

He had a magnificent great house about five miles out of the city, crammed full of pictures and antiques and so on. He was somewhere between thirty-five and forty, I should think, dark and smooth, and very quick and lively in his movements. He talked very well; seemed to have been everywhere and have seen everything and not to have any too good an opinion of anybody. You could sit and listen to him for hours; he'd got anecdotes about everybody, from the Pope to old Phineas E. Groot of the Chicago Ring. The only kind of story I didn't care about hearing from him was the improper sort. Not that I don't enjoy an after-dinner story—no, sir, I wouldn't like you to think I was a pig—but he'd tell it with his eye upon you as if he suspected you of having something to do with it. I've known women do that, and I've seen men do it to women and seen the women squirm, but he was the only man that's ever given me that feeling. Still, apart from that, Loder was the most fascinating fellow I've ever known. And, as I say, his house surely was beautiful, and he kept a first-class table.

He liked to have everything of the best. There was his mistress, Maria Morano. I don't think I've ever seen anything to touch her, and when you work for the screen you're apt to have a pretty exacting standard of female beauty. She was one of those big, slow, beautifully moving creatures, very placid, with a slow, wide smile. We don't grow them in the States. She'd come from the South—had been a cabaret dancer he said, and she didn't contradict him. He was very proud of her, and she seemed to be devoted to him in her own fashion. He'd show her off in the studio with nothing on but a fig-leaf or so—stand her up beside one of the figures he was always doing of her, and compare them point by point. There was literally only one half-inch of her, it seemed, that wasn't absolutely perfect from the sculptor's point of view—the second toe of her left foot was shorter than the big toe. He used to correct it, of course, in the statues. She'd listen to it all with a good-natured smile, sort of vaguely flattered, you know. Though I think the poor girl sometimes got tired of being gloated over that way. She'd sometimes hunt me out and confide to me that what she had always hoped for was to run a restaurant of her own, with a cabaret show and a great many cooks with white aprons, and lots of polished electric cookers. "And then I would marry," she'd say, "and have four sons and one daughter," and she told me all the names she had chosen for the family. I thought it was rather pathetic. Loder came in at the end of one of

these conversations. He had a sort of grin on, so I dare say he'd overheard. I don't suppose he attached much importance to it, which shows that he never really understood the girl. I don't think he ever imagined any woman would chuck up the sort of life he'd accustomed her to, and if he was a bit possessive in his manner, at least he never gave her a rival. For all his talk and his ugly statues, she'd got him, and she knew it.

I stayed there getting on for a month altogether, having a thundering good time. On two occasions Loder had an art spasm, and shut himself up in his studio to work and wouldn't let anybody in for several days on end. He was rather given to that sort of stunt, and when it was over we would have a party, and all Loder's friends and hangers-on would come to have a look at the work of art. He was doing a figure of some nymph or goddess, I fancy, to be cast in silver, and Maria used to go along and sit for him. Apart from those times, he went about everywhere, and we saw all there was to be seen.

I was fairly annoyed, I admit, when it came to an end. War was declared, and I'd made up my mind to join up when that happened. My heart put me out of the running for trench service, but I counted on getting some sort of a job, with perseverance, so I packed up and went off.

I wouldn't have believed Loder would have been so genuinely sorry to say good-bye to me. He said over and over again that we'd meet again soon. However, I did get a job with the hospital people, and was sent over to Europe, and it wasn't till 1920 that I saw Loder again.

He'd written to me before, but I'd had two big pictures to make in '19, and it couldn't be done. However, in '20 I found myself back in New York, doing publicity for *The Passion Streak*, and got a note from Loder begging me to stay with him, and saying he wanted me to sit for him. Well, that was advertisement that he'd pay for himself, you know, so I agreed. I had accepted an engagement to go out with Mystofilms Ltd. in *Jake of Dead Man's Bush*—the dwarfmen picture, you know, taken on the spot among the Australian bushmen. I wired them that I would join them at Sydney the third week in April, and took my bags out to Loder's.

Loder greeted me very cordially, though I thought he looked older than when I last saw him. He had certainly grown more nervous in his manner. He was—how shall I describe it?—more *intense*—more real, in a way. He brought out his pet cynicisms as if he thoroughly meant them, and more and

more with that air of getting at you personally. I used to think his disbelief in everything was a kind of artistic pose, but I began to feel I had done him an injustice. He was really unhappy; I could see that quite well, and soon I discovered the reason. As we were driving out in the car I asked after Maria.

"She has left me," he said.

Well, now, you know, that really surprised me. Honestly, I hadn't thought the girl had that much initiative. "Why," I said, "has she gone and set up in that restaurant of her own she wanted so much?"

"Oh! she talked to you about restaurants, did she?" said Loder. "I suppose you are one of the men that women tell things to. No. She made a fool of herself. She's gone."

I didn't quite know what to say. He was so obviously hurt in his vanity, you know, as well as in his feelings. I muttered the usual things, and added that it must be a great loss to his work as well as in other ways. He said it was.

I asked him when it had happened and whether he'd finished the nymph he was working on before I left. He said, "Oh, yes, he'd finished that and done another—something pretty original, which I should like."

Well, we got to the house and dined, and Loder told me he was going to Europe shortly, a few days after I left myself, in fact. The nymph stood in the dining-room, in a special niche let into the wall. It really was a beautiful thing, not so showy as most of Loder's work, and a wonderful likeness of Maria. Loder put me opposite it, so that I could see it during dinner, and, really, I could hardly take my eyes off it. He seemed very proud of it, and kept on telling me over and over again how glad he was that I liked it. It struck me that he was falling into a trick of repeating himself.

We went into the smoking-room after dinner. He'd had it rearranged, and the first thing that caught one's eye was a big settee drawn before the fire. It stood about a couple of feet from the ground, and consisted of a base made like a Roman couch, with cushions and a highish back, all made of oak with a silver inlay, and on top of this, forming the actual seat one sat on, if you follow me, there was a great silver figure of a nude woman, fully life-size, lying with her head back and her arms extended along the sides of the couch. A few big loose cushions made it possible to use the thing as an actual settee, though I must say it never was really comfortable to sit on respectably. As a stage prop, for registering dissipation it would have been excellent, but to

Eric P. Loder, pretty well known in New York at that period, who would have been a very fine sculptor if he hadn't had more money than was good for him, or so I understood from the people who go in for that kind of thing. He used to exhibit a good deal and had a lot of one-man shows of his stuff to which the highbrow people went—he did a good many bronzes, I believe. Perhaps you know about him, Masterman?

"I've never seen any of his things," said the poet, "but I remember some photographs in *The Art of To-Morrow*. Clever, but rather overripe. Didn't he go in for a lot of that chryselephantine stuff? Just to show he could afford to pay for the materials, I suppose."

"Yes, that sounds very like him."

"Of course—and he did a very slick and very ugly realistic group called Lucina, and had the impudence to have it cast in solid gold and stood in his front hall."

"Oh, that thing! Yes—simply beastly! I thought it, but then I never could see anything artistic in the idea. Realism, I suppose you'd call it. I like a picture or a statue to make you feel good, or what's it there for? Still, there was something very attractive about Loder."

"How did you come across him?"

"Oh, yes. Well, he saw me in that little picture of mine, *Apollo Comes to New York*—perhaps you remember it. It was my first star part. About a statue that's brought to life—one of the old gods, you know—and how he gets on in a modern city. Dear old Reubenssohn produced it. Now, there was a man who could put a thing through with consummate artistry. You couldn't find an atom of offence from beginning to end, it was all so tasteful, though in the first part one didn't have anything to wear except a sort of scarf—taken from the classical statue, you know."

"The Belvedere?"

"I dare say. Well. Loder wrote to me, and said as a sculptor he was interested in me, because I was a good shape and so on, and would I come and pay him a visit in New York when I was free. So I found out about Loder, and decided it would be good publicity, and when my contract was up, and I had a bit of time to fill in, I went up east and called on him. He was very decent to me, and asked me to stay a few weeks with him while I was looking around."

the service of the cinema screen. He had come to London from Los Angeles to stimulate publicity for his great new film, *Marathon*, and turned out to be quite a pleasant, unspoiled person—greatly to the relief of the club, since Masterman’s guests were apt to be something of a toss-up.

There were only eight men, including Varden, in the brown room that evening. This, with its panelled walls, shaded lamps, and heavy blue curtains was perhaps the cosiest and pleasantest of the small smoking-rooms, of which the club possessed half a dozen or so. The conversation had begun quite casually by Armstrong’s relating a curious little incident which he had witnessed that afternoon at the Temple Station, and Bayes had gone on to say that that was nothing to the really very odd thing which had happened to him, personally, in a thick fog one night in the Euston Road.

Masterman said that the more secluded London squares teemed with subjects for a writer, and instanced his own singular encounter with a weeping woman and a dead monkey, and then Judson took up the tale and narrated how, in a lonely suburb, late at night, he had come upon the dead body of a woman stretched on the pavement with a knife in her side and a policeman standing motionless near by. He had asked if he could do anything, but the policeman had only said, ‘I wouldn’t interfere if I was you, sir; she deserved what she got.’ Judson said he had not been able to get the incident out of his mind, and then Petifer told them of a queer case in his own medical practice, when a totally unknown man had led him to a house in Bloomsbury where there was a woman suffering from strychnine poisoning. This man had helped him in the most intelligent manner all night, and, when the patient was out of danger, had walked straight out of the house and never reappeared; the odd thing being that, when he (Petifer) questioned the woman, she answered in great surprise that she had never seen the man in her life and had taken him to be Petifer’s assistant.

‘That reminds me,’ said Varden, ‘of something still stranger that happened to me once in New York—I’ve never been able to make out whether it was a madman or a practical joke, or whether I really had a very narrow shave.’

This sounded promising, and the guest was urged to go on with his story. ‘Well, it really started ages ago,’ said the actor, ‘seven years it must have been—just before America came into the war. I was twenty-five at the time, and had been in the film business a little over two years. There was a man called

see Loder sprawling over it by his own fireside gave me a kind of shock. He seemed very much attached to it, though.

“I told you,” he said, “that it was something original.”

Then I looked more closely at it, and saw that the figure actually was Maria’s, though the face was rather sketchily done, if you understand what I mean. I suppose he thought a bolder treatment more suited to a piece of furniture.

But I did begin to think Loder a trifle degenerate when I saw that couch. And in the fortnight that followed I grew more and more uncomfortable with him. That personal manner of his grew more marked every day, and sometimes, while I was giving him sittings, he would sit there and tell one of the most beastly things, with his eyes fixed on one in the nastiest way, just to see how one would take it. Upon my word, though he certainly did me uncommonly well, I began to feel I’d be more at ease among the bushmen.

Well, now I come to the odd thing.’

Everybody sat up and listened a little more eagerly.

‘It was the evening before I had to leave New York,’ went on Varden. ‘I was sitting—’

Here somebody opened the door of the brown room, to be greeted by a warning sign from Bayes. The intruder sank obscurely into a large chair and mixed himself a whisky with extreme care not to disturb the speaker.

‘I was sitting in the smoking-room,’ continued Varden, ‘waiting for Loder to come in. I had the house to myself, for Loder had given the servants leave to go to some show or lecture or other, and he himself was getting his things together for his European trip and had had to keep an appointment with his man of business. I must have been very nearly asleep, because it was dusk when I came to with a start and saw a young man quite close to me.

He wasn’t at all like a housebreaker, and still less like a ghost. He was, I might almost say, exceptionally ordinary-looking. He was dressed in a grey English suit, with a fawn overcoat on his arm, and his soft hat and stick in his hand. He had sleek, pale hair, and one of those rather stupid faces, with a long nose and a monocle. I stared at him, for I knew the front door was locked, but before I could get my wits together he spoke. He had a curious, hesitating, husky voice and a strong English accent. He said, surprisingly:

“Are you Mr Varden?”

“You have the advantage of me,” I said.

He said, "Please excuse my butting in; I know it looks like bad manners, but you'd better clear out of this place very quickly, don't you know."

"What the hell do you mean?" I said.

He said, "I don't mean it in any impertinent way, but you must realise that Loder's never forgiven you, and I'm afraid he means to make you into a hat-stand or an electric-light fitting, or something of that sort."

My God! I can tell you I felt queer. It was such a quiet voice, and his manners were perfect, and yet the words were quite meaningless! I remembered that madmen are supposed to be extra strong, and edged towards the bell—and then it came over me with rather a chill that I was alone in the house.

"How did you get here?" I asked, putting a bold face on it.

"I'm afraid I picked the lock," he said, as casually as though he were apologising for not having a card about him. "I couldn't be sure Loder hadn't come back. But I do really think you had better get out as quickly as possible."

"See here," I said, "who are you and what the hell are you driving at? What do you mean about Loder never forgiving me? Forgiving me what?"

"Why," he said, "about—you *will* pardon me prancing in on your private affairs, won't you—about Maria Morano."

"*What* about her, in the devil's name?" I cried. "What do you know about her, anyway? She went off while I was at the war. What's it to do with me?"

"Oh!" said the very odd young man, "I beg your pardon. Perhaps I have been relying too much on Loder's judgment. Damned foolish; but the possibility of his being mistaken did not occur to me. He fancies you were Maria Morano's lover when you were here last time."

"Maria's lover?" I said. "Preposterous! She went off with her man, whoever he was. He must know she didn't go with me."

"Maria never left the house," said the young man, "and if you don't get out of it this moment, I won't answer for *your* ever leaving, either."

"In God's name," I cried, exasperated, "what do you mean?"

The man turned and threw the blue cushions off the foot of the silver couch. "Have you ever examined the toes of this?" he asked.

"Not particularly," I said, more and more astonished. "Why should I?"

"Did you ever know Loder make any figure of her but this with that short toe on the left foot?" he went on.

The Abominable History of the Man with Copper Fingers

THE Egotists' Club is one of the most genial places in London. It is a place to which you may go when you want to tell that odd dream you had last night, or to announce what a good dentist you have discovered. You can write letters there if you like, and have the temperament of a Jane Austen, for there is no silence room, and it would be a breach of club manners to appear busy or absorbed when another member addresses you. You must not mention golf or fish, however, and, if the Hon. Freddy Arbutnot's motion is carried at the next committee meeting (and opinion so far appears very favourable), you will not be allowed to mention wireless either. As Lord Peter Wimsey said when the matter was mooted the other day in the smoking-room, those are things you can talk about anywhere. Otherwise the club is not specially exclusive. Nobody is ineligible *per se*, except strong, silent men. Nominees are, however, required to pass certain tests, whose nature is sufficiently indicated by the fact that a certain distinguished explorer came to grief through accepting, and smoking, a powerful Trichinopoly cigar as an accompaniment to a '63 port. On the other hand, dear old Sir Roger Bunt (the coster millionaire who won the £20,000 ballot offered by the *Sunday Shriek*, and used it to found his immense catering business in the Midlands) was highly commended and unanimously elected after declaring frankly that beer and a pipe were all he really cared for in that way. As Lord Peter said again: 'Nobody minds coarseness but one must draw the line at cruelty.'

On this particular evening, Masterman (the cubist poet) had brought a guest with him, a man named Varden. Varden had started life as a professional athlete, but a strained heart had obliged him to cut short a brilliant career, and turn his handsome face and remarkably beautiful body to account in

Well, I did take a look at it then, and saw it was as he said—the left foot had a short second toe.

“So it is,” I said, “but, after all, why not?”

“Why not, indeed?” said the young man. “Wouldn’t you like to see why, of all the figures Loder made of Maria Morano, this is the only one that has the feet of the living woman?”

He picked up the poker.

“Look!” he said.

With a lot more strength than I should have expected from him, he brought the head of the poker down with a heavy crack on the silver couch. It struck one of the arms of the figure neatly at the elbow-joint, smashing a jagged hole in the silver. He wrenched at the arm and brought it away. It was hollow, and, as I am alive, I tell you there was a long, dry arm-bone inside it!

Varden paused, and put away a good mouthful of whisky.

‘Well?’ cried several breathless voices.

‘Well,’ said Varden, ‘I’m not ashamed to say I went out of that house like an old buck-rabbit that hears the man with the gun. There was a car standing just outside, and the driver opened the door. I tumbled in, and then it came over me that the whole thing might be a trap, and I tumbled out again and ran till I reached the trolley-cars. But I found my bags at the station next day, duly registered for Vancouver.’

When I pulled myself together I did rather wonder what Loder was thinking about my disappearance, but I could no more have gone back into that horrible house than I could have taken poison. I left for Vancouver next morning, and from that day to this I never saw either of those men again. I’ve still not the faintest idea who the fair man was, or what became of him, but I heard in a round-about way that Loder was dead—in some kind of an accident, I fancy.’

There was a pause. Then:

‘It’s a damned good story, Mr Varden,’ said Armstrong—he was a dabbler in various kinds of handiwork, and was, indeed, chiefly responsible for Mr Arbuthnot’s motion to ban wireless—but are you suggesting there was a complete skeleton inside that silver casting? Do you mean Loder put it into the core of the mould when the casting was done? It would be awfully difficult and dangerous—the slightest accident would have put him at the mercy of his

workmen. And that statue must have been considerably over life-size to allow of the skeleton being well covered.’

‘Mr Varden has unintentionally misled you, Armstrong,’ said a quiet, husky voice suddenly from the shadow behind Varden’s chair. ‘The figure was not silver, but electro-plated on a copper base deposited direct on the body. The lady was Sheffield-plated, in fact. I fancy the soft parts of her must have been digested away with pepsin, or some preparation of the kind, after the process was complete, but I can’t be positive about that.’

‘Hullo, Wimsey,’ said Armstrong, ‘was that you came in just now? And why this confident pronouncement?’

The effect of Wimsey’s voice on Varden had been extraordinary. He had leapt to his feet, and turned the lamp so as to light up Wimsey’s face.

‘Good evening, Mr Varden,’ said Lord Peter. ‘I’m delighted to meet you again and to apologise for my unceremonious behaviour on the occasion of our last encounter.’

Varden took the proffered hand, but was speechless.

‘D’you mean to say, you mad mystery-monger, that *you* were Varden’s Great Unknown?’ demanded Bayes. ‘Ah, well,’ he added rudely, ‘we might have guessed it from his vivid description.’

‘Well, since you’re here,’ said Smith-Harington, the *Morning Yell* man, ‘I think you ought to come across with the rest of the story.’

‘Was it just a joke?’ asked Judson.

‘Of course not,’ interrupted Pettifer, before Lord Peter had time to reply. ‘Why should it be? Wimsey’s seen enough queer things not to have to waste his time inventing them.’

‘That’s true enough,’ said Bayes. ‘Comes of having deductive powers and all that sort of thing, and always sticking one’s nose into things that are better not investigated.’

‘That’s all very well, Bayes,’ said his lordship, ‘but if I hadn’t just mentioned the matter to Mr Varden that evening, where would he be?’

‘Ah, where? That’s exactly what we want to know,’ demanded Smith-Harington. ‘Come on, Wimsey, no shirkings; we must have the tale.’

‘And the whole tale,’ added Pettifer.

‘And nothing but the tale,’ said Armstrong, dexterously whisking away the whisky-bottle and the cigars from under Lord Peter’s nose. ‘Get on with it,

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old son. Not a smoke do you smoke and not a sup do you sip till Burd Ellen is set free.'

'Brute!' said his lordship plaintively. 'As a matter of fact,' he went on, with a change of tone, 'it's not really a story I want to get about. It might land me in a very unpleasant sort of position—manslaughter probably, and murder possibly.'

'Gosh!' said Bayes.

'That's all right,' said Armstrong, 'nobody's going to talk. We can't afford to lose you from the club, you know. Smith-Hartington will have to control his passion for copy, that's all.'

Pledges of discretion having been given all round, Lord Peter settled himself back and began his tale

'The curious case of Eric P. Loder affords one more instance of the strange manner in which some power beyond our puny human wills arranges the affairs of men. Call it Providence—call it Destiny—'

'We'll call it off,' said Bayes; 'you can leave out that part.'

Lord Peter groaned and began again.

'Well, the first thing that made me feel a bit inquisitive about Loder was a casual remark by a man at the Emigration Office in New York where I happened to go about that silly affair of Mrs Bilt's. He said, "What on earth is Eric Loder going to do in Australia? I should have thought Europe was more in his line."

"Australia?" I said, "you're wandering, dear old thing. He told me the other day he was off to Italy in three weeks' time."

"Italy, nothing," he said, "he was all over our place to-day, asking about how you got to Sydney and what were the necessary formalities, and so on."

"Oh," I said, "I suppose he's going by the Pacific route, and calling at Sydney on his way." But I wondered why he hadn't said so when I'd met him the day before. He had distinctly talked about sailing for Europe and doing Paris before he went on to Rome.

I felt so darned inquisitive that I went and called on Loder two nights later.

He seemed quite pleased to see me, and was full of his forthcoming trip. I asked him again about his route, and he told me quite distinctly he was going via Paris.

Lord Peter Views The Body

Well, that was that, and it wasn't really any of my business, and we chatted about other things. He told me that Mr Varden was coming to stay with him before he went, and that he hoped to get him to pose for a figure before he left. He said he'd never seen a man so perfectly formed. "I meant to get him to do it before," he said, "but war broke out, and he went and joined the army before I had time to start."

He was lolling on that beastly couch of his at the time, and, happening to look round at him, I caught such a nasty sort of glitter in his eye that it gave me quite a turn. He was stroking the figure over the neck and grinning at it.

"None of your efforts in Sheffield-plate, I hope," said I.

"Well," he said, "I thought of making a kind of companion to this, *The Sleeping Athlete*, you know, or something of that sort."

"You'd much better cast it," I said. "Why did you put the stuff on so thick? It destroys the fine detail."

That annoyed him. He never liked to hear any objection made to that work of art.

"This was experimental," he said. "I mean the next to be a real masterpiece. You'll see."

We'd got to about that point when the butler came in to ask should he make up a bed for me, as it was such a bad night. We hadn't noticed the weather particularly, though it had looked a bit threatening when I started from New York. However, we now looked out, and saw that it was coming down in sheets and torrents. It wouldn't have mattered, only that I'd only brought a little open racing car and no overcoat, and certainly the prospect of five miles in that downpour wasn't altogether attractive. Loder urged me to stay, and I said I would.

I was feeling a bit fagged, so I went to bed right off. Loder said he wanted to do a bit of work in the studio first, and I saw him depart along the corridor.

You won't allow me to mention Providence, so I'll only say it was a very remarkable thing that I should have woken up at two in the morning to find myself lying in a pool of water. The man had struck a hot-water bottle into the bed, because it hadn't been used just lately, and the beastly thing had gone and unstopped itself. I lay awake for ten minutes in the depths of damp misery before I had sufficient strength of mind to investigate. Then I found it was hopeless—sheets, blankets, mattress, all soaked. I looked at the arm-chair, and

Lord Peter Views the Body



Dorothy L. Sayers