Mrs Ruyslaender. Is the fellow hard up, to start stealing diamonds?'

'I fancy he has got into debt over horses lately. And possibly poker.'

'Oh! Poker player, is he? That makes an excellent excuse for gettin' to know him. Well, cheer up—we'll get the goods, even if we have to buy 'em. But we won't, if we can help it. Bunter!'

'My lord?' The valet appeared from the inner room.

'Just go an' give the "All Clear," will you?'

Mr Bunter accordingly stepped into the passage, and, having seen an old gentleman safely away to the bathroom and a young lady in a pink kimono pop her head out of an adjacent door and hurriedly pop it back on beholding him, blew his nose with a loud, trumpeting sound.

'Good night,' said Mrs Ruyslaender, 'and thank you.'

She slipped back to her room unobserved.

'Whatever has induced you, my dear boy,' said Colonel Marchbanks, 'to take up with that very objectionable fellow Melville?'

'Diamonds,' said Lord Peter. 'Do you find him so, really?'

'Perfectly dreadful man,' said the Hon. Frederick Arbuthnot. 'Hearts. What did you want to go and get him a room here for? This used to be a quite decent club.'

'Two clubs?' said Sir Impey Biggs, who had been ordering a whisky, and had only caught the last word.

'No, no, one heart.'

'I beg your pardon. Well, partner, how about spades? Perfectly good suit.'

'Pass,' said the Colonel. 'I don't know what the Army's coming to nowadays.'

'No trumps,' said Wimsey. 'It's all right, children. Trust your Uncle Pete. Come on, Freddy, how many of those hearts are you going to shout for?'

'None, the Colonel havin' let me down so 'orrid,' said the Hon. Freddy.

'Cautious blighter. All content? Righty-ho! Bring out your dead, partner. Oh, very pretty indeed. We'll make it a slam this time. I'm rather glad to hear that expression of opinion from you, Colonel, because I

He sprang out into the road and waved to the rider, who, seeing four policemen, thought it better to pull up.

'Excuse me,' said his lordship. 'Thought we'd just like to stop you and ask if you were all right, and all that sort of thing, you know. Wanted to stop in passing, throttle jammed open, couldn't shut the confounded thing. Little trouble, what?'

'Oh, yes, perfectly all right, thanks, except that I would be glad if you could spare a gallon of petrol. Tank came adrift. Beastly nuisance. Had a bit of a struggle. Happily, Providence placed a broken strap in my way and I've fixed it. Split a bit, though, where that bolt came off. Lucky not to have an explosion, but there's a special cherub for motor-cyclists.'

'Strap, eh?' said the superintendent. 'Afraid I'll have to trouble you to let me have a look at that.'

'What?' said the other. 'And just as I've got the damned thing fixed? What the—? All right, dear, all right'—to his passenger. 'Is it something serious, officer?'

'Afraid so, sir. Sorry to trouble you.'

'Hi!' yelled one of the policemen, neatly fielding Mr Simpkins as he was taking a dive over the back of the car. 'No use doin' that. You're for it, my lad.'

'No doubt about it,' said the superintendent triumphantly, snatching at the strap which the side-car rider held out to him. 'Here's his name on it, "J. Simpkins," written on in ink as large as life. Very much obliged to *you*, sir, I'm sure. You've helped us effect a very important capture.'

'No! *Who* is it?' cried the girl in the side-car. 'How frightfully thrilling! Is it a murder?'

'Look in your paper to-morrow, miss,' said the superintendent, 'and you may see something. Here, Briggs, better put the handcuffs on him.'

'And how about my tank?' said the man mournfully. 'It's all right for you to be excited, Babs, but you'll have to get out and help push.'

'Oh, no,' said his lordship. 'Here's a strap. A *much* nicer strap. A really superior strap. And petrol. *And* a pocket-flask. Everything a young man ought to know. And, when you're in town, mind you both look me up. Lord Peter Wimsey, 110A Piccadilly. Delighted to see you any time. Chin, chin!'

'I mean, it didn't fall off, so nobody *could* have seen it,' gasped the other.

'Well, my lord,' said the superintendent, 'I'm inclined to accept your suggestion, as it gives us a chance of enquiring into your story at the same time. Mind you, I'm not saying I doubt it, you being who you are. I've read about some of your detective work, my lord, and very smart I considered it. But, still, it wouldn't be my duty not to get corroborative evidence if possible.'

'Good egg! Quite right,' said his lordship. 'Forward the light brigade. We can do it easily in—that is to say, at the legal rate of progress it needn't take us much over an hour and a half.'

About three-quarters of an hour later, the racing car and the police car loped quietly side by side into Hatfield. Henceforward, the four-seater, in which Walters and Simpkins sat glaring at each other, took the lead, and presently Walters waved his hand and both cars came to a stop.

'It was just about here, as near as I can remember, that it fell off,' he said. 'Of course, there's no trace of it now.'

'You're quite sure as there wasn't a strap fell off with it?' suggested the superintendent, 'because, you see, there must 'a' been something holding it on.'

'Of course there wasn't a strap,' said Simpkins, white with passion. 'You haven't any business to ask him leading questions like that.'

'Wait a minute,' said Walters slowly. 'No, there was no strap. But I've got a sort of a recollection of seeing something on the road about a quarter of a mile farther up.'

'It's a lie!' screamed Simpkins. 'He's inventing it.'

'Just about where we passed that man with the side-car a minute or two ago,' said his lordship. 'I told you we ought to have stopped and asked if we could help him, superintendent. Courtesy of the road, you know, and all that.'

'He couldn't have told us anything,' said the superintendent. 'He'd probably only just stopped.'

'I'm not so sure,' said the other. 'Didn't you notice what he was doing? Oh, dear, dear, where were your eyes? Hullo! here he comes.'

particularly want you and Biggy to hang on this evening and take a hand with Melville and me.'

'What happens to me?' enquired the Hon. Freddy.

'You have an engagement and go home early, dear old thing. I've specially invited friend Melville to meet the redoubtable Colonel Marchbanks and our greatest criminal lawyer. Which hand am I supposed to be playin' this from? Oh, yes. Come on, Colonel—you've got to hike that old king out some time, why not now?'

'It's a plot,' said Mr Arbuthnot, with an exaggerated expression of mystery. 'Carry on, don't mind me.'

'I take it you have your own reasons for cultivating the man,' said Sir Impey.

'The rest are mine, I fancy. Well, yes, I have. You and the Colonel would really do me a favour by letting Melville cut in to-night.'

'If you wish it,' growled the Colonel, 'but I hope the impudent young beggar won't presume on the acquaintance.'

'I'll see to that,' said his lordship. 'Your cards, Freddy. Who had the ace of hearts? Oh! I had it myself, of course. Our honours.... Hullo! Evenin', Melville.'

The ampelopsis was rather a good-looking creature in his own way. Tall and bronzed, with a fine row of very persuasive teeth. He greeted Wimsey and Arbuthnot heartily, the Colonel with a shade too much familiarity, and expressed himself delighted to be introduced to Sir Impey Biggs.

'You're just in time to hold Freddy's hand,' said Wimsey; 'he's got a date. Not his little paddy-paw, I don't mean—but the dam' rotten hand he generally gets dealt him. Joke.'

'Oh, well,' said the obedient Freddy, rising, 'I s'pose I'd better make a noise like a hoop and roll away. Night, night, everybody.'

Melville took his place, and the game continued with varying fortunes for two hours, at the end of which time Colonel Marchbanks, who had suffered much under his partner's eloquent theory of the game, was beginning to wilt visibly.

Wimsey yawned.

'Gettin' a bit bored, Colonel? Wish they'd invent somethin' to liven this game up a bit.'

'Oh, Bridge is a one-horse show, anyway,' said Melville. 'Why not have a little flutter at poker, Colonel? Do you all the good in the world. What d'you say, Biggs?'

Sir Impey turned on Wimsey a thoughtful eye, accustomed to the sizing-up of witnesses. Then he replied:

'I'm quite willing, if the others are.'

'Damn good idea,' said Lord Peter. 'Come now, Colonel, be a sport. You'll find the chips in that drawer, I think. I always lose money at poker, but what's the odds so long as you're happy. Let's have a new pack.'

'Any limit?'

'What do *you* say, Colonel?'

The Colonel proposed a twenty-shilling limit. Melville, with a grimace, amended this to one-tenth of the pool. The amendment was carried and the cards cut, the deal falling to the Colonel.

Contrary to his own prophecy, Wimsey began by winning considerably, and grew so garrulously imbecile in the process that even the experienced Melville began to wonder whether this indescribable fatuity was the cloak of ignorance or the mask of the hardened poker-player. Soon, however, he was reassured. The luck came over to his side, and he found himself winning hands down, steadily from Sir Impey and the Colonel, who played cautiously and took little risk—heavily from Wimsey, who appeared reckless and slightly drunk, and was staking foolishly on quite impossible cards.

'I never knew such luck as yours, Melville,' said Sir Impey, when that young man had scooped in the proceeds from a handsome straight-flush.

'My turn to-night, yours to-morrow,' said Melville, pushing the cards across to Biggs, whose deal it was.

Colonel Marchbanks required one card. Wimsey laughed vacantly and demanded an entirely fresh hand; Biggs asked for three; and Melville, after a pause for consideration, took one.

It seemed as though everybody had something respectable this time—though Wimsey was not to be depended upon, frequently going the limit upon a pair of jacks in order, as he expressed it, to keep the pot a-boiling. He became peculiarly obstinate now, throwing his chips in with a flushed face, in spite of Melville's confident air.

with a ghastly white face and drunk two double brandies and gone out and ridden off furiously. Number?—of course not. The barmaid told me. *She* didn't notice the number. After that it was a tale of furious driving all along the road. After Hatfield, I got the story of a road-race. And here we are.'

'It seems to me, my lord,' said the superintendent, 'that the furious driving can't have been all on one side.'

'I admit it,' said the other, 'though I do plead in extenuation that I spared the women and children and hit up the miles in the wide, open spaces. The point at the moment is— '

'Well, my lord,' said the superintendent, 'I've got your story, and, if it's all right, it can be verified by enquiry at Paddington and Finchley and so on. Now, as for these two gentlemen— '

'It's perfectly obvious,' broke in Mr Walters, 'the bag dropped off this man's carrier, and, when he saw me coming after him with it, he thought it was a good opportunity to saddle me with the cursed thing. Nothing could be clearer.'

'It's a lie,' said Mr Simpkins. 'Here's this fellow has got hold of the bag—I don't say how, but I can guess—and he has the bright idea of shoving the blame on me. It's easy enough to *say* a thing's fallen off a man's carrier. Where's the proof? Where's the strap? If his story's true, you'd find the broken strap on my 'bus. The bag *was* on *his* machine—tied on, tight.'

'Yes, with string,' retorted the other. 'If I'd gone and murdered someone and run off with their head, do you think I'd be such an ass as to tie it on with a bit of twopenny twine? The strap's worked loose and fallen off on the road somewhere; that's what's happened to that.'

'Well, look here,' said the man addressed as 'my lord,' 'I've got an idea for what it's worth. Suppose, superintendent, you turn out as many of your men as you think adequate to keep an eye on three desperate criminals, and we all tool down to Hatfield together. I can take two in my 'bus at a pinch, and no doubt you have a police car. If this thing *did* fall off the carrier, somebody beside Mr Walters may have seen it fall.'

'They didn't,' said Mr Simpkins.

'There wasn't a soul,' said Mr Walters, 'but how do *you* know there wasn't, eh? I thought you didn't know anything about it.'