

green silk stockings and heavy brogue shoes thickly covered with mud.

‘His lordship has not yet returned, my lady,’ said Mr Bunter, ‘but Mr Parker is here waiting for him, and we are expecting him at any minute now. Will your ladyship take anything?’

‘No, no,’ said the vision hastily, ‘nothing, thanks. I’ll wait. Good evening, Mr Parker. Where’s Peter?’

‘He has been called out, Lady Mary,’ said Parker. ‘I can’t think why he isn’t back yet. Do sit down.’

‘Where did he go?’

‘To Scotland Yard—but that was about six o’clock. I can’t imagine—’

Lady Mary made a gesture of despair.

‘I knew it. Oh, Mr Parker, what am I to do?’

Mr Parker was speechless.

‘I *must* see Peter,’ cried Lady Mary. ‘It’s a matter of life and death. Can’t you send for him?’

‘But I don’t know where he is,’ said Parker. ‘Please, Lady Mary—’

‘He’s doing something dreadful—he’s all *wrong*,’ cried the young woman, wringing her hands with desperate vehemence.

‘I must see him—tell him—Oh! did anybody ever get into such dreadful trouble! I—oh!—’

Here the lady laughed loudly and burst into tears.

‘Lady Mary—I beg you—please don’t,’ cried Mr Parker anxiously, with a strong feeling that he was being incompetent and rather ridiculous. ‘Please sit down. Drink a glass of wine. You’ll be ill if you cry like that. If it is crying,’ he added dubiously to himself. ‘It *sounds* like hiccups. Bunter!’

Mr Bunter was not far off. In fact, he was just outside the door with a small tray. With a respectful ‘Allow me, sir,’ he stepped forward to the withering Lady Mary and presented a small phial to

her nose. The effect was startling. The patient gave two or three fearful whoops, and sat up, erect and furious.

‘How *dare* you, Bunter!’ said Lady Mary. ‘Go away at once!’

‘Your ladyship had better take a drop of brandy,’ said Mr Bunter, replacing the stopper in the smelling-bottle, but not before Parker had caught the pungent reek of ammonia. ‘This is the 1800 Napoleon brandy my lady. Please don’t snort so, if I may make the suggestion. His lordship would be greatly distressed to think that any of it should be wasted. Did your ladyship dine on the way up? No? Most unwise, my lady, to undertake a long journey on a vacant interior. I will take the liberty of sending in an omelette for your ladyship. Perhaps you would like a little snack of something yourself, sir, as it is getting late?’

‘Anything you like,’ said Mr Parker, waving him off hurriedly.

‘Now, Lady Mary, you’re feeling better, aren’t you? Let me help you off with your coat.’

No more of an exciting nature was said until the omelette was disposed of, and Lady Mary comfortably settled on the Chesterfield. She had by now recovered her poise. Looking at her, Parker noticed how her recent illness (however produced) had left its mark upon her. Her complexion had nothing of the brilliance which he remembered; she looked strained and white, with purple hollows under her eyes.

‘I am sorry I was so foolish just now, Mr Parker,’ she said, looking into his eyes with a charming frankness and confidence, ‘but I was dreadfully distressed, and I came up from Riddlesdale so hurriedly.’

‘Not at all,’ said Parker meaninglessly. ‘Is there anything I can do in your brother’s absence?’

‘I suppose you and Peter do everything together?’

‘I think I may say that neither of us knows anything about this investigation which he has not communicated to the other.’

‘If I tell you, it’s the same thing?’

‘Exactly the same thing. If you can bring yourself to honour me with your confidence—’

‘Wait a minute, Mr Parker. I’m in a difficult position. I don’t quite know what I ought—Can you tell me just how far you’ve got—what you have discovered?’

Mr Parker was a little taken aback. Although the face of Lady Mary had been haunting his imagination ever since the inquest, and although the agitation of his feelings had risen to boiling-point during this romantic interview, the official instinct of caution had not wholly deserted him. Holding, as he did, proofs of Lady Mary’s complicity in the crime, whatever it was, he was not so far gone as to fling all his cards on the table.

‘I’m afraid,’ he said, ‘that I can’t quite tell you that. You see, so much of what we’ve got is only suspicion as yet. I might accidentally do great mischief to an innocent person.’

‘Ah! You definitely suspect somebody, then?’

‘Indefinitely would be a better word for it,’ said Mr Parker with a smile. ‘But if you have anything to tell us which may throw light on the matter, I beg you to speak. We may be suspecting a totally wrong person.’

‘I shouldn’t be surprised,’ said Lady Mary, with a sharp, nervous little laugh. Her hand strayed to the table and began pleating the orange envelope into folds. ‘What do you want to know?’ she asked suddenly, with a change of tone. Parker was conscious of a new hardness in her manner—a something braced and rigid.

He opened his note-book, and as he began his questioning his nervousness left him; the official reasserted himself.

‘You were in Paris last February?’

Lady Mary assented.

‘Do you recollect going with Captain Cathcart—oh! by the way, you speak French, I presume?’

‘Yes, very fluently.’

‘As well as your brother—practically without accent?’

Chapter 7

The Club and the Bullet

He is dead, and by my hand. It were better that I were dead myself, for the guilty wretch I am.

Adventures Of Sexton Blake

FOUR after hour Mr Parker sat waiting for his friend’s return. Again and again he went over the Riddlesdale Case, checking his notes here, amplifying them there, involving his tired brain in speculations of the most fantastic kind. He wandered about the room, taking down here and there a book from the shelves, strumming a few unskilful bars upon the piano, glancing through the weeklies, fidgeting restlessly. At length he selected a volume from the criminological section of the bookshelves, and forced himself to read with attention that most fascinating and dramatic of poison trials—the Seddon Case. Gradually the mystery gripped him, as it invariably did, and it was with a start of astonishment that he looked up at a long and vigorous whirring of the doorbell, to find that it was already long past midnight.

His first thought was that Wimsey must have left his latchkey behind, and he was preparing a facetious greeting when the door opened—exactly as in the beginning of a Sherlock Holmes story—to admit a tall and beautiful young woman, in an extreme state of nervous agitation, with a halo of golden hair, violet-blue eyes, and disordered apparel all complete; for as she threw back her heavy travelling-coat he observed that she wore evening dress, with light

He leapt out of the flat, and a moment later his taxi buzzed away up Piccadilly.

‘Quite as well. We always had French governesses as children, and mother was very particular about it.’

‘I see. Well, now, do you remember going with Captain Cathcart on February 6th to a jeweller’s in the Rue de la Paix and buying, or his buying for you, a tortoiseshell comb set with diamonds and a diamond-and-platinum cat with emerald eyes?’

He saw a lurking awareness come into the girl’s eyes.

‘Is that the cat you have been making inquiries about in Riddlesdale?’ she demanded.

‘It being never worth while to deny the obvious, Parker replied, ‘Yes.’

‘It was found in the shrubbery, wasn’t it?’

‘Had you lost it? Or was it Cathcart’s?’

‘If I said it was his—’

‘I should be ready to believe you. *Was* it his?’

‘No’—a long breath—‘it was mine.’

‘When did you lose it?’

‘That night.’

‘Where?’

‘I suppose in the shrubbery. Wherever you found it. I didn’t miss it till later.’

‘Is it the one you bought in Paris?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why did you say before that it was not yours?’

‘I was afraid.’

‘And now?’

‘I am going to speak the truth.’

Parker looked at her again. She met his eye frankly, but there was a tenseness in her manner which showed that it had cost her something to make her mind up.

‘Very well,’ said Parker, ‘we shall all be glad of that, for I think there were one or two points at the inquest on which you didn’t tell the truth, weren’t there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do believe,’ said Parker, ‘that I am sorry to have to ask these questions. The terrible position in which your brother is placed—’

‘In which I helped to place him.’

‘I don’t say that.’

‘I do. I helped to put him in jail. Don’t say I didn’t, because I did.’

‘Well,’ said Parker, ‘don’t worry. There’s plenty of time to put it all right again. Shall I go on?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, now, Lady Mary, it wasn’t true about hearing that shot at three o’clock, was it?’

‘No.’

‘Did you hear the shot at all?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘At 11.50.’

‘What was it, then, Lady Mary, you hid behind the plants in the conservatory?’

‘I hid nothing there.’

‘And in the oak chest on the landing?’

‘My skirt.’

‘You went out—why?—to meet Cathcart?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who was the other man?’

‘What other man?’

‘The other man who was in the shrubbery. A tall, fair man dressed in a Burberry?’

‘There was no other man.’

‘Oh, pardon me, Lady Mary. We saw his footmarks all the way up from the shrubbery to the conservatory.’

‘It must have been some tramp. I know nothing about him.’

‘That’s about it,’ said Peter. ‘I suppose she was so desperately anxious to throw us off the scent of № 10 that it never occurred to her that her story was going to help implicate her brother.’

‘She realized it at the inquest,’ said Parker eagerly. ‘Don’t you remember how hastily she grasped at the suicide theory?’

‘And when she found that she was simply saving her—well, № 10—in order to hang her brother, she lost her head, took to her bed, and refused to give any evidence at all. Seems to me there’s an extra allowance of fools in my family,’ said Peter gloomily.

‘Well, what could she have done, poor girl?’ asked Parker. He had been growing almost cheerful again. ‘Anyway, she’s cleared—’

‘After a fashion,’ said Peter, ‘but we’re not out of the wood yet by a long way. Why is she hand-in-glove with № 10 who is at least a blackmailer if not a murderer? How did Gerald’s revolver come on the scene? And the green-eyed cat? How much did Mary know of that meeting between № 10 and Denis Cathcart? And if she was seeing and meeting the man she might have put the revolver into his hands any time.’

‘No, no,’ said Parker. ‘Wimsey, don’t think such ugly things as that.’

‘Hell!’ cried Peter, exploding. ‘I’ll have the truth of this beastly business if we all go to the gallows together!’

At this moment Bunter entered with a telegram addressed to Wimsey. Lord Peter read as follows:

PARTY TRACED LONDON; SEEN MARYLEBONE FRI-
DAY. FURTHER INFORMATION FROM SCOTLAND
YARD.—POLICE-SUPERINTENDENT GOSLING, RUPLEX.

‘Good egg!’ cried Wimsey. ‘Now we’re gettin’ down to it. Stay here, there’s a good man, in case anything turns up. I’ll run round to the Yard now. They’ll send you up dinner, and tell Bunter to give you a bottle of the Château Yquem—it’s rather decent. So long.’

servatory door with her suit-case, expecting to meet the—the murderer of her—damn it, Wimsey!’

‘We needn’t go so far as that,’ said Peter; ‘we decided that she *didn’t* expect to find Cathcart dead.’

‘No. Well, she went, presumably to meet somebody.’

‘Shall we say, *pro tem*, she went to meet No. 10?’ suggested Wimsey softly.

‘I suppose we may as well say so. When she turned on the torch and saw the Duke stooping over Cathcart she thought—by Jove, Wimsey, I was right after all! When she said, “You’ve killed him!” she meant No. 10—she thought it was No. 10’s body.’

‘Of course!’ cried Wimsey. ‘I’m a fool! Yes. Then she said, “It’s Denis—what has happened?” That’s quite clear. And, meanwhile, what did she do with the suit-case?’

‘I see it all now,’ cried Parker. ‘When she saw that the body wasn’t the body of No. 10 she realized that No. 10 must be the murderer. So her game was to prevent anybody knowing that No. 10 had been there. So she shoved the suit-case behind the cacti. Then, when she went upstairs, she pulled it out again, and hid it in the oak chest on the landing. She couldn’t take it to her room, of course, because if anybody’d heard her come upstairs it would seem odd that she should run to her room before calling the others. Then she knocked up Arbutnot and the Pettigrew-Robinsons—she’d be in the dark, and they’d be flustered and wouldn’t see exactly what she had on. Then she escaped from Mrs P., ran into her room, took off the skirt in which she had knelt by Cathcart’s side, and the rest of her clothes, and put on her pyjamas and the cap, which someone might have noticed, and the coat, which they *must* have noticed, and the shoes, which had probably left footmarks already. Then she could go down and show herself. Meantime she’d concocted the burglar story for the Coroner’s benefit.’

‘But we have proof that he was there—of what he did, and how he escaped. For heaven’s sake, and your brother’s sake, Lady Mary, tell us the truth—for that man in the Burberry was the man who shot Cathcart.’

‘No,’ said the girl, with a white face, ‘that is impossible.’

‘Why impossible?’

‘I shot Denis Cathcart myself.’

‘So that’s how the matter stands, you see, Lord Peter,’ said the Chief of Scotland Yard, rising from his desk with a friendly gesture of dismissal. ‘The man was undoubtedly seen at Marylebone on the Friday morning, and, though we have unfortunately lost him again for the moment, I have no doubt whatever that we shall lay hands on him before long. The delay has been due to the unfortunate illness of the porter Morrison, whose evidence has been so material. But we are wasting no time now.’

‘I’m sure I may leave it to you with every confidence, Sir Andrew,’ replied Wimsey, cordially shaking hands. ‘I’m diggin’ away too; between us we ought to get somethin’—you in your small corner and I in mine, as the hymn says—or is it a hymn? I remember readin’ it in a book about missionaries when I was small. Did you want to be a missionary in your youth? I did. I think most kids do some time or another, which is odd, seein’ how unsatisfactory most of us turn out.’

‘Meanwhile,’ said Sir Andrew Mackenzie, ‘if you run across the man yourself, let us know. I would never deny your extraordinary good fortune, or it may be good judgment, in running across the criminals we may be wanting.’

‘If I catch the bloke,’ said Lord Peter, ‘I’ll come and shriek under your windows till you let me in, if it’s the middle of the night and you in your little night-shirt. And talking of night-shirts reminds me that we hope to see you down at Denver one of these

days, as soon as this business is over. Mother sends kind regards, of course.'

'Thanks very much,' replied Sir Andrew. 'I hope you feel that all is going well. I had Parker in here this morning to report, and he seemed a little dissatisfied.'

'He's been doing a lot of ungrateful routine work,' said Wimsey, 'and being altogether the fine, sound man he always is. He's been a damn good friend to me, Sir Andrew, and it's a real privilege to be allowed to work with him. Well, so long, Chief.'

He found that his interview with Sir Andrew Mackenzie had taken up a couple of hours, and that it was nearly eight o'clock. He was just trying to make up his mind where to dine when he was accosted by a cheerful young woman with bobbed red hair, dressed in a short checked skirt, brilliant jumper, corduroy jacket, and a rakish green velvet tam-o'-shanter.

'Surely,' said the young woman, extending a shapely, ungloved hand, 'it's Lord Peter Wimsey. How're you? And how's Mary?'

'B'love!' said Wimsey gallantly, 'it's Miss Tarrant. How perfectly rippin' to see you again. Absolutely delightful. Thanks, Mary ain't as fit as she might be—worryin' about this murder business, y'know. You've heard that we're what the poor so kindly and tactfully call "in trouble," I expect, what?'

'Yes, of course,' replied Miss Tarrant eagerly, 'and, of course, as a good Socialist, I can't help rejoicing rather when a peer gets taken up, because it does make him look so silly, you know, and the House of Lords is silly, isn't it? But, really, I'd rather it was anybody else's brother. Mary and I were such great friends, you know, and, of course, *you* do investigate things, don't you, not just live on your estates in the country and shoot birds? So I suppose that makes a difference.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Peter. 'If you can prevail upon yourself to overlook the misfortune of my birth and my other

Do you remember what Mrs Petigrew-Robinson said to you in the train?'

'About the door slamming on the landing, do you mean?'

'Yes. Now I'll tell you something that happened to me the other morning. I was burstin' out of the bathroom in my usual breezy way when I caught myself a hell of a whack on that old chest on the landin', and the lid lifted up and shut down, *plonk!* That gave me an idea, and I thought I'd have a squint inside. I'd got the lid up and was lookin' at some sheets and stuff that were folded up at the bottom, when I heard a sort of gasp, and there was Mary, stratin' at me, as white as a ghost. She gave me a turn, by Jove, but nothin' like the turn I'd given her. Well, she wouldn't say anything to me, and got hysterical, and I hauled her back to her room. But I'd seen something on those sheets.'

'What?'

'Silver sand.'

'Silver—'

'D'you remember those cacti in the greenhouse, and the place where somebody'd put a suit-case or something down?'

'Yes.'

'Well, there was a lot of silver sand scattered about—the sort people stick round some kinds of bulbs and things.'

'And that was inside the chest too?'

'Yes. Wait a moment. After the noise Mrs Petigrew-Robinson heard, Mary woke up Freddy and then the Petigrew-Robinsons—and then what?'

'She locked herself into her room.'

'Yes. And shortly afterwards she came down and joined the others in the conservatory, and it was at this point everybody remembered noticing that she was wearing a cap and coat and walking shoes over pyjamas and bare feet.'

'You are suggesting,' said Parker, 'that Lady Mary was already awake and dressed at three o'clock, that she went out by the con-

might be burglars. Now how does she dress to go and look for burglars? What would you or I have done? I think we would have taken a dressing-gown, a stealthy kind of pair of slippers, and perhaps a poker or a stout stick—not a pair of walking shoes, a coat, and a cap, of all things!’

‘It was a wet night,’ mumbled Parker.

‘My dear chap, if it’s burglars you’re looking for you don’t expect to go and hunt them round the garden. Your first thought is that they’re getting into the house, and your idea is to slip down quietly and survey them from the staircase or behind the dining-room door. Anyhow, fancy a present-day girl, who rushes about bare-headed in all weathers, stopping to embellish herself in a cap for a burglar-hunt—damn it all, Charles, it won’t wash, you know! And she walks straight off to the conservatory and comes upon the corpse, exactly as if she knew where to look for it beforehand.’

Parker shook his head again.

‘Well, now. She sees Gerald stooping over Cathcart’s body. What does she say? Does she ask what’s the matter? Does she ask who it is? She exclaims: “O God! Gerald, you’ve killed him,” and *then* she says, as if on second thoughts, “Oh, it’s Denis! What has happened? Has there been an accident?” Now, does that strike you as natural?’

‘No. But it rather suggests to me that it wasn’t Cathcart she expected to see there, but somebody else.’

‘Does it? It rather sounds to me as if she was pretending not to know who it was. First she says, “You’ve killed him!” and then, recollecting that she isn’t supposed to know who “he” is, she says, “Why, it’s Denis!”’

‘In any case, then, if her first exclamation was genuine, she didn’t expect to find the man dead.’

‘No—no—we must remember that. The death *was* a surprise. Very well. Then Gerald sends Mary up for help. And here’s where a little bit of evidence comes in that you picked up and sent along.

deficiencies, p’raps you would honour me by comin’ along and havin’ a bit of dinner somewhere, what?’

‘Oh, I’d have *loved* to,’ cried Miss Tarrant, with enormous energy, ‘but I’ve promised to be at the club tonight. There’s a meeting at nine. Mr Coke—the Labour leader, you know—is going to make a speech about converting the Army and Navy to Communism. We expect to be raided, and there’s going to be a grand hunt for spies before we begin. But look here, do come along and dine with me there, and, if you like, I’ll try to smuggle you in to the meeting, and you’ll be seized and turned out. I suppose I oughtn’t to have told you anything about it, because you ought to be a deadly enemy, but I can’t really believe you’re dangerous.’

‘I’m just an ordinary capitalist, I expect,’ said Lord Peter, ‘highly obnoxious.’

‘Well, come to dinner, anyhow. I *do* so want to hear all the news.’

Peter reflected that the dinner at the Soviet Club would be worse than execrable, and was just preparing an excuse when it occurred to him that Miss Tarrant might be able to tell him a good many of the things that he didn’t know, and really ought to know, about his own sister. Accordingly, he altered his polite refusal into a polite acceptance, and, plunging after Miss Tarrant, was led at a reckless pace and by a series of grimy short cuts into Gerrard Street, where an orange door, flanked by windows with magenta curtains, sufficiently indicated the Soviet Club.

The Soviet Club, being founded to accommodate free thinking rather than high living, had that curious amateur air which pervades all worldly institutions planned by unworldly people. Exactly why it made Lord Peter instantly think of mission teas he could not say, unless it was that all the members looked as though they cherished a purpose in life, and that the staff seemed rather sketchily trained and strongly in evidence. Wimsey reminded him-

self that in so democratic an institution one could hardly expect the assistants to assume that air of superiority which marks the servants in a West End club. For one thing, they would not be such capitalists. In the dining-room below the resemblance to a mission tea was increased by the exceedingly heated atmosphere, the babel of conversation, and the curious inequalities of the cutlery. Miss Tarrant secured seats at a rather crummy table near the serving-hatch, and Peter wedged himself in with some difficulty next to a very large, curly-haired man in a velvet coat, who was earnestly conversing with a thin, eager young woman in a Russian blouse, Venetian beads, a Hungarian shawl and a Spanish comb, looking like a personification of the United Front of the Internationale.’

Lord Peter endeavoured to please his hostess by a question about the great Mr Coke, but was checked by an agitated ‘Hush!’ ‘*Please* don’t shout about it,’ said Miss Tarrant, leaning across till her auburn mop positively tickled his eyebrows. ‘It’s so secret.’ ‘I’m awfully sorry,’ said Wimsey apologetically. ‘I say, d’you know you’re dipping those jolly little beads of yours in the soup?’ ‘Oh, am I?’ cried Miss Tarrant, withdrawing hastily. ‘Oh, thank you so much. Especially as the colour runs. I hope it isn’t arsenic or anything.’ Then, leaning forward again, she whispered hoarsely:

‘The girl next me is Erica Heath-Warburton—the writer, you know.’

Wimsey looked with a new respect at the lady in the Russian blouse. Few books were capable of calling up a blush to his cheek, but he remembered that one of Miss Heath-Warburton’s had done it. The authoress was just saying impressively to her companion: ‘—ever know a sincere emotion to express itself in a subordinate clause?’

‘Joyce has freed us from the superstition of syntax,’ agreed the curly man.

out and stays out. At 11:50 the gamekeeper, Hardraw, hears a shot which may very well have been fired in the clearing where the—well, let’s say the accident—took place. The time also agrees with the medical evidence about Cathcart having already been dead three or four hours when he was examined at 4:30. Very well. At 3 A.M. Jerry comes home from somewhere or other and finds the body. As he is bending over it, Mary arrives in the most apropos manner from the house in her coat and cap and walking shoes. Now what is her story? She says that at three o’clock she was awakened by a shot. Now nobody else heard that shot, and we have the evidence of Mrs Petigrew-Robinson, who slept in the next room to Mary, with her window open according to her immemorial custom, that she lay broad awake from 2 A.M. till a little after 3 A.M., when the alarm was given, and heard no shot. According to Mary, the shot was loud enough to waken her on the other side of the building. It’s odd, isn’t it, that the person already awake should swear so positively that she heard nothing of a noise loud enough to waken a healthy young sleeper next door? And, in any case, *if* that was the shot that killed Cathcart, he can barely have been dead when my brother found him—and again, in that case, how was there time for him to be carried up from the shrubbery to the conservatory?’

‘We’ve been over all this ground,’ said Parker, with an expression of distaste. ‘We agreed that we couldn’t attach any importance to the story of the shot.’

‘I’m afraid we’ve got to attach a great deal of importance to it,’ said Lord Peter gravely. ‘Now, what does Mary do? Either she thought the shot—’

‘There was no shot.’

‘I know that. But I’m examining the discrepancies of her story. She said she did not give the alarm because she thought it was probably only poachers. But, if it was poachers, it would be absurd to go down and investigate. So she explains that she thought it