THE CLEVEDON
: : CASE : :

BY

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CHAPTER I
A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

I BECAME mixed up with the Clevedon case—the Cartordale Mystery, as it has been called—in curious fashion. True, it was to some extent in my line of business, though I do not actually earn my living by straightening out tangles. With me it is all a matter of "copy."

You may or may not have read my various books—there are eight of them now—on criminology. Their preparation has led me into all sorts of queer by-ways and has given me a curiously clear and analytical insight into the mind of the criminal. I have solved many mysteries—you will forgive the apparent boastfulness, but I have no useful Watson to detail my exploits—but I stop there, with solving them, I mean. When I know the answer, I hand the whole matter over to the police. "There is your man (or woman)—take him," I say. And sometimes they do take him—and hang him. But occasionally they reply, "But we can't take him—we couldn't prove it against him." That, however, is no business of mine. I am a scientist, not a police official, and have nothing to do with the foolery of their law courts or the flummery of what they call their rules of evidence.

I have supplied the answer to the conundrum and that suffices me. The mystery and its solution go into my notebooks, to be used eventually for my own purpose, it may be to illustrate a theory, or perhaps to demonstrate a scientific fact. I have no desire to pose and no intention of posing as a worker of miracles.

There is nothing marvellous about my methods nor wonderful in the results. I do but proceed from fact to fact, as you will see in this narrative, wherein I have set forth exactly what happened, however foolish it may make me look. The reader will accompany me step by step in my investigation of the Clevedon mystery and will learn precisely how the solution, which so bewildered and astonished the little group in Cartordale, came to me. You will see me groping in the dark, then you will discover, as I did, a pin-point of light which grows wider and wider until the whole story stands revealed. And if you guess the solution before I did, that will show that you are a cleverer detective than I am, which may very easily be.

I did not, by the way, go to Cartordale for the purpose of investigating this particular mystery. I became involved in it almost involuntarily. It was a queerly tangled skein enough, and that of itself would have been sufficient fascination to drag me into it, though I was deep in it long before any intention or even desire to solve the puzzle manifested itself. As a rule I carefully select my cases. Some appeal to me, others do not. But in this instance I was not entirely a free agent. I was in it before I quite knew where I was going. That being so, it may be interesting to explain how I came to be at Cartordale at all.

My Aunt Emily, to put it briefly, left me the house and the money that took me into the wilds of Peakshire. I had never met her in the flesh, and she, as far as I know, had never set eyes on me. In point of fact, she never forgave my father for taking to himself a second wife after my mother died. But that is family history and dry stuff. Aunt Emily made amends for past neglect by her will. She left me about eight hundred a year from investments, and the house at Cartordale, both very useful, though I was not exactly a poor man.

My books have provided me with a fairly steady income for some years.

Stone Hollow, the house I had inherited, was a square, rather gloomy-looking building—outwardly sombre, at all events—situated at the head of Cartordale, a wild and romantic valley in the heart of Peakshire, some sixteen miles from the large industrial city of Midlington. The name, Stone Hollow, had a comparatively recent derivation, arising from the fact that the house was built on the site of, and largely on the profits from, a now disused stone quarry.

The house itself stood on a sort of broad shelf, and behind it a tall hill sprang almost perpendicularly upwards, still showing on its face the marks and scars of former quarrying operations, though Nature was already busy trying to hide the evidences of man's vandalism behind a cover of green and brown. Before the house, the ground sloped gently downwards towards the Dale, while to the left was a stretch of heather clad moorland lying between Stone Hollow and White Towers, the residence of Sir Philip Clevedon.

It sounds rather well in description, but I will frankly confess that after a very few days at Cartordale I was bored. Though I had travelled widely, I had never actually lived out of London and was always very quickly eager to be back there. At first, I had done my best to persuade myself that a country life was really the ideal and that it would provide me with quiet and isolation that would be useful for literary work. But I soon arrived at the limit of my resources in self-deception. Which brings me to the night of February 23rd.

I was lolling on the couch in the room I had made my study, pretending to work and succeeding very badly.

“Nothing ever happens in a place like this,” I said aloud, with a yawn. “I should become a hopeless vegetable if I lived here. I couldn’t even write another book. There isn’t a chapter in the whole blessed place. Neither robbery nor murder ever happens. The folk wouldn’t know the meaning of the words without looking them up in a dictionary. Honesty is the badge of all their tribe, and honesty, if commendable, is dull.”

I took up a batch of manuscript from the desk at my elbow and began to read in rather desultory fashion, making a correction here and there with a pencil.

“Another delusion shattered,” I murmured. “They say one can write so much better in the quiet of the country than amid the bustle and distractions of town. That is bunkum. This one can’t, anyway. I thought I would have made a good start with this book, but I have done next to nothing, and what there is of it is rotten. I could do more work in a week in London than I shall do in three months of this. I think I’ll be getting back next week.”

But I was wrong in saying that nothing ever happened in Cartordale. Adventure was even at that moment coming towards me with very hurried footsteps.

The time—it is essential always to be precise in details—was fifty-three minutes past eleven, and the date February 23rd.

It came, the beginning of the story, with a quick, almost peremptory tapping on the window-pane and then the bottom sash was slowly pushed up. I turned to the desk and took a revolver

from one of the small drawers, then strode across the room and raised the blind with a quick rattle, half expecting that my visitor would reveal himself in the shape of a burglar. What I saw brought even me to a standstill, little susceptible as I am to surprises of any sort.

My visitor was not a burglar—at least, not a male of that species—but a girl, who looked young enough to be in her teens, though she may have been a year or two outside them, and a great deal too pretty to be wandering about alone at that time of night. She was wearing a long, sleeveless cloak and a grey, woollen cap, from beneath which part of her hair had escaped and was blowing about her face in little wisps of bronze-gold cloud.

“Let me in,” she whispered. “Please—I have hurt myself and I am afraid to go on.”

I stretched out my hands and, placing them beneath her arms, lifted her over the low window-sill and into the room.

“How strong you are,” she murmured.

But even as she said that, the something that had kept her up gave way and she lay a limp, dead weight in my clasp. I carried her to the couch, but as I placed her down and began to unfasten the long, grey cloak, I noticed that the sleeve of her white blouse was stained with blood. That was evidently the hurt to which she had referred; and I began to wonder whether I had not better summon my housekeeper. It looked essentially a case for feminine aid. The girl, however, was already recovering.

“No, come here,” she said, as I began to move towards the door.

I returned to her side and gently lifted her arm.

“Yes, you have hurt yourself,” I remarked. “See—your arm, isn’t it?—there is blood—”

“Yes, it’s my arm,” she replied, lifting her cloak and showing a ragged tear in the blouse on the under-side of the sleeve. “It’s not very bad—I think—but it seems to be bleeding a good deal, and I—I am afraid of blood.”

“May I look at it?” I asked. “I could perhaps bandage it, and—”

“Are you a doctor—how nice!” she cried.

“No,” I replied with a smile, “I am not a doctor. But I am a first-aid expert, enough of one, anyway, to say whether or not a doctor is necessary. Yes, I have treated much bigger injuries than this. It is only a scratch, I fancy, and the blood looks more than it really is. A very little blood makes a mess of things. Lie still a minute. I have everything here within reach and we’ll soon put you right.”

I brought a pair of scissors and cut away the sleeve, finding the arm beneath it—the left arm, by the way—rather badly gashed.

“To-morrow you must show that to a doctor,” I said when I had washed and bandaged it. “Now I will give you a glass of wine and—”

“Is there anyone but you in the house?” the girl asked abruptly, as if some thought had suddenly occurred to her.

“There is my housekeeper,” I said, “and a maid. Shall I rouse them and—?”

“Mercy, no!” she exclaimed. “Whatever would they say if they found me here—at this time of night—?”

I nodded, quite comprehending the hint so conveyed.

“I have been visiting a friend,” she went on, observing me keenly through her drooping eyelashes, perhaps to see how I took the story, “and I—I lost my way.”

“Your friends should not have allowed you to attempt to find it by yourself,” I returned.

“My friends are not plural,” she retorted with a little trill of laughter. “They—or rather she—she is a maiden lady—and I am not in the least bit nervous. I am a country girl by birth and upbringing, and the darkness means nothing to me. It is the fog that worries me. I stayed later than I should have done, and in my hurry to get back I lost my way. Then I saw the light in your window and I came, meaning to ask where I was. I had to climb over a wall, and in doing that I cut my arm on some glass. I think it is very stupid to put glass on walls—”

“It shall be knocked off to-morrow,” I interrupted.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” the girl said demurely. “I am not likely to come this way again. But do you know Cartordale?”

“Well, know is hardly the word. I am afraid I don’t very well. I have only been here a short time,” I answered. “I know very few people. I have never seen you before, for example.”

That was a leading question very thinly disguised, but she did not rise to it.

“I am afraid,” I went on, “it would be but another instance of the blind leading the blind if I attempted to guide you about the Dale. I will do my best if you will tell me where you live, unless, indeed,

you would prefer to stay here until morning. The place is at your service and I could very easily waken the—”

But my visitor’s negative gesture was very decided.

“What house is this?” she demanded.

“It is called Stone Hollow,” I told her.

“Oh, I know Stone Hollow,” she cried. “It was Mrs.—Mrs.—a lady with a curious name, but I have forgotten it.”

“Mrs. Mackaluce,” I volunteered. “She was my aunt.”

“Yes, that was the name, I remember now. I have been here before, but never by the—the back window. If you can put me on the roadway outside Stone Hollow I shall know where I am.”

“I can take you home, at all events, if you can show me the way,” I said.

The girl looked at me for a moment or two doubtfully as if that were not quite what she had intended.

“It is not right that you should be out alone at this time of the night,” I added.

“Oh, right and wrong are merely terms,” she replied, rising to her feet. “There is no law against being out at night. It isn’t forbidden in the Defence of the Realm Act, is it? If I like to be out at night it is right I should be.”

“I was thinking of the danger, not of the law,” I responded dryly.

“Why, whatever danger can there be?” the girl cried, opening wide her pretty eyes. “There are no highway robbers in Cartordale, nor any Germans.”

But I did not argue with her. I simply handed her the woollen cap which had fallen off when she fainted, then helped her to fasten the cloak around her, and finally led her into the hall, picking up my own hat and coat as I went. I was fully determined on seeing her to her own home, wherever that might be and whatever her objections. I opened the door noiselessly and closed it again with the merest click of the lock.

“It is very dark,” I muttered, being a man of the town and used to gas-lamps.

“Yes, it often is at midnight,” the girl replied demurely, but with a little catch in her voice as if she were choking back a laugh. “But I can see very well. Those who are country-born have eyes in their feet, you know, and never miss the path. Why, there are men of the Dale, and women too, for that matter, who will walk across the moors at dark and never miss the path for all it is no more than three feet wide.”

“But you have lost your way once already to-night,” I murmured.

“That doesn’t affect the question,” she retorted scornfully. “It was only because I was trying a short cut. I left the path of my own accord. If I had kept to the road I should have been home by now. The longest way round is the quickest way home. Is that a proverb? It sounds like one. If it isn’t it should be. It is true, anyway. Besides, it is foggy. That makes a difference. Give me your hand.”

Apparently she did see better than I, for the next minute I felt the grip of her slender fingers as she seized mine and began to pull me forward. We went swiftly and in silence, still hand in hand, for some minutes, then her clasp loosened.

For a moment or two the shadow of her lingered beside me, then suddenly disappeared into the fog. We had reached a part of the Dale that was flanked on one side by a wall of rock which deepened even the blackness of the night and made the darkness, to me, at all events, absolutely impenetrable. There was no sign of light or house, nor indeed of any building, and when I groped my way to the side of the road, I stumbled, first into a ditch and then against a low rubble wall, beyond which was only fog much thicker now than it had been earlier in the evening.

And it was there I lost her. How she went, or in which direction, I had no idea. But I had no doubt that she had evaded me of design—and that her home was nowhere thereabout. That she knew the Dale intimately was evident. She had deliberately led me to its darkest spot simply that she might there lose me. I smiled grimly as I realised that. She had fooled me with incomparable skill and wit. I paid a frank mental tribute to her cleverness. A young lady of brains, this, and one whose acquaintance was well worth cultivating.

I stood waiting for some little time—possibly ten minutes or a quarter of an hour—then lit a cigarette and walked slowly back to Stone Hollow, pondering over the queer little adventure, wondering who the girl was and whether—or rather when—I should see her again. She was evidently an inhabitant of the Dale—her familiarity with it at all events suggested that—in which case she could hardly expect to evade me permanently. I must

sooner or later meet and recognise her. At any rate it was a piquant little mystery, and I must confess that somehow Cartordale no longer seemed quite so dull as it had been.

I had little idea then as to what the mystery, in which I had thus become involved, really was or how quickly it would develop on tragic and very unexpected lines.

I reached Stone Hollow again at 2.7 a.m. The whole episode, from the knock on the window to my return home had occupied two hours fourteen minutes.

CHAPTER II
THE TRAGEDY AT WHITE TOWERS

WHEN I came down to Stone Hollow to take over my new inheritance, I found the house completely furnished on extremely comfortable if rather old-fashioned lines; and Martha Helter in possession. She had been my aunt's housekeeper for over twenty years and had evidently every intention of being mine also. I was quite agreeable, since it saved me a lot of trouble, nor have I so far seen any reason to regret that decision.

Mrs. Helter—the title had apparently been accorded her by courtesy, since she was still a spinster and everybody but myself used it; but I began with Martha, her Christian name, and Martha it is to this day—is a most capable manager and runs my household with a precision that reminds one of well-oiled wheels, and a careful economy that has its recommendation in these days of ridiculous prices. She seemed to know and to be known by almost everybody in the Dale, and was an all but exhaustless fountain of anecdote and news.

I say "all but" because she could not give me immediately the information I sought regarding my pretty midnight visitor. Not that I attached very much actual importance to that queer incident. It had amused me, and perhaps, though I would not confess it even to myself, I was just a little piqued at being so cleverly outwitted by a mere girl. I had cause during the day to revise my estimate of the

interest I was to take in my uninvited guest. But my first thought was to identify her.

“Martha,” I said to my housekeeper, “did you ever meet hereabouts a young lady wearing a grey woollen cap and a long cloak without sleeves, a sort of cape reaching to her boots?”

Martha Helter pondered the question for a minute or two, but shook her head.

“I don’t think I have ever seen a cloak like that in Cartordale,” she replied.

“I saw one yesterday,” I said, “and I wondered who the wearer was. Never mind, perhaps I shall see her—I mean it—again. It was the pattern of the cloak that took my fancy.”

I am not quite sure why I added that last phrase, though if Martha noticed anything she kept a perfectly straight face.

“A grey woollen cap and a long cloak without sleeves?” said the little maid who entered the room at that moment and to whom the housekeeper propounded the question. “Why, yes’m, that’s Miss Kitty Clevedon—lives with her ladyship, you know. There are two gentlemen to see the master,” she added.

“Bring them in,” I said. “Who are they? Do you know them?”

“One of them is Sergeant Gamley, of the County Police,” Susan replied, “but the other is a stranger and did not give his name.”

“Bring them in,” I repeated.

Sergeant Gamley was in uniform, a tall, thin man with a long hatchet face and an air of important solemnity which he never shed.

His companion was rather more rotund in build, with puffy red cheeks above which peered small, keen eyes that did not seem to linger long on anything, but which for all that missed nothing. Abraham Pepster was chief of the detective force at Peakborough, the county town, and one may judge to some extent his prevailing characteristic by the fact that his nickname among disrespectful subordinates was "Gimlet-eyes." It was, however, Sergeant Gamley who opened the conversation on this particular occasion.

"We have called, Mr. Holt," he said, "with regard to the tragedy at White Towers. Sir Philip Clevedon—"

"A tragedy—of what nature?" I interrupted. "I have heard nothing of it. There is nothing in the papers about it, is there? Or have I missed it?"

I interposed just then because I wanted to slow down the story a little. The girl who had visited me last night was named Clevedon—Susan had just told me so—and now there was a Sir Philip Clevedon and a tragedy. I could not help wondering, of course, what connection there could be between the two, but I was determined to feel my way cautiously, resolved not to be hustled or bounced into saying more than I wanted to say. The story, whatever it was, should come from them without any help from me.

"No, Mr. Holt, I dare say you haven't heard anything yet—not many have," Sergeant Gamley went on. "As you say, it isn't in the papers. You are a stranger among us—yes, yes. For the moment I had forgotten that. I knew your late respected aunt very well indeed, Mr. Holt. There was a little matter of a burglary in this very house some four years ago. Mr. Holt"—he turned to his

companion—"has been living here only a very short time. He succeeded the late Mrs. Mackaluce, whose nephew he was."

"Hadn't you better tell Mr. Holt what has happened at White Towers?" the other man suddenly interrupted, speaking in a small, soft voice that was rather curiously in contrast with his bulk, and without any trace of impatience. He had perhaps been as willing as myself that the conversation should not be hurried.

"You can see White Towers from the upper windows of your own house, Mr. Holt," Sergeant Gamley continued. "It lies between you and the village, a large house with an outstanding turret and two smaller towers."

"I have seen it," I said, "but my housekeeper said it was White Abbey, if that is the place you mean."

"The good lady is a little mixed," was Gamley's reply.

He was proud of his local antiquarian knowledge and delighted to parade it, being, indeed, a frequent contributor to the local papers and regarded as an authority on county history in general and Cartordale in particular.

"White Towers," he went on, "stands on the site of the old White Abbey. The older name survives, but the present house, of which Sir Philip Clevedon is the owner—was the owner—"

If there is such a thing as an inward smile I indulged in one then. The method was so obvious and I had so often used it myself. Pepster was allowing the other man to go maundering on while he himself kept me under careful observation. I do not, however, allow my thoughts to be written on my face, and I merely listened impassively. Pepster seemed at last to recognise that he was not

likely to get much help as things were going, for he brushed Gamley aside and took up the story himself.

“The fact is, Mr. Holt,” he said bluntly, “Sir Philip Clevedon was found dead this morning—stabbed—”

He paused there and I waited, making no sign.

“With a lady’s hatpin,” he added, “a big, three-cornered affair with a silver knob.”

I had a swift vision of a white, frightened face beneath a woollen cap, but I could not quite connect the girl of the previous night’s visit with any thought of crime. She did not fit into a picture of that sort. Yet I knew as certainly as if she had told me that she was in some way mixed up with it all. And why had they come to me? Did they know of that midnight visit? I was determined that they should tell me. I would give them no lead. They must do all the talking. Pepster, after a rather lengthy pause, seemed to realise the position.

“Perhaps you wonder why we come to you,” he said in his small, soft voice. “It was merely on the chance that in your late stroll last night—”

So they did know I had been out. Had they also seen my companion?

“—Sergeant Gamley—you stood to light a cigarette and the match lit up your face.”

Pepster paused there again with an obvious appearance of waiting. Following the normal course, the person addressed should now break into more or less voluble explanations of the why and

wherefore of this midnight stroll, explanations which the detective could weigh as they came forth and so form some estimate of their value or otherwise to the quest on which he was engaged. There might be nothing in it. Pepster knew full well that he would interview and interrogate scores of persons during the next few days and would have to sift a prodigious amount of chaff on the off chance of an occasional grain of wheat. In any case he had to go on sifting. That was his job.

"Seeing your name was mentioned in the way it was," Pepster went on, "I thought you might like to explain—"

"Yes?" I said inquiringly, "explain?"

"Your name was mentioned, you know," Pepster murmured.

"So you have told me. But what is it you wish me to explain?"

"You were out very late last night," Pepster remarked.

"Let us be a trifle more explicit," I said. "It comes to this—if you suspect me of having any hand in killing Sir Philip Clevedon with a three-cornered hatpin, you have no right to question me. It is against your rules, isn't it, for you to trip me up and entrap me? If I am not under suspicion I do not quite see whither your questions lead. You may produce the handcuffs or take me into your confidence. But in any case," I added with a quick smile, "I reserve my defence."

"You are a bit off the rails, Mr. Holt," Pepster returned with unabated calm. "I know of nothing which should connect you with the murder, nothing at all. But your name was mentioned, and it is my duty to question everybody who may be in the remotest degree linked up with the affair in case by any chance they may afford me

information. Do you mind telling me why you were out so late last night?"

"I was taking a stroll."

"It was a very foggy, unpleasant night."

"It was extremely so."

"And consequently very dark."

"That coincides with my own recollection."

"A stroll in a thick fog!"

"My dear sir, you ask me a question. I answer it in good faith, and you disbelieve me."

"No, no, not at all," Pepster said blandly. "I accept your word implicitly. It was not the object and inspiration of the—er—the stroll that interested me."

"No? You were not wondering whether I was coming from or going to White Towers? I am glad of that," I returned with apparently great satisfaction. "In point of fact the stroll was a mere whim on my part, induced mainly, I may say, by the hope that it would assist me to a night's sound sleep. I had been writing. One reason why I maintain my cabbage-like existence in a God-forgotten corner of the country like this is that I may write a book. But writing renders the brain a little over-active and—"

I broke off there and waited for the other to continue.

"What I really wanted to know," Pepster went on, "was whether you saw or met anybody during your stroll."

“I saw nobody and met nobody,” I responded equably.

“Somebody passed a few minutes previously,” Pepster continued. “Gamley here heard them talking, a man and a woman. But he could not distinguish them. He thought no more of it at the time, of course. Nothing was known of the murder then. He recognised you only because you struck a match to light your cigarette. But you were alone.”

He nodded to Sergeant Gamley and picked up his hat.

“Would it be impertinent,” I asked, “to inquire whether you have any clue, any idea, any theory—”

“Oh, I never theorise,” Pepster replied with bland serenity. “It is only story-book detectives who theorise. Theories are too much of a luxury for professionals. Facts are my stock-in-trade. I do not travel outside those.”

“You have the hatpin,” I suggested.

“Yes,” he replied vaguely, “we have the hatpin.”

But he had evidently no intention of talking about that.

When they had gone I set myself down to concentrate my thoughts—on the girl’s woollen cap. I have so trained my faculty of observation—just as a conjurer trains his fingers or a dancer her feet—that I see everything even to the smallest detail, though often without making any conscious record of it at the time. When the girl fainted in my arms her woollen cap had fallen off. Consequently there had been no hatpin, though, as I visualised it, I remembered that on the rim of grey cloth which bound the knitted shape, there were marks showing that a hatpin had been in use.

Was it with her hatpin that Sir Philip Clevedon had been done to death?

There you—this to the reader—have the case set forth, and you are in exactly the same position that I was myself—a stranger to the place and the people, knowing practically nobody and with every item of information yet to seek. But we both of us have one small advantage over the police. The latter, as far as I could make out, knew nothing of Miss Kitty Clevedon's midnight adventure.

CHAPTER III
A MEETING IN THE DARK

I HAD not long to wait before making further acquaintance with my pretty midnight visitor. Our second meeting took place within a few hours of the police call and on the same day. I had been out for a long walk across the hills and was tramping steadily along the high road towards Stone Hollow, when I saw, gleaming through the darkness—it was already dark though only late afternoon—at probably the loneliest and most desolate spot in the Dale, the headlights of a motor-car evidently at a standstill.

"It's a weird place for a halt and worse if it's a breakdown," I murmured, and involuntarily quickened my steps.

But as I approached the car I saw a moving light and then the shadow of a woman walking towards me, carrying, apparently, a small electric torch. Evidently she had heard my approach and had set out to meet me. As she stepped momentarily into the light of the car I recognised her. It was the girl of the midnight visit.

"Who is it, Kitty?" demanded a quick, imperious voice somewhere in the darkness. "Tell him to come here. Do you know him?"

"Lady Clevedon is in the car," the girl said a little hurriedly. "Will you come and speak to her?"

"Is it a breakdown?" I queried.

"No," the girl responded, "it is Hartrey. We have lost him."

But I had no immediate opportunity of questioning her as to the missing Hartrey, or the manner of his going, for "Kitty," as the old lady had addressed her, had run to the door of the car and pulled it open, to reveal old Lady Clevedon, white of hair, very erect of figure, rather stern of face and with keen, searching eyes that just now were full of wrath.

"Is there anything I can do?" I began.

"You can find Hartrey," her ladyship responded, not exactly snappily, but quite ungently; she was evidently used to giving orders, and it never occurred to her, apparently, that I would do any other than obey.

"Who is Hartrey?" I demanded.

"He is the chauffeur," the girl explained. "We sent him with a message to Lepley's farm—it is over there."

She pointed vaguely into the darkness, and I followed her gesture with my eyes. But I could see no sign of house or light or living creature—only the darkness and, in the fore-ground, the blurred outlines of masses of rock.

"It should not have taken him ten minutes," the girl went on, "but he has been gone for more than half an hour."

"How far is the farm-house?" I asked. "It is rather queer we cannot see any lights."

"Oh, I think there are some barns or something of the sort between the road and the house," Miss Kitty Clevedon told me. "And, besides, it lies in a hollow and the rocks may hide it. I have seen

the place before, but only in daylight, and I forget just how it stands."

"If you will allow me I will go as far as the house and inquire," I said, producing my own electric lamp. "Possibly your man has tripped over a stone—"

"Tripped over a stone!" her ladyship cried scornfully. "He's more likely philandering with the Lepley girl. Do you know her?"

I replied in the negative, adding that, indeed I had never heard of her.

"Well, you're the only man in the Dale that doesn't know her," the old lady retorted. "Oh, no, there's nothing wrong with the girl, but the men are crazy over her, and Hartrey with the rest, I suppose."

I could not help being a little entertained by the idea that I might be a competitor with the chauffeur for the favours of the fair Lepley. But I did not put the thought into words. I hadn't an opportunity, indeed, for the old lady threw off her rugs and made evident preparations to alight.

"If you would wait here, I could go alone," I ventured, thinking the search would be hampered rather than helped by the old lady's presence. But she did not even answer me. She stepped from the car with an agility which showed that her body was still younger than her years, and herself led the way towards a gap in the tumble-down, rubble wall where once apparently had been a gate. The car, I noticed, was standing well aside on the rough turf that flanked the roadway, and, in any case, there was little enough traffic in those parts at that time of the year. We might leave it

there in safety. And accordingly the three of us made our way along the very rough and uneven road that led to Lepley's farm.

"No," said the farmer's wife, who answered my rap at the door, "Mr. Hartrey has not been here to-night."

She called to somebody who was evidently in a kitchen at the rear of the house.

"Perhaps he tripped ovver a stoan and hurt hisself," the farmer's wife went on, "though if it's that it seems queer you saw nowt of him as you came along. Besides, I don't know what he would be doing tripping ovver a boulder, anyway. I reckon he knows the road blindfolded, and there are no boulders to hurt if you keep to the path."

I could have argued that point with her, for I had nearly twisted my ankle on one group of boulders and had badly barked my shins on another. But it was hardly worth while debating it, since apparently Hartrey had not tripped over a boulder or we should have tripped over him. At this moment, too, a girl emerged from the kitchen, carrying a lamp held high so that she might see who the visitors were. Her sharper eyes discovered the two ladies, and she made a step towards them.

"Her ladyship!" she cried, "and Miss Kitty! Come right in. What is the trouble?"

That was my first introduction to Nora Lepley, a young woman of whom I was to know a good deal more before I finished with her. She was tall and finely built, with plentiful hair so dark as to be almost black, and eyes that in some lights seemed to be of a rich purple and in others of a sombre, rather heavy blue. They were

wonderful eyes and one had no need to wonder that the men of the Dale should be, to use Lady Clevedon's words, "crazy over her." She had then more admirers than she could count on the fingers of both her slim, capably hands, and is still unmarried. I think I know why, though I have hardly any right to say so.

She spoke with an educated intonation, in curious contrast with her mother, who used the ordinary dialect of the Dale. Beautiful, clever, educated, entirely self-possessed, she was certainly something of a novelty to discover in a Cartordale farm-house.

"I thought you were at White Towers with your aunt," Lady Clevedon said.

"I have just run home to get some clothes," the girl replied. "I am going back to-night to stay with Aunty. She is terribly upset. But what is the trouble here?"

"The trouble is," Lady Clevedon retorted grimly, "that I have a fool for a chauffeur. I sent him here with a message, but he hasn't been nor did he come back to us. He went off into the darkness and apparently stopped there, leaving me and the car on the roadway for anybody to run into."

"Well, he hasn't been here," the girl said, with a decision that was evidently characteristic of her. "Wait until I get a lantern and we'll look for him."

Lady Clevedon followed Mrs. Lepley and her daughter into the house, and for a minute or two Miss Kitty Clevedon and I were left together in the porch. She could have followed the others into the house, but for some reason preferred to wait outside. Possibly she wanted to see what I would do. She did not look at me—I noticed

that—but stood near the door, not quite with her back to me, but so that if it had been light I could not have seen her face. She did not speak to me, but I had of course no intention that she should get off as easily as that.

“I hope your arm is better,” I said, speaking softly, so that no sound of my voice might reach those inside.

“I beg your pardon,” the girl returned icily.

“I was expressing the hope that your arm was better,” I explained.

“But there is nothing the matter with my arm—thank you.”

The girl’s voice was perfectly cool and without the slightest sign of flurry or perturbation.

“I may congratulate you on a wonderfully quick recovery, then,” I responded.

“I do not understand you—what was supposed to be the matter with my arm?”

“I was told—it was rumoured—that you had cut it—climbing a wall—a wall with glass on top.”

“I do not climb walls.”

“I don’t suppose you make a hobby of it, but every one does queer things now and again.”

“Such as addressing impertinent observations to a lady one meets for the first time,” she rapped out.

There was a rather lengthy pause, and then I made one more attempt to break down her defences.

“I was very sorry to hear of the—the tragedy at White Towers,” I said softly. “It was a queer coincidence—”

But if I thought to disconcert her by that remark I had miscalculated. She made no reply, but simply walked a few steps away and left me standing. Her acting was perfect. I could not forbear a smile, though at the same time I admired both her courage and her cleverness. Anyone less alert would have admitted our meeting and tried in some way to secure my silence. She did nothing of the sort, but ignored the whole matter, putting up a big bluff in the assurance that since there had been no witnesses to the little midnight incident I should hesitate to tell the story lest I should not be believed. Of course I knew very well that if I had really been guilty of the impertinence of which she had accused me she would not have received it quite in that way. However, I had no opportunity for further efforts because just at that moment the Lepley girl reappeared with a shawl over her head and a big lantern in her hand, her mother and Lady Clevedon following her.

We went slowly along in a sort of zigzag, going for six or eight yards to the left of the roadway and then recrossing it and covering a similar space on the opposite side. It was a lengthy process and it was wasted time, because, as we neared the car, we saw Hartrey standing by it, looking from left to right into the darkness, evidently with rather dismal forebodings.

“He’s there!” Miss Kitty Clevedon cried in accents of relief, but the tone in which her ladyship echoed the phrase was quite otherwise. The latter approached the car and demanded to know what Hartrey meant by leaving her alone there on the high road and why he had not gone to the farm to deliver her message.

“I lost my way, my lady, in the darkness,” the man replied. “I found myself at the bend of the road higher up—”

“Now, Hartrey,” her ladyship said severely, “when I engaged you I gave you extra wages on condition that you should be teetotal.”

“My lady, I have not touched anything of the sort for nearly seven years.”

“And you—what is your name?” the old lady demanded, turning suddenly on me.

“My name is Dennis Holt and I live at Stone Hollow,” I replied, amused and not at all offended at the old lady’s brusqueness.

“Oh, yes, I know, nephew to Mrs. Mackaluce. I remember hearing about you from Dr. Crawford. Well, thanks for your help. Now, Kitty, come along. Good bye, Mr. Holt.”

“Can you find your way back all right?” I said, turning to Nora Lepley, who had stood silent during the conversation and whom the old lady had not thanked.

“But I live here,” she replied, with a quick laugh, “and I don’t always come home by daylight. Good night, Mr. Holt.”

Old Lady Clevedon had amused me hugely. She was evidently what the country people would call “a character” whose acquaintance might be worth cultivating. But it was the pretty niece who attracted all my attention, and I made up my mind that I must become interested in the tragedy at White Towers. There might be no connection between that and Miss Kitty Clevedon’s midnight wanderings. The latter might be susceptible of the most innocent explanation. But it was in that case a queer coincidence,

and though I am far from denying that coincidences play a large and weighty part in human affairs, I instinctively distrust them. This might be one, but until I could prove the affirmative I preferred to admit a possible negative, or at all events to keep an open mind.

CHAPTER IV
THE SILVER-HEADED HATPIN

THE Midlington evening papers reached Cartordale about seven o'clock. To accomplish that they had to be printed somewhere about 3.30 p.m., and accordingly were rather early editions. Nevertheless, the one I saw contained a very good account of the Clevedon tragedy, though, as I could well see, reading between the lines, one which the police had carefully supervised. The press and the police work in very much closer accord than most people realise. They help one another, and the wise newspaper man never gives away anything the police desire to keep secret. In return for that the press receives all sorts of information otherwise inaccessible to it. I have many thousands of newspaper cuttings, all carefully indexed, of which I make good use in the compilation of my books. Newspapers give the facts that are known with creditable accuracy, though really what remains unknown is frequently the more important. The whole story is not always told.

And the press may and often does materially assist the police. If the latter wish to publish some item broadcast, the description of some individual, particulars of a missing weapon, details that may bring further items and possibly produce an unsuspected clue, they go to the press, which very quickly and efficiently gives them all the publicity they want. They do not deliberately keep things from the press. Any such attempt defeats its own end. It is the reporter's job to get news and he is an expert at it.

But if you tell the press all you know with a reservation as to what may not be published, the secret is safe enough. In a very long and varied experience I never knew a newspaper man to break a promise or violate a confidence. Some journals, of course, make a speciality of crime investigation on their own account, and clever enough they are at it. But even they will suppress an item of news if the police ask it, and frequently when they discover some fact unknown to the police will inquire before publishing whether it is desirable or safe. The ordinary man's idea that the press thinks first and only of its news column is a delusion. Very often a newspaper knows a lot more than it says.

From the account in the Midlington evening paper I learnt that Sir Philip Clevedon had dined alone soon after seven o'clock. At the conclusion of dinner he retired to his study according to his usual custom. At a quarter past eight he received a visit from Miss Kitty Clevedon, who had motored over from Hapforth House, the residence of Lady Clevedon, with a message to Mrs. Halfleet, the housekeeper. Miss Clevedon left before nine o'clock, and at 11.30 Sir Philip rang for his man Tulmin and ordered a whisky-and-soda, giving also some instructions regarding a contemplated journey to London on the morrow. Tulmin went off to bed, and thereafter was a long blank from 11.30 or so until between six and seven o'clock in the morning, when Miss Nora Lepley found Sir Philip lying dead on the couch in his study with the hatpin driven through his heart. Those were the facts out of which the reporter had made several columns. But the summary is sufficient for my purpose.

There was, of course, a description of the hatpin, which was eight inches long, with a flat, circular head of silver about the size of a shilling and a three-sided or three-cornered blade of steel that tapered off to a very fine point—an unusual hatpin that more

resembled a silver-headed skewer or stiletto. It had been driven into the body so that the head was close up to the white shirt-front—as far as it would go, in fact—but any bleeding had apparently been internal, since there was none discernible either on the exterior of the body or on the clothing.

I made a careful note of the times. Tulmin had last seen his master alive at about 11.30. It was 11.53 when the girl tapped at my window. When I had read the newspaper story I sent for Martha Helter, my housekeeper.

"Who is Lady Clevedon?" I asked her, "and what relation is Miss Kitty Clevedon to Sir Philip?"

"It is a little bit complicated, you see," she said, seating herself on the extreme edge of a big arm-chair. "Lady Clevedon is the widow of the late baronet who died some years ago—before the war, anyway. She was Miss Ursula Hapforth before her marriage, and when her husband died she went back to Hapforth House, which had been left her by her father, whose only child she was. The Hapforths are older than the Clevedons in these parts."

"But perhaps not so wealthy?"

"Oh, I don't know for that. They have plenty of money."

"And this Sir Philip—was he her son?"

But I recollected that her attitude had been anything but that of a bereaved mother when I saw her a short time before.

"No, she never had any children," Martha told me.

"Oh, then—but go on, Martha."

I had been about to remark that Miss Kitty was not, therefore, Lady Clevedon's daughter, but had thought better of it. I should get more out of Martha, I reflected, by allowing her to tell her story in her own way.

"This Sir Philip was a cousin of the other baronet," my housekeeper went on, "and next to him comes Mr. Billy Clevedon, who is Miss Kitty's brother. He is in the army. They say that he and Sir Philip quarrelled, and there are all sorts of rumours about. Miss Kitty lives with Lady Clevedon. I believe she has some money of her own, though I don't know how much. Her father was a rector down in Cornwall, but he's been dead a long time now."

"And this Sir Philip—where did he come from?"

"From somewhere abroad, I think. He was not very young, perhaps forty-five, and he wasn't married. We didn't see a lot of him in Cartordale—he lived mostly in London. He was not friends, they say, with Lady Clevedon, though I should not think they had really quarrelled. He was a stiff, solemn sort of man, and not very popular."

In point of fact the Clevedon title was one of the oldest surviving baronetcies, though there had been Clevedons in the Dale long before James I invented baronets as a new means of raising revenue. The Clevedons had all been politicians of varying degrees of importance, frequently unimportant. A minor Minister or two, a Colonial governor or so, a small Embassy, all urbane, honest, honourable, but occasionally unintelligent personages, belonging to what one might describe as the great Official class, which has ruled England since the days of the Tudors, doing most things badly but generally with clean hands.

But the late Sir Philip Clevedon was something of a mystery. No one had heard of him until the death of his cousin had given him the title. He had never been in Cartordale before that, and way entirely unknown even to his relatives. They had no idea even where he lived. Rumour was almost equally divided between America and Australia, but without any real foundation, since he himself vouchsafed no information on the point. Among the people of the Dale, as Martha indeed had told me, he had not been popular. He was too chilly and unemotional in his manner and, being frequently absent for lengthy periods, took no real part in the life of the Dale and, apparently, little interest in its concerns. To many of the inhabitants he was not even known by sight.

All this is a summary not only of what Martha told me, but of what I subsequently gathered.

When I had finished with Martha I went out and met Detective Pepster strolling in casual fashion through the village. I should have missed him in the darkness but that we stepped at the same time into the light cast across the roadway by the "Waggon and Horses," Tim Dallott's roadside inn, famed far and wide among visitors to the Dale.

"You haven't been to arrest me yet," I said, as Pepster returned my salute.

"No," he replied, with a placid grin, "we are giving you a little more rope."

"You have taken a load off my mind," I returned cheerfully. "But are you quite sure? Sudden temptation, you know, and—and so on."

“Ah, you are pulling my leg, Mr. Holt,” Pepster replied affably.

“But you did suspect me,” I urged, wondering how far the detective might be amenable to pumping.

Some of them are, but not those who know their job.

“Well, suspect—that’s rather a big word,” Pepster said thoughtfully. “You see, the law says a man is innocent until he is proved guilty, but a detective who knows his business proceeds the other way about. Everybody is guilty in his eyes until the facts prove their innocence. There is only one man I am absolutely sure did not commit this murder, and that is myself, but nobody save me has any call to be sure even of that. Now you, for example—could you prove an alibi for that night if I took it into my head to charge you?”

“We will suppose I could not—for the sake of argument.”

“Just so, but then, you see, something else is required. Society is based on a notion that ordinary, normal men act in an ordinary, normal manner and don’t go about murdering each other for the mere fun of the thing. It is like people walking along a city pavement while motor-cars are dashing to and fro in the roadway. The three or four inches by which the pavement is raised are no protection at all should a motor-car take a sudden swerve, but pedestrians go ambling quietly on in the knowledge that the normal thing is for motor-cars to keep their own place, and that when they go wrong it is because something has happened. Yes, Society is based on the prevalence of the normal. When you hear, for instance, that one man has killed another, you take it for granted there was a reason—what we call a motive. And the motive is vital.

Sometimes the why of a murder reveals the who, and sometimes the who explains the why. But the two must go together."

"Your philosophy is both interesting and accurate," I said. "And what of the hatpin?"

"Ah, the hatpin," Pepster replied thoughtfully. "But that may have been an accident and not the woman in the case."

"The woman?" I said inquiringly, my thought going instantly to my midnight visitor. "Yes, of course, a hatpin does suggest a woman, doesn't it?"

"There may be a woman in it," Pepster went on, gently garrulous, "but I don't know that the hatpin brings her in. Some woman owns the hatpin, no doubt, but that isn't to say that she used it. Though it does help things wonderfully to get a woman into a case, even though it may complicate it. No doubt there would be a man in it too. There generally is. Women seldom play a lone hand. But they have always been a fruitful source of crime in men ever since Adam had to declare that the woman tempted him and he did eat. I have always thought ill of Adam for that—for telling, I mean. It's not the sort of thing a real man would have blurted out. But for all that it was true—it was true then and it has been true ever since. Women—"

"And as you say," I interrupted gently, "it would be a woman's hatpin."

"Oh, yes, it would be a woman's hatpin. Sir Philip Clevedon didn't wear them—not that I ever heard. And we have identified it, you know. It belongs to Lady Clevedon and, as far as I can make out, Miss Kitty Clevedon borrowed it when she went to see the

housekeeper earlier that evening. It will be in all the papers to-morrow. There seemed no particular reason to keep it secret."

"According to the newspapers, Miss Clevedon went to see the housekeeper, Mrs. Halfleet," I observed. "Did she take her hat off? Where did she leave the pin?"

"Those questions have been asked and answered," Pepster replied. "She was caught in a shower of rain on her way to White Towers and took off her hat to dry it. She does not recollect where she laid the pin down, but it must have been somewhere in the housekeeper's room. She did not see Sir Philip Clevedon and did not enter the study where later the body was found."

"The housekeeper—?"

"Knows nothing of the hatpin—does not remember Miss Clevedon laying it down, and in fact never saw it until she was brought to her dead master. It was Lady Clevedon herself who identified the hatpin and told me all about it."

"So that instead of one woman you have three," I murmured.

"Yes, three women but not *the* woman. Hullo! there's Dr. Crawford, and I want to speak to him."

He nodded a quick farewell and went off with long strides after the doctor. Considering his bulk and his apparently leisurely methods of thought and speech, Pepster was curiously quick and active in his movements.

"Do you know Mrs. Halfleet?" I asked my own housekeeper when I again reached home.

“Oh, yes, quite well,” she replied. “I have known her for years. A little stand-offish in her manner, but quite pleasant face to face.”

“About how old would she be?” I queried.

“Oh, well, let me see. I am—yes, she must be quite sixty, perhaps a year or two older.”

“Not a young woman, anyway.”

“Oh, dear no, not a young woman. She is the widow of a minister, a Methodist, I think, who was at a church in Midlington when he died. That must be a good sixteen years ago. Lady Clevedon, who was living at White Towers then, her husband being alive, brought her in as housekeeper, and the present—I mean the late—Sir Philip kept her on. She is sister to Mrs. Lepley, but far more of a lady—”

I switched the conversation on to other lines, leaving Mrs. Halfleet for later investigation.

The case, you will note, has advanced another stage. The weapon has been identified. The queer hatpin, with the three-cornered blade and the silver knob, was the property of Lady Clevedon, who lived at Hapforth House. Miss Kitty Clevedon borrowed it and so conveyed it to White Towers where, apparently, she left it. That was all very interesting and quite simple, but probably irrelevant. The question was not who had owned the hatpin or who had worn it, but who had used it.

The question of time becomes interesting here. Tulmin, the valet, had seen his master alive at 11.30, and the girl had visited me at 11.53. She certainly had committed no murder at White Towers in that interval. It was a physical impossibility. I had carefully assured myself regarding that. It would have required at the very

minimum another fifteen or twenty minutes. But I had lost her in the darkness somewhere before 2 a.m. As I have already said, it was seven minutes past two when I reached Stone Hollow again on that night (or rather early morning), and allowing for the time I stood after she had evaded me, and for the walk homewards, I judged that it would be about 1.15 when she disappeared into the darkness. What had her movements been after that?

It must not be supposed that I suspected the girl of having had any hand in the tragedy, though I by no means ruled her out. Her beauty and youth did not weigh with me at all. I had found both in even greater measure in proven criminals. Besides which, a murder is not invariably a crime.

But I had two ascertained facts—that Kitty Clevedon had worn the hatpin to White Towers, and that she had been abroad in the Dale during the early hours of that tragic morning.

CHAPTER V
KITTY CLEVEDON AND RONALD THOYNE

I MET Sergeant Gamley, the officer who had called on me in company with Detective Pepster, and I asked him whether the public would be admitted freely to the inquest.

"Well," he said slowly, "I suppose they have the right, but the accommodation is very limited, very. When the witnesses and the lawyers and the family and the police and the reporters and people who must be there are squeezed in there'll not be a lot of room for outsiders. Did you want—ah, now, I am looking for another juryman. Stokkins has fallen ill. How would you like—?"

"Excellent!" I interrupted. "As long as you don't make me foreman it will suit me very well. I should like to hear the story in full—being a neighbour, you know."

I did not add that it would also afford me an opportunity of seeing the body without making any obvious attempt in that connection.

It was an ordinary country jury, consisting mostly of farmers, with a small shopkeeper or two, and Tim Dallott, landlord of the "Waggon and Horses," as foreman. We visited the chamber where the body lay, but it did not add anything to my knowledge except that I was able to form some idea what the man had looked like in life, which did at least add to the interest of the mystery.

An inquest is a singularly useless form of inquiry at its best. It is doubly and trebly so when the police use it, as frequently they do, for purposes of their own, to conceal the truth rather than reveal it. The real duty of the jury is to determine the cause of death, for, though it may declare that So-and-so was a murderer, the actual demands of the law are satisfied if the jury simply decides that a murder has been committed. A coroner who knows his business does not travel far outside the brief allotted him by the police, and generally manages—though not invariably—to keep his jury within the limits assigned himself.

I have had a long and very varied experience of inquests and was not, therefore, surprised that the inquiry regarding Sir Philip Clevedon's death should be merely formally opened and then immediately adjourned, for the purpose, it was stated, of a post-mortem examination. I regarded that as a mere subterfuge—in which, as it happened, I was wrong—and easily realised that the police did not want as yet to tell all they knew, which in its turn suggested that they had some sort of a line on the murderer and did not desire to give him (or her) any information.

Meanwhile I busied myself making some very careful inquiries regarding Miss Kitty Clevedon. Through her midnight visit to me, I was in possession of some information so far not within the knowledge of the police, unless, indeed, she had herself told them, which I doubted; and I intended, for a bit at all events, to keep it to myself. Exactly what connection she had with the tragedy I could not say, but I meant that she should tell me—in which determination I reckoned without Kitty Clevedon. I met her as she was walking from Cartordale to Hapforth House. She was warmly clad in furs and, a little flushed by the wind that was blowing smartly across the moors, was looking very pretty and attractive.

She saw me approaching her and, curiously enough, made no attempt to avoid me. In point of fact, I expected a direct "cut," but she stopped as I drew near and even held out her hand.

"Fancy meeting you, Mr. Holt!" she cried.

"I have just been to Hapforth House," I replied, wondering what might be the explanation of her unexpected cordiality, though I fancy that what she really had in mind was to show that at least she did not fear me. "I—well, in fact," I went on, "I wanted a word or two with you."

"With me!"

"May I turn and walk back part of the way with you?" I asked.

"Why, of course," she replied. "I always prefer company if I can get it, and it's none too plentiful here. I am used to lonely walks, though one can have too many of them. A woman likes to talk, you know, but one cannot converse with stone walls."

She rattled on, rather intent apparently on doing most of the talking, as if she did not wish to give me an opportunity. But I merely bided my time, knowing the chance would come; and presently she seemed to realise that, because she interrupted her flow of chatter and turned as if waiting for me to speak.

"You wanted—was it about something particular?" she asked.

The words were all right, but the mocking smile in her eyes, and the set of her pretty lips, rather belied them. She was preparing to meet her adversary with a woman's weapons.

"It is about the night of the—of the murder," I began slowly.

“Yes?” she said.

“And of your visit to my house.”

She put up her hand and with a pretty gesture pushed back an unruly curl, meeting my gaze firmly and frankly and without any sign of disquiet.

“But—my visit to your house, Mr. Holt. I do not quite understand. Am I supposed to have visited your house on the night of the—?”

“You intend to deny it?” I asked. “Well, if you consider that worth while I suppose I could not prove it. After all, it would be merely my word against yours. But isn’t such a subterfuge between us two just a little—shall I say—grotesque?”

“Suppose you tell me all about it,” she said quite tranquilly. “Perhaps I have lost my memory. Such things do happen, don’t they? But then there is generally a railway accident, isn’t there, or a motor smash. And I haven’t even knocked my head. Do tell me all about it, Mr. Holt.”

I could not help admiring the skill with which she kept me at arm’s-length. It was grotesque, of course, as I had said, but it was wonderfully clever. Whatever her object, she certainly lacked none of the gifts and qualities of an accomplished actress.

“Doesn’t your attitude suggest,” I said, “that you have—er—something to conceal?”

“Does it?” she asked, opening her eyes wide. “I wonder what it can be? Oh, yes, the night of the—the tragedy. Are you suggesting by any chance that I murdered Sir Philip—is that what you mean, Mr. Holt? Speak out if it is—please do not hesitate.”

“I did not say that.”

“But then what have I to do with it all?” she demanded, stamping her foot as if she were really angry. “You must tell me what you mean, Mr. Holt. You have said too much not to say more. What is it you suspect? You hint at this and hint at that, but say nothing straight out. It is a cowardly way to attack a woman.”

Her voice broke artistically, and she seemed to be on the verge of tears. It was all very cleverly done, and I confess I admired her, though that did not turn me from my purpose. I have had to deal with women in all sorts of moods and every possible disguise, though Kitty Clevedon at that moment was less a woman than a clue in skirts and furs.

“The matter is quite simple,” I said, deliberately brutal, in the hope of startling her out of her calm. “I was only wondering what view the police, for example, would take of your midnight adventure.”

“You had better go and tell them,” she flamed out. “They might believe you, you know.”

“You were in my house on that night,” I said, and waited to see if she, would deny the visit even to me.

“So you said before,” she retorted.

“Do you, then, wish to deny that you were in my house on that night?”

“Would you believe me if I did deny it?”

“Of course not—how could I?”

“Then why should I trouble to deny it? You ask me a question and answer it for me, and tell me you will not believe me unless I adopt your answer. That is a convenient method of cross-examining—put the question and invent the answer.”

“And yet you will not deny it—why not deny it and have done with it?”

“Mr. Holt,” she said slowly, “I do not know what you mean.”

That was definite enough, and we walked along for some minutes in silence, the while I considered whether I should press her further just then or carry my inquiries in another direction. I was, however, relieved of the responsibility of immediate decision, for at that moment a man turned the bend of the road and, seeing us there, came towards us and greeted Kitty with the familiarity of an old acquaintance. She on her part welcomed him joyfully, though whether that was from pleasure at seeing him or because he provided a way of escape from further questioning, I did not attempt to decide.

The new-comer was tall and rather heavily built and gave an impression of immense physical strength. His manner was bluff and frank and his eyes kindly and intelligent, but the lines of his mouth were hard, as of a man who had had to fight his way and would be little likely to give quarter to an opponent. He looked like one who wanted much anything he did want, and would leave nothing undone that might secure it. “Honest in a way, but a tough customer,” was my own private summary, and I wondered who the man was.

“I was just going to Hapforth House,” he said, smiling, as he addressed Kitty Clevedon, though the stare he bestowed on me was none too friendly.

I noticed that Kitty made no move to introduce us.

“Oh, yes, Auntie told me she was expecting you—some business matter, isn’t it?” she said. “I warn you there may be a warm half-hour before you. Good-bye, Mr. Holt. It was very kind of you to come this far with me. Mr. Thoyne is going my way.”

I accepted my dismissal smilingly and made a careful note in my mind of the man’s name. Anyone with whom Miss Kitty Clevedon was acquainted became a person of interest worth knowing. On my way to Stone Hollow I met Dr. Crawford, a Scot, rough of tongue and occasionally almost brutal in manner; but he was implicitly trusted by the Dale folk, who regarded suavity and gentleness with suspicion, and politeness as a form of hypocrisy. He had come to them from a country even wilder and sterner than their own, and was thus able to fit in with their moods and to understand their temperament, which, to strangers, seemed to be compounded of a mixture of sullenness and stupidity. He was one of the very few people in the Dale with whom I had struck up any sort of intimacy, possibly because he had been my late aunt’s medical attendant and a witness to the will that had given me Stone Hollow.

“Do you happen to know a man named Thoyne?” I asked after a few preliminary remarks.

“Yes; don’t you know him?”

“Am I supposed to? Is he one of those persons whom not to know is proof of one’s own insignificance?”

“Oh, I would not say that, though it is a little curious that you should have been some weeks in Cartordale without hearing about Ronald Thoyne.”

“Well, apparently I have heard about him,” I replied, “or I shouldn’t be asking you questions regarding him.”

“I am not exactly one of his intimates,” Dr. Crawford said. “He is an American who fought in the war with the French Army before the Yanks came in. He was wounded or gassed, or possibly it was shell-shock. At all events he came to England and was for some time in hospital, but he seems perfectly fit again now. He settled here at Lennsdale, which stands away up there on the hill-side. You can just see the house through that opening. He is certainly wealthy and gives generously, which is perhaps one reason why he is popular round here. He is bluff and hearty, but rather too ready with his fists to fit our modern notions of law and order. A good man to avoid a quarrel with, I should imagine. He is very strong on the war and indignant with his own country for holding off as long as she did. That is about as near a character-sketch as I can give you.”

“Good. I must make his acquaintance. Is he very friendly with Miss Kitty Clevedon?”

“Well, there have been rumours—matrimonial—but nothing definite. If they are formally engaged I haven’t heard of it.”

The doctor turned into a small cottage standing by the roadway, and I walked on alone to Stone Hollow.

CHAPTER VI
A NEW SENSATION

IT was in Dr. Crawford's surgery the day before the resumed inquest that I met Lady Clevedon again. A little to my surprise she recognised me, though, as far as I knew, she had only seen me in the dark, and greeted me by name.

"I wanted to know you, Mr. Holt," the old lady said. "You were a popular theme of conversation when your aunt's will became known, and everybody wondered what this London nephew might be like."

"May I suppose that he, even though distantly, approaches expectation?" I said.

"Oh, I don't know that we really harboured expectations," Lady Clevedon retorted bluntly. "I had seen your photograph, so that your features do not come upon me with any overwhelming sense of novelty. Mrs. Mackaluce showed me the portrait."

"Yes, I know she had one," I said. "I found it in the house. But I don't know how she got it."

"I think she said her lawyer procured it for her. 'I quarrelled with his father and mother,' she told me, 'and I'm not going to make it up with him. But he is the only relative I have in the world, and he has only me, and I shall make him my heir.' Are you really as lonely as all that, Mr. Holt?"

“Lonely?” I echoed, perhaps a little vaguely. “Oh, you mean the only relative—no, it’s not quite so blank as that. True, my relatives do not worry me much, but there are some about somewhere.”

“Are you going to settle in Cartordale?” she demanded. “It’s slow enough as a rule, though there is excitement just now, more than enough. Sir Philip Clevedon stabbed and with my hatpin—it was my hatpin, you know—”

She closed her lips together with what was almost a snap, as if she feared to say too much. But she was not constructed for long silences.

“That man Peppermint, Peppercorn—”

“Pepster,” Dr. Crawford murmured.

“Ah, yes, Pepster—thinks I did the murder. Where did I last see my hatpin? Did I leave it at White Towers? ‘My good man,’ I said, ‘I haven’t been in White Towers for three years.’ Wasn’t I friendly with Sir Philip? Had I quarrelled with him? when did I last see him? Of course I had quarrelled with him. Philip Clevedon was always quarrelling with somebody. He was—but there, he’s dead now.”

She paused again and began to draw on her glove.

“The late baronet wasn’t exactly popular—?” I began.

“Popular!” the old lady cried explosively. “Popular!”

She left it there and, indeed, she had no need to go into further detail. Her inflection on the word was sufficient.

“But, anyway, I didn’t kill him,” she went on. “There is a lot of difference between a desire to box a man’s ears and stabbing him

with a hatpin. If I stabbed everybody I quarrelled with I should have some busy days."

"It was your hatpin," I murmured, possibly in the hope that I might irritate her into talking, a plan which, if indeed I had really formed it, Dr. Crawford frustrated.

"Well, anyway, you did not kill Sir Philip Clevedon," he said roughly.

"You are a true friend," the old lady cried, with grim and satirical humour. "Thank God! somebody believes me innocent. If I come to the gallows—"

"I know you did not kill him," the doctor repeated half sullenly, but with so much emphasis that I could not help wondering what was behind it.

"How can you know?" Lady Clevedon cried. "Perhaps I did. I have felt like it many a time, anyway. And it was my hatpin—as Mr. Holt reminded me. Pepperpot suspects me at all events. But here comes Kitty."

The old lady drew Dr. Crawford aside and began to discuss with him some matters connected, I fancy, with village doings. Kitty Clevedon and I were left by ourselves in the huge bay window that looked out over the rough, uncultivated garden. The girl made no effort to avoid my company but greeted me with a cool tranquillity that was, however, of that careful variety which suggested some anxiety to show that she was not afraid of me. For my part I merely returned a conventional reply and stood looking out into the garden, leaving it to her to open a conversation or not just as she thought

proper. I took it that, being a woman, she would, and I was not far out.

“Your gaze on that garden seems very intent, Mr. Holt,” she said, with a bewildering smile. “Are you looking for something?”

“Well, perhaps,” I responded, with a smile. “You see, I am always on the look-out—for your double.”

“My double! Have I a double? How delightful!” she cried.

“Yes,” I said gravely, turning once more to the garden; “a double—someone so exactly like you that it is very difficult to distinguish you. I should like to find her—that other one. But I have had no luck, none at all.”

“Are you so very anxious to find her?” Kitty asked, bringing that smile once more to bear as she saw that my eyes were turned again in her direction.

“At this moment, none at all,” I responded lightly. “I find my present company fully adequate.”

“Is it that I make an efficient substitute? How very sweet of you to say so,” Kitty murmured, with a quick glance downward as if at the slender toe of an exceptionally pretty shoe.

“No, I do not remember saying that,” I replied. “You see, you are you and she is she—”

“‘And never the twain shall meet’—isn’t that Kipling?” Kitty demanded.

“I think it may be quite safely asserted,” I said, with grim meaning, “that you will never meet your double.”

She flushed a little at the thrust but maintained otherwise her smiling calm.

“But when did you meet her, Mr. Holt—did you ever tell me?” she asked, with a delightful assumption of candour and innocence.

There was never a cleverer actress on or off the stage than Kitty Clevedon.

“Oh, she flitted into my life through my study window—and then flitted out again—into the darkness—”

“Leaving you desolate—how very unkind of her!”

She broke off with a quick trill of pretty laughter that was not at all affected and in which I joined her.

“It sounded a trifle sentimental, didn’t it?” I said, and then added with tranquil insolence, looking her this time full in the face, “but isn’t there a proverb about better to have seen and lost than never to have—oh, and that reminds me. I asked Dr. Crawford where I should find another young lady like Miss Clevedon and he replied, ‘Impossible—there isn’t one. God broke the mould when He made her.’ But there is another one, I know, because I have seen her, and—”

“I should want a very solemn affidavit indeed to make me believe that Dr. Crawford ever said anything so pretty as that,” she interrupted.

I had expected to make her angry but she seemed only amused.

“Oh, you don’t know the doctor,” I said airily. “He is capable of much. But he was wrong in this case—the double exists.”

“I shall ask him if he said it.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Oh, well, you know, he might ask some awkward questions in his turn. You see, I have never told anyone yet about your—double. I don’t think I should care to entrust him with the secret.”

“But why let it trouble you, Mr. Holt—why not forget it—and her?”

“Oh, I am not allowing it to trouble me.”

“You seem to be always talking about it.”

“I have never mentioned it to a soul except yourself.”

“I should think—” Kitty began, then turned away to meet Lady Clevedon, whose conference with Dr. Crawford had just terminated.

The old lady stood glaring at me for a moment or two.

“I dare say you think that we—Kitty and I—take this—this tragedy very calmly, Mr. Holt,” she said.

“I don’t know that I thought about it at all,” I responded.

“Women sometimes wear a mask, Mr. Holt.”

“Yes?”

“It may be for a purpose or it may be by habit.”

“Yes.”

I glanced quickly at Kitty and found her surveying the old lady with sombre eyes from which all the laughter had fled. She at all events had been wearing a mask.

When the two ladies had gone Dr. Crawford and I sat down to a whisky and soda apiece and a cigar. He seemed ill at ease, restless and rather unhappy until I casually reintroduced the subject of the Clevedon mystery, then he seemed in some curious way to brighten up.

“Aye, murder cases,” he said reflectively. “A murder case can be very interesting, you know—morbid but fascinating.”

I agreed without at all grasping his meaning.

“You are a student of criminology and you have written books on the subject,” Crawford went on. “Did you ever run up against a case of poisoning with prussic acid?”

“Several times,” I replied. “It is a frequent and formidable poison because it is so swift and unerring in its effect. The victim is dead before help can possibly reach him.”

“That is true,” Crawford agreed. “Death may be a matter of seconds, of minutes at most. But, now, tell me, have you met cases in which a man, having taken a dose of prussic acid, lies calmly down and is found as tranquil and orderly in posture as if he had died in his sleep?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “Indeed, I should say the majority of cases were like that. Prussic acid is said to produce convulsion, frothing at the mouth, and so forth. Those do take place, and may in every instance, though there are cases in which no evidence of them remains.”

“Just so,” Crawford agreed, nodding his head. “But, now suppose it were a case of suicide by prussic acid, would you expect to find the bottle near at hand?”

“In nine cases out of ten—yes,” I responded.

“And in the tenth?” he asked eagerly.

“There might have been some other way of administering the poison—wasn’t there a case of prussic acid in chocolates—?”

“Would it be possible for a man who had taken prussic acid to conceal the bottle?”

“Possible, yes, but—”

“And if no bottle were found you would regard it as a case of murder?”

“If the murderer had any sense he would leave the bottle near at hand to give the appearance of suicide.”

“But murderers—sometimes forget—these little—”

“They do, fortunately for the law. Nine murderers out of ten are hanged by their own mistakes. But what is your sudden interest in poison cases? Have you one in—?”

“I have—Sir Philip Clevedon—”

“Sir Philip Clevedon!” I echoed, for once surprised into showing my astonishment.

“Aye,” Dr. Crawford said slowly. “He died from prussic acid poisoning and the hatpin was thrust through his heart—after he was dead.”

CHAPTER VII
EVIDENCE AT THE INQUEST

I TOOK my place at the jury table for the resumed inquest with considerably quickened anticipations. Dr. Crawford's story had introduced new factors into the case which promised added interest and a still more involved mystery, though with a possibility of suicide and, it might be, a vivid and fascinating life story. Not that I indulged in any speculations. I wanted only facts and those I expected the inquest to afford. I was not disappointed. Of course, the doctor's evidence startled everybody.

"And what was the cause of death?" the coroner asked, when Dr. Crawford had concluded his preliminary evidence.

"The deceased died from poisoning by hydrocyanic acid," was the reply.

This was news to most of those present, including the reporters, who began to write feverishly, those representing the evening papers, anyway. Here was a new fact, one even they, so far, had not been allowed to know.

"That is what is known as prussic acid, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"The hatpin you have already described to us was not the cause of death?"

"The deceased was dead when it was inserted."

“Would it have caused death had there been no poison?”

“Possibly, but not certainly. Death at all events would hardly have been so rapid. With that wound the deceased might have lingered for some time, for days even.”

“He might eventually have recovered?”

“Yes.”

The coroner paused for a moment or two, then glanced at Pepster, who shook his head slightly. For some reason or other the police were not eager to pursue that particular line of questioning.

Dr. Crawford’s further evidence and that of the police surgeon from Peakborough, who followed him, was largely devoted to what one might describe as the technique of prussic acid poisoning, unnecessary to detail here. There was, however, one little fragment of evidence worth repeating.

“On a small table by the side of the couch on which the deceased was lying was a bottle half full of whisky, a siphon of soda-water and a glass. I took charge of them and later Dr. Crimley and myself analysed the contents.”

“With what results?”

“None.”

“You found no trace of prussic acid?”

“None.”

“Was there any liquid in the glass?”

“Yes, about half an inch.”

“What was it?”

“Water.”

“No whisky?”

“No”

“And no prussic acid?”

“Not a trace.”

I glanced at the reporters again and saw that they were writing their hardest. The trained newspaper man is never at fault when it comes to selecting evidence. He seems to know by instinct what is crucial. The longest report of any case does not represent more than a twentieth part of the evidence actually given, but the points are all there always. And the reporters knew quite well that the absence of poison from the bottle and siphon might make all the difference between suicide and murder. Had the whisky been poisoned Sir Philip Clevedon might have put it there himself. There was, of course, the fact that the apparent absence of any medium through which the poison could have been administered added to the puzzle, and the press dearly loves a mystery—at least its readers do, and newspapers that live by their readers wisely enough live for them also.

The next witness was John Tulmin, a little, thin man, not more than about five feet three in height and correspondingly meagre in build, who had been the late baronet’s personal servant, possessed, apparently, of sufficient education occasionally to do secretarial work for him. At all events he opened Sir Philip’s letters and typed the replies dictated by his employer. But he also acted as valet and was apparently as clever with clothes brush and razor as he was

with the typewriter. He gave his evidence clearly and without hesitation, and seemed quite unaware of any reason why he should be an object of considerable interest to Police, Press and Public.

“At what time did you last see Sir Philip Clevedon alive?” the coroner asked him.

“At thirty-three minutes past eleven.”

“You are very precise.”

“I am precise because I am stating the fact.”

“What enables you to fix the time?”

“As I was leaving the room Sir Philip asked me for the time and set his watch.”

“Was that usual with him?”

“Oh, no, but he had complained during the day that his watch seemed to be losing.”

“Good! He asked you the time and you told him—”?

“Eleven thirty-three.”

“Was that from your own watch?”

“Yes”

“And your watch was right?”

“Yes.”

“You are quite sure of that?”

“Absolutely.”

“And what happened then?”

“He said, ‘That will be all, Tulmin, good night.’ I replied, ‘Good night, Sir Philip,’ and had reached the door when he called me back. ‘And, by the way, Tulmin,’ he said, ‘waken me at eight o’clock. I want to catch the 10.15 to London. Order me the car at 9.30 will you.’ I said, ‘Very good, Sir Philip,’ and then I left the room, closing the door behind me.”

“He told you to call him at eight o’clock?”

“Yes.”

“And to have the car round at 9.30?”

“Yes”

“Because he was catching the 10.15 to London?”

“Yes”

“That is a very important matter, gentlemen,” the coroner said, turning to the jury. “It has some bearing on the possibility of suicide.”

I glanced at Pepster, whose face was wrinkled in a quiet grin. Really, such orders had no bearing at all on the question of suicide—they were just such as a man might give who had determined to take his own life but desired to conceal the truth. A person bent on suicide—though “temporary insanity” is usually the verdict of kindly juries—can manifest very considerable skill, and frequently does, in covering up the real mode of his exit from this life. Scores of cases of “accident”—according to the verdict—in my experience have been suicide disguised. Men and women who have been killed on the railway, or run over by motor-cars, or

drowned while bathing, or shot while cleaning a gun, or swallowed poison from bottles labelled something else, have carefully arranged those happenings, chiefly for the benefit of insurance companies. Suicide is much more frequent than is generally supposed, and it is far more often the result of careful calculation and arrangement than of insanity, temporary or otherwise.

“Did Sir Philip give you any order when he rang for you?” the coroner went on, continuing his examination of Tulmin.

“Yes, he told me to bring him a whisky and soda.”

“You did that?”

“I brought him a bottle of whisky, a siphon of soda-water and a glass, and I placed them on a small table which I drew up to the side of the couch on which Sir Philip was reclining.”

“How much whisky was there in the bottle?”

“It was about half full.”

“Where was this bottle kept?”

“It was on the sideboard in the dining-room. Sir Philip always had whisky and soda for dinner.”

“Was the bottle you took him at night the same bottle out of which Sir Philip had had whisky at dinner?”

“Yes.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Yes—quite. I poured it out myself at dinner.”

“You see the point of my question?”

“I am not sure—”

“No; but we will return to that later. As far as you know, the bottle you took Sir Philip was the one from which you had given him whisky at dinner?”

“I am quite sure it was the same.”

I confess I did not quite see the bearing of that question, but I gathered from Pepster’s attitude that he, at all events, attached some importance to it, and I was content to wait.

“Did Sir Philip drink only one brand of whisky?”

“Yes, sir, always the same; Lambert’s Blue Label.”

“How many bottles have you of that?”

“I am not quite certain, but about eight dozen, I think.”

“Now let us come to the following morning. How did you hear of the—the tragedy?”

“Miss Lepley awakened me, and I went straight to the study.”

“You saw the small table by the side of the couch?”

“Yes.”

“Was the whisky bottle there?”

“Yes.”

“And the siphon and the glass?”

“Yes.”

“Just as you had put them the night before?”

“Yes.”

“Now here is the bottle of whisky that was found on the table by Sir Philip’s side”—Pepster produced it from a bag he had been hitherto carefully guarding—“is that the bottle from which you gave your employer a drink at dinner and which you left with him at night?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How do you identify it?”

“It’s Lambert’s Blue Label, sir.”

“But that is a popular brand, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes, I believe it is, sir.”

“You could buy a bottle in Midlington, for example?”

“Yes, sir, at several places.”

“Are there any special marks on this particular bottle?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so.”

“Then how do you identify it?”

“It is Lambert’s Blue Label, and—”

“Just so, and we may leave it there. As far as you know, that bottle is the one from which you gave Sir Philip his drink at dinner, and which you took him at night, but there are no marks on it which enable you to identify it positively.”

“Well, of course, one bottle of Lambert’s Blue Label is very like another.”

“Precisely. Did you notice the glass?”

“Not particularly.”

“Could you say whether it was the glass you took Sir Philip?”

“It was the same sort of glass.”

“Quite an ordinary glass?”

“Oh, yes.”

“There are many glasses of that type in the house?”

“Yes, sir, several dozen, I should think. The housekeeper or the butler would know.”

“Just so. There was nothing special about the glass, any more than about the bottle?”

“Nothing, sir.”

That was the end of this very curious cross-examination, the exact bearing of which did not occur to me immediately.

The next witness was Miss Nora Lepley, niece to Mrs. Halfleet, the housekeeper. The name seemed familiar to me, and for a moment or two I puzzled over it. But when I saw the girl, I remembered. Indeed, she was not of the type that is easily forgotten. It was the girl of the farm-house at which we had called in search of Lady Clevedon’s missing chauffeur. It seemed that she was staying with her aunt, Mrs. Halfleet, for a few days, and she it was that made the first discovery of the tragedy.

“It was you who found Sir Philip’s—er—who first saw—?”

“Yes, sir, I found Sir Philip lying dead on his couch in the study.”

“At what time would that be?”

“About seven o’clock.”

“And how came you to be the first to enter the study?”

“Nobody was allowed to tidy Sir Philip’s study except my aunt, and she had to be there when the maids were cleaning. But when I was staying with her at White Towers, I sometimes looked after it for her. Sir Philip knew, and didn’t object.”

“Were you friendly with Sir Philip?”

“Oh, no, not particularly. I seldom saw him, and when I did he generally didn’t speak to me. He wasn’t very—very—”

“Is genial the word?”

“Yes, that would fit.”

The girl smiled, but quickly composed her features again.

“Now let us come to this particular morning. Tell me exactly what happened.”

“My aunt wakened me and said would I straighten Sir Philip’s study for her, as he would be down early. I think she said he was going to London.”

“What time would it be when she wakened you?”

“I should think about a quarter to seven. I can’t say to the minute, because I did not look at my watch.”

“And what happened then?”

“I dressed, and went downstairs to the study. As I opened the door I saw that the light was still burning, and that Sir Philip was lying on the couch. I thought he had fallen asleep there overnight. I went to him and put my hand on his shoulder, intending to waken him, and then I saw—”

She paused there, and her face whitened a little at the recollection.

“You saw that he was dead?”

“Yes.”

“Had you tried to awaken him?”

“Yes, I had shaken his arm.”

“And then?”

“I ran out of the room and fetched my aunt who sent me for Mr. Chinley—”

“That is the butler?”

“Yes, and then I went for Mr. Tulmin.”

“Was he awake?”

“Oh, yes. Indeed, he was half dressed.”

“Did he open the door directly you knocked?”

“Yes, I—I think so.”

“But you would not be sure of that?”

“No, I may have knocked twice.”

“Did Tulmin go with you immediately to the study?”

“Yes, and then he ran off for the doctor.”

“And what did you do?”

“I remained with my aunt and Mr. Chinley in the study until the doctor came.”

“And now I want you to consider very carefully this next question; when you saw that Sir Philip was dead, did you examine him at all?”

“No, I did not wait for that. I ran straight out to bring help.”

“Did you notice the hatpin?”

“No, I saw nothing of it.”

“Does that mean that it wasn’t there, or that you did not notice it?”

“It may have been there. Indeed, I suppose it must have been, but I did not see it.”

“You formed no idea as to how he had died?”

“I formed no ideas of any sort. I think I was too frightened and upset.”

“Thank you, Miss Lepley,” the coroner said. “You have given your evidence very clearly.”

“I am sorry I could not remember about the hatpin,” she replied.

“Oh, well, I have no doubt we shall trace it in time. And now we will have Mrs. Halfleet, the housekeeper.”

CHAPTER VIII
THE STORY OF A QUARREL

THE inquest, as far as it had gone, afforded no leading at all. We had not even learned how the poison had been administered, for though there had been some suggestion of possible juggling with the whisky bottle and glass, there had been nothing definite. But it was the hatpin that puzzled me most. One might regard it as certain, at all events, that Sir Philip Clevedon, even if he had voluntarily taken the poison, had not thereafter stabbed himself. One could only suppose that it was the murderer's effort to make absolutely sure that his work was complete. Without the hatpin it might have been odds in favour of suicide.

Mrs. Halfleet, the housekeeper, was a tall woman, something past middle-age, with black hair lightly streaked with grey, and dark eyes of a peculiarly penetrating quality. I wondered for a moment if or where I had seen her before, and then I realised that it was her likeness to her niece that had impressed me. She was very alert, both mentally and physically, answered the questions in full and without hesitation, and yet with a curious air of detachment as if, after all, it were no particular business of hers. She described events already dealt with here, and generally corroborated the evidence that had gone before.

"I want to ask you now about this hatpin," the coroner said, picking up the pretty but sinister little weapon. "You were the first to discover the—the use to which it had been put."

"Yes, I saw it and called Mr. Chinley's attention to it."

“Had you seen it before?”

“Not that I can recollect.”

“You had a visitor during the evening?”

“Yes, Miss Clevedon.”

“Did she remove her hat?”

“Yes, she had been caught in the rain, and her hat was very wet. I advised her to take it off and dry it before my fire.”

“Did she do that?”

“Yes.”

“When Miss Clevedon took off her hat, did you see her remove the pin?”

“I cannot remember.”

“Did you see where she put it down?”

“No.”

“You did not see her put it on the table, for instance, or the mantelpiece?”

“No.”

“You did not notice it lying about after she had gone?”

“No.”

“Did Miss Clevedon see Sir Philip?”

“She went to his study.”

“Do you know whether she saw him?”

“No, she went straight out after that, and did not return to my room.”

“Did Miss Clevedon resume her hat before she went to the study?”

“No, she was carrying it in her hand.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Yes, I remember her remarking that it was still damp, and that she would put it on when she got outside.”

“You do not recollect whether she had the hatpin in her hand?”

“No, I do not remember that.”

“Did Sir Philip Clevedon have any other visitors?”

“One, earlier in the evening.”

“Before or after dinner?”

“Before dinner—about six o’clock.”

“Were you present at their interview?”

“No, I was in the little room that leads off the study.”

“What is that room used for?”

“Only to store books. It is completely lined with shelves that are full of books. I was engaged dusting them.”

“You heard someone enter the study?”

“Yes”

“Could you overhear the conversation?”

“Not while they spoke in ordinary tones; only when they raised their voices.”

“Did you recognise the visitor?”

“Yes, it was Mr. Thoyne.”

I glanced at Thoyne, who had started from his seat as if with intention to intervene, then resumed it again as one who had thought better of it.

“Were they—was it a friendly interview?”

“Well—they disagreed—”

“I protest, Mr. Coroner,” Thoyne cried explosively, rising to his feet.

“If you desire to give evidence later—” the coroner began suavely.

“I have no desire to give evidence—I have none to give,” Thoyne cried. “This interview which was purely private, took place hours before the—the tragedy, and had nothing to do with it.”

“Please be silent, Mr. Thoyne,” the coroner said a little sharply, “and allow me to conduct the inquiry in my own way. You shall, if you desire, have an opportunity later.”

He turned again to Mrs. Halfleet.

“You said that Sir Philip and Mr. Thoyne disagreed—did you learn the cause of the—?”

This brought Thoyne once again to his feet and I did not wonder at it. The coroner had evidently his own particular method of conducting an inquiry.

“Once again I protest, Mr. Coroner,” he said, his face flushed darkly with anger. “This was a purely private conversation and had nothing to do with—”

The coroner took absolutely no notice of him this time but simply repeated his question to Mrs. Halfleet though in a slightly different form.

“Did you gather over what it was that Mr. Thoyne and Sir Philip Clevedon—quarrelled?”

“There was no quarrel,” Thoyne interjected.

“It was over—a lady,” Mrs. Halfleet responded slowly.

I began now to see something of the drift of this apparently irregular questioning. There was more behind it all than appeared to the casual observer. I glanced almost furtively at Miss Kitty Clevedon but found her perfectly calm and tranquil though her face was dead white.

“Was the lady’s name mentioned?”

“No.”

Curiously enough, the coroner did not appear to be disappointed by that reply and it also had the effect of quietening Ronald Thoyne. His lips moved in a quick smile and he settled himself back in his chair with an air of obvious satisfaction. What they might say about himself apparently did not worry him.

“Could you hear what they said when they raised their voices?”

“I heard Sir Philip say, ‘You are talking nonsense. I cannot compel her to marry me against her will. The decision rests with her.’ He was not exactly shouting but was speaking a little more loudly than usual. Mr. Thoyne seemed angry. ‘You must release her from her promise,’ he said. His voice was hoarse and he struck the table with his stick as he spoke. I think Sir Philip stood up from his seat then. I did not see him, of course, but I seemed to hear him walking up and down. And he spoke sharply, almost angrily. The words appeared to come with a sort of snap. ‘I have nothing to say in this matter,’ Sir Philip declared. ‘I neither hold her to her promise nor release her from it. The decision rests solely with her. If she notifies me that she cannot marry me I have no power to compel her. But I am not prepared to take your word for it. The decision must come from herself.’ Mr. Thoyne said ‘That is your last word, is it?’ to which Sir Philip replied, ‘My first word and my last. As far as I am concerned I am engaged and remain engaged until the young lady herself notifies me that the engagement is at an end.’ Then Mr. Thoyne said, ‘If you don’t release her I shall find a way of making you—I shall find a way.’”

“Upon which,” Thoyne rapped out sarcastically, “I poisoned him with prussic acid. It certainly was an effective form of compulsion.”

“Silence!” cried a police officer.

“Silence!” Thoyne echoed irascibly. “It is a time for silence, isn’t it, when I am virtually accused of murdering Sir Philip Clevedon? This lady has a marvellous memory, hasn’t she?”

“You will have an opportunity of giving evidence and of denying—” the coroner began.

“I am denying nothing,” Thoyne interrupted half sullenly. “The story is all right as far as it goes. Sir Philip Clevedon probably stood nearer a thrashing than ever in his life before. But I didn’t poison him nor did I stab him with a hatpin.”

I happened just then to glance casually at Pepster, who was seated a little behind the coroner and who was watching Thoyne with a keen, intent gaze as if anxious not to miss the smallest trifle of word or gesture. I began to read some method into this curiously unconventional inquest episode.

“And what happened then?” the coroner asked, turning to Mrs. Halfleet.

“Mr. Thoyne went out of the room banging the door behind him.”

“Quite true, Mr. Coroner,” Thoyne cried. “I went home—to get the prussic acid. I had forgotten to take it with me.”

The coroner took no notice but turned to Mrs. Halfleet.

“Had you heard anything previously of Sir Philip’s engagement?”

“No.”

“Had not heard his name coupled with that of any lady?”

“Never a whisper.”

Mrs. Halfleet was asked a number of further questions, chiefly regarding household arrangements and with special regard to glasses and bottles. But she added nothing to the information

already set forth. And it all appeared very tame after the Thoyne sensation. As she left the witness's chair, Ronald Thoyne sprang to his feet.

"Do you intend to call me, Mr. Coroner?" he demanded.

"No," replied the coroner, "I have nothing to ask you. Do you desire to tender any evidence?"

"No, I know nothing about it."

"Then," said the coroner suavely, "we'll have Lady Clevedon."

The old lady took her seat in the chair and sat bending a little forward, her hands on her knees.

"Is this your hatpin, Lady Clevedon?"

"Yes."

"Do you identify it as your property?"

"I have already told you it is mine."

"Do you know how it got to White Towers?"

"If you mean did I go and stab—?"

"I did not mean that, Lady Clevedon. I asked you a very simple question. Do you know how that hatpin got to White Towers?"

"I do not."

"Did you lend it to anyone?"

"No."

"But you are sure it is your property?"

“For the third time—yes.”

“Is there any special mark on it?”

“I do not know of any.”

“There might be other pins like it?”

“There isn’t another like it in the world.”

“You knew the late Sir Philip Clevedon well?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And you were good friends with him?”

“Nobody was good friends for long with Philip Clevedon. He was—”

She pulled herself up, pursing her lips.

“You were going to say?”

“Something one ought not to say of a man who is dead.”

“Had he any enemies?”

“Plenty, but not of the murdering sort.”

“Had you heard of his engagement?”

“He did not confide in me!”

“You had not heard of it?”

“I had not.”

Again I happened to glance at Pepster and saw him gazing as intently at Lady Clevedon as he had done at Thoyne. For the most part he had sat listening to the evidence with partly closed eyes, as if it were very little concern of his. Only with Ronald Thoyne and now with Lady Clevedon had he seemed at all keenly interested. Evidently there was more in Sir Philip's mysterious engagement—known apparently to Thoyne, but not to Sir Philip's own relatives—than had appeared. The coroner glanced sideways at Pepster, who nodded his head slightly as if answering an unspoken question in the affirmative, upon which the coroner thanked Lady Clevedon for her evidence and dismissed her.

CHAPTER IX
WHAT KITTY CLEVEDON SAID

THE next witness was Miss Kitty Clevedon herself and I confess I awaited her coming with more than ordinary interest. Of one thing I was certain, that she would say exactly what she wanted to say and not a word more, and that no intrusive scruples would confine her too urgently to the truth, unless, indeed, the fact that she was on oath might have any influence with her, which I doubted. I have always found that a woman's conscience is in that respect far more elastic than a man's. She took her seat in the witness's chair and glanced round her with thoughtful calm, nor was her tranquillity in the least abated when she saw me watching her. There was certainly not the faintest suggestion in her manner that my presence disturbed her in the slightest, or, indeed that she had ever so much as seen me before. The coroner took up the hatpin.

"Have you ever seen this before?"

"Many times. It belongs to Lady Clevedon."

"Have you ever borrowed it?"

"Often."

"Did you wear it when you visited Mrs. Halfleet on the day—er—the day of Sir Philip Clevedon's—er—decease?"

"Yes."

“Will you kindly detail the circumstances of your visit to White Towers?”

“Lady Clevedon asked me to convey a message to Mrs. Halfleet regarding some parish business, the clothing club at the church of which Lady Clevedon is president and Mrs. Halfleet is secretary. On my way I was caught in the rain and my hat was soaked through. Mrs. Halfleet advised me to dry it at the fire in her room and I did so.”

“You say you were caught in the rain—did you walk to White Towers?”

“No, I went in my own motor, a little two-seater which I drive myself.”

“There was no one with you in the car?”

“No one.”

“You used this hatpin to secure your hat?”

“Yes.”

“And of course took it out when you removed—?”

“Of course.”

“What happened to the hatpin when you resumed your hat?”

“I do not recollect.”

“Could you wear that hat without a pin?”

“Oh, yes, I frequently did. Sometimes I use a hatpin and sometimes not. That particular hat fits very close and I pull it well down.”

“Now I want you to be very careful in answering the next few questions as they are exceptionally important. You are sure you had the hatpin when you visited Mrs. Halfleet?”

“No, I am not sure.”

“You said—”

“Yes, but that was because I don’t see how else it could get here. The use of a hatpin is more or less mechanical, you know, and sometimes I wear one and sometimes I don’t. I think I brought it here but I cannot remember either putting it in my hat or taking it out.”

“You would not swear then that you had it?”

“No, nor that I hadn’t. I cannot remember.”

“It is hopeless, then, to ask you where you laid it down?”

“Quite, I am afraid. If I had it with me I should take it out without thinking and lay it down anywhere.”

“Where were you standing when you took your hat off?”

“Before the fire.”

“You might possibly lay the hatpin on the mantelpiece?”

“I should think that a very likely place.”

“But you cannot recollect?”

“No, I cannot remember anything about it.”

“How long did you remain with Mrs. Halfleet?”

“Oh, about half an hour, I should say.”

“Where was the cap during that time?”

“It was in the fender drying.”

“Was it dry when you took it up?”

“Drier than it was, but still damp.”

“When you put it on again, can you remember whether you used the hatpin?”

“No, I cannot remember for certain, but apparently I did not.”

“Can you suggest any reason why you should want a hatpin when you left Hapforth House, but did without one when you were going from White Towers?”

“No, I cannot explain it.”

“When did you again remove the hat?”

“When I reached home.”

“Didn’t the absence of the hatpin strike you then?”

“No, I didn’t think of it. I could not even say for certain that it was absent.”

The coroner sat for a moment or two drawing figures on his blotting-paper, then turned suddenly towards her.

“Did you go out again that night?”

As Miss Kitty Clevedon looked casually round, our glances met and for a brief second her eyes held mine, hardly in questioning,

certainly not in fear, but with some subtle suggestion I could not then interpret.

“No,” she said with inimitable composure, “I did not go out again.”

That might have been perfectly true since it was at least possible that she had not gone straight from White Towers to Hapforth House. Though it was hardly possible she could have been absent all the evening without some remark. If, on the other hand, she was lying, and I had good reason for knowing that she possessed all the qualities essential to success in that very difficult art, then her midnight expedition had been secret. It was a tangle that would have to be straightened out later, and so far, I hadn’t either end of the string in my fingers.

“Did you see Sir Philip Clevedon?”

“No, I went to his study, but he was not there and I did not wait.”

That is all the evidence it is necessary for me to detail here, nor need I reproduce the address of the coroner, who carefully examined in his summing-up the possibilities of suicide, and rather discounted them.

The jury retired into the study—the room in which Sir Philip’s dead body had been found—to consider their verdict. It was not quite such a simple matter as one might suppose. My fellow jurymen were deeply impressed with the heavy responsibility thrust upon them, quite unnecessarily so, since a coroner’s verdict does not matter a snap of the finger one way or the other.

“Now, gents all,” said Tim Dallott, our foreman, “the question is—suicide or murder? Why should he want to commit suicide? And if he did, where did he hide the bottle? You, Mester Hapton”—this to

a big, heavy man with a vast head, a considerable farmer in the Dale—"what do you say?"

"Well," said Mr. Hapton slowly, "there's no knowing."

"But you've got to know one way or the other," Tim Dallott cried. "You'll have an opinion."

"No, I don't know as I have," was the deliberate reply.

"Then we'll say murder, eh?"

"No, I'm not so sure—"

"Well, suicide?"

"Ah, but then, you see—"

"Well, if it wasn't suicide, it was murder, and if it wasn't murder it was suicide—"

"Aye, that's right," Mr. Hapton cried, brightening up a little.

Fortunately, I was the next to be interrogated, and I snapped out my answer even before our foreman had completed his question. "Murder, undoubtedly," I said, not because I had really any such certainty, or had made up my mind on the matter, but in order to get the thing settled. My very unrural promptitude gave the cue to the rest, and "murder" went round with affecting unanimity.

"Now, Mester Hapton," Tim Dallott added, "everybody but you's said murder—you'll not stand out."

"I'm not one to be contrary-like," Mr. Hapton said. "But murder—it's an ugly business, that."

“Well, it doesn’t matter very much,” I interposed. “We’re not going to hang anybody this afternoon.”

“Nor not to mention no names,” our foreman put in. “Persons or person unknown—that’s what it is.”

“Ah, well,” Mr. Hapton said, with a gloomy shake of the head, “if you’re all set on murder, murder let it be, but it’s an ugly word.”

And that was our verdict—“Murder by some person or persons unknown.” But, for my part, like Mr. Hapton, I wasn’t at all sure. And, curiously enough, the hatpin was not so much as mentioned.

It was the day following the inquest that I met Detective Pepster in the village.

“Ah, good morning, Mr. Holt,” Pepster cried, as I joined him. “How is Cartordale using you these times? Have you settled down amongst us?”

“More or less,” I replied. “This place rather improves on acquaintance. I think I would like to see a summer here.”

“Yes, it’s all right in the summer, if the summer is all right,” Pepster rejoined dryly. “But our summer isn’t much to rave over. It doesn’t last long enough.”

“No, that’s true. And how is the mystery getting on?”

“The mystery?” Pepster echoed. “Oh, you mean the murder. It isn’t getting on. I was just coming along to see you.”

“To see me!” I cried.

“Oh, I’m not going to arrest you,” he returned, with a soft chuckle. “No, not at all. But do you know Kelham, of Scotland Yard? I had a letter from him to-day. ‘Dennis Holt is living in your neighbourhood,’ he said. ‘Ask him who murdered Clevedon.’ Now, what does he mean by that?”

“Kelham—yes, I know Kelham very well,” I replied. “He is a humorist.”

“Well, I wish he’d let me in on the joke, anyway,” Pepster said discontentedly. “Do you know who murdered Sir Philip Clevedon?”

“No,” I said, “not yet. For that matter, I don’t even know that he was murdered. But I shall find out, and then I’ll let you know.”

“Do you belong to the Force?”

“Not at all.”

“Then are you—?

“Sherlock Holmes disguised,” I said with a laugh. “Why not? Anyway, Kelham is no fool. Why not take his advice and let me come in? Not that you can keep me out, but it’s easier. I am not a detective, not at all, but merely a writer of books. Still, I have discovered a few little things that have been useful to the police and especially to Kelham.”

“Are you quite sure you will know who—?”

“Oh, yes,” I replied. “I am quite sure I shall know eventually. But whether the knowledge will be of any use to you is another matter. I only solve the mystery, but you have to prove the case.”

“Yes,” Pepster said thoughtfully, “and that is a different thing, isn’t it? I may have a good idea who did it, but where is my proof? But as to letting you in, it seems I can’t help myself. I showed Kelham’s letter to the Chief Constable this morning. ‘Dennis Holt?’ he said. ‘Is he at Cartordale? Did he come down especially for this?’ I told him, no, that you’d been living here and that you’d been on the jury. ‘Go and see him,’ he said. ‘Talk it over with him. Tell him everything.’ And there you are.”

“Just so,” I replied. “And I’ll make the same bargain with you I did with Kelham and his crowd. What I discover I will pass on, but I don’t appear in it publicly. Do we work together?”

“Why, yes, certainly,” Pepster said. “Since both Kelham and the Chief insist on it I should be a fool to stand out.”

We strode along in silence for a few minutes.

“Of course,” Pepster remarked, “there are a few matters that haven’t—come out.”

“There always are,” I replied, thinking of Kitty Clevedon’s midnight visit regarding which, at present, at all events, I intended to say nothing.

“For example, that valet, John Tulmin,” Pepster went on. “Why should Sir Philip Clevedon have given him a cheque for £500 the day before he was—before he died?”

“That certainly hasn’t come out. Did he? And did Tulmin cash it?”

“Oh, yes, there was no particular secret about it. The counterfoil of the cheque-book seemed quite plain, ‘John Tulmin, £500,’ and the money was paid out to Tulmin by the bank in Midlington at 11.30

on the morning of the day Sir Philip was—died. The bank knew Tulmin well. He had often transacted business for Sir Philip. Now, suppose that cheque was a forgery, or suppose it had been made out for £5 and Tulmin altered it to £500, or suppose the money was really for household expenses, and Tulmin stuck to it and Clevedon discovered it or Tulmin feared discovery, and so—"

"There would be your motive, certainly," I agreed. "Has Tulmin explained the cheque?"

"Well, not in detail."

"Has he been asked?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"That it was money owing him. 'What about this cheque?' I asked him. 'Oh, the governor owed me that,' he said. But when I wanted something a bit more definite be dried up.

"Any other cheques of that sort?"

"No, I don't know. I might inquire."

"Perhaps it was salary."

"No, Tulmin's salary was paid monthly—£20 a month. This is an extra."

"And he declares it is money owing?"

"Yes."

“Well, perhaps it was,” I said, as we drew up outside the little post office where I had to make a call. “Anyway, I don’t think I would arrest Tulmin just yet. Tell the Chief you have that from me.”

But what I wanted to know more than anything just then was why John Tulmin was blackmailing Sir Philip Clevedon.

CHAPTER X
AN INVITATION FROM LADY CLEVEDON

"OH, Mr. Holt," cried the young lady behind the counter of the little general shop that was also the village post office. "I have just taken a telegram for you. You can have it now if you like. It's against the regulations, but that doesn't matter."

I took the yellow slip and perused the message which was from a publishing firm with whom I was negotiating, offering me a price for a manuscript I had submitted to them.

"It is a lot of money," the girl said, with a touch of envy. "It would take me years and years to earn that at this job."

"You'll not be here years and years," I replied smilingly. "Some lucky man will snap you up long before that."

"Well, there's no queue so far," the girl returned dryly.

"Perhaps when Mr. Holt has quite finished, other customers may have a turn," said a mocking voice at my elbow, and wheeling round with a quick movement that dislodged a pile of picture post cards and albums and brought them clattering to the floor, I saw Kitty Clevedon's face flushed with pretty colour.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I was just reading a telegram."

“I have been down to Stone Hollow,” Kitty Clevedon went on. “In fact, I have been looking for you. I have a message for you from Lady Clevedon. She would like you to come and see her.”

“Yes? When?”

“Well, could you come now? I have my car here.”

I nodded assent, and followed her out of the shop to the smart little two-seater, which she managed with a skill that betokened plentiful practice. As we drove off I saw Pepster walking slowly through the village.

“I don’t know that man,” Kitty said, as Pepster saluted, “but I have seen him about quite a lot lately. And he was at the—the inquest. I suppose he belongs to the police.”

“Yes, a detective. He is very interested in me.”

“I dare say you are a very interesting person,” Kitty rejoined equably.

“You see,” I went on, “I am under suspicion.”

She turned to have another look at Pepster, and the car swerved suddenly to the left.

“Steady on!” I cried. “You’ll have us into the wall.”

“But—I do not understand. Why should they—?”

“Oh, the story is very simple. The police knew I was out late on that particular night. Sergeant Gamley saw me. They questioned me, of course, and after all, it was a trifle—er—suspicious-looking,

wasn't it? Here was I, a new-comer and a stranger, wandering about the Dale at midnight—"

I paused and glanced at her to note the effect of my words; and was interested to see that she had grown perceptibly paler.

"But they—surely they didn't suspect you?" she said, in tones that were very little above a whisper.

"Oh, I don't know," I returned cheerfully, "why shouldn't they suspect me? They know nothing about me, and certainly nothing that would count particularly in my favour. At all events, they questioned me. Had I seen anyone that night? And I lied to them. I had seen nobody at all. There are occasions, you know, when mendacity may be condoned."

Kitty gazed at me with wide-open eyes for fully a minute, then pulled herself together with an effort and laughed with a quite passable imitation of merriment.

"And had you seen anyone?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied, smiling into her face. "I had seen a very beautiful and clever woman and an extremely capable actress whose ideas regarding truth are apparently nearly as flexible as my own."

She flushed a little, but remained apparently undisturbed by either the compliment or the sarcasm.

"And which had committed the crime?" she asked. "Was it the beautiful and clever woman—you said beautiful and clever, didn't you?—or the capable actress? But still, I don't understand. I thought you were a great detective—a sort of Sherlock Holmes in real life."

I threw myself back on the cushioned seat with a quick laugh.

“Where did you get that fairy story from?” I demanded.

“But—it’s true, isn’t it?”

“No,” I said, “I am not a detective, certainly not. And I am not a great anything, unless it be a great liar. I have had a little practice at that just lately.”

“But that is why auntie has sent for you,” she added, with a puzzled frown.

“Because I am a great liar?” I asked.

“No,” she replied, quite seriously. “Because you—because she thinks that you—somebody told her you were a great detective.”

“Oh, yes, and why does she need the services of a—er—a detective?” I demanded.

“She wants you to find out who murdered Sir Philip Clevedon.”

“I see. And do *you* want me to discover that?”

“Of course, but I don’t think you can.”

“If you thought I could, you wouldn’t want me to try—is that it?”

“No—oh, I don’t know what you mean.”

She gave all her attention to the car after that, while I, having nothing particular to say, lapsed into silence.

We found Lady Clevedon seated in the small parlour, a square, cheerful room, furnished evidently for comfort with couches and

big arm-chairs. The old lady bade me sit down and then plunged with characteristic abruptness into the subject of the interview.

“What is your fee?” she demanded.

“My fee?” I echoed. “But I have no fee. I am neither a doctor nor a solicitor.”

“Nor a parson—you may as well complete the usual trio,” the old lady said dryly. “But you are a policeman.”

The word was so unexpected that I could not forbear a soft laugh in which, after a momentary hesitation, Miss Kitty Clevedon joined me. I expected her to label me detective; that she should call me policeman had all the elements of novelty that go to make up unconscious humour.

“But policemen are not allowed to take fees,” I replied. “They have their salaries—or is it wages?”

“Do you get a salary?” Lady Clevedon demanded.

“No, but then you see I am not a policeman; I am merely a writer of books.”

“But the Chief Constable of Peakborough-he is a cousin of mine, distant, but still a cousin, and a fool at that, or he would have found out before this who killed Sir Philip—told me you were a celebrated detective and that if I could get your help—now, who did murder Sir Philip Clevedon?”

“Did you?” I asked, rudely enough I admit though the question was well in accord with her own conversational style. Nor did she take it amiss.

“I? No,” she said. “Why should I murder him?”

“Then if you are quite sure of that,” I returned, “you have all the world to go at. I may have done it, or Miss Clevedon may have done it, or Tulmin may—”

“May, may, may—you tire me to death with your may’s. I don’t want to know who may have done it, but who did. I suppose it is a case of the needle in the haystack.”

“Even the needle in the haystack could be found, given the necessary time and labour,” I observed.

“I wish you would talk sense,” the old lady rejoined tartly. “I have had that fat man Peppermint, Peppercorn—”

“Pepster,” I suggested.

“Yes—I have had him here and pumped him hard. But he knows nothing, merely talks in a squeaky voice and gets nowhere. Now, how would you start discovering who—?”

I found the old lady interesting and decided to humour her, not because I intended to be of any use to her, but because it was just possible she might be useful to me.

“Well,” I replied slowly, “there are several starting points. For example, who benefits most by his death?”

“Eh!”

I happened to glance just then at Miss Kitty Clevedon and noticed that her face had gone an almost chalky whiteness that extended even to her lips and that she was gripping the arm of her chair with a strong, nervous tension.

“For instance,” I went on slowly, keeping my voice low and tranquil as if it were really a matter of small importance, “who is Sir Philip’s heir?”

But I still kept my eyes on Kitty Clevedon and noted that her grip on the chair tightened.

“Well, he didn’t do it, anyway,” Lady Clevedon retorted.

“No, I don’t suppose he did,” I returned, carefully refraining from raising my voice. “I merely said that he would be my starting point. Then, doubtless, he would prove an alibi and I should eliminate him.”

“Billy might have hit him over the head with a stick,” Lady Clevedon went on, “but he wouldn’t poison a man nor would he dig a hatpin into him.”

“Oh, you never know,” I replied cheerfully. “Who is Billy?”

“Sir William Clevedon—the new baronet—Kitty’s brother,” the old lady explained. “But he never poisoned Philip. They weren’t friends, certainly, but then, Philip had no friends. And they had quarrelled; though for that matter Philip had quarrelled with Ronald Thoyne, as you heard at the inquest. Philip was that way. He quarrelled with most people. But Billy didn’t do it. He is with his regiment in Ireland, trying to keep the Sinn Feiners quiet.”

“Then there is his alibi which rules him out,” I said.

But I made up my mind to learn more regarding Billy Clevedon. His sister’s agitation had been too pronounced to be disregarded; and it was the more impressive in that I knew her for a very clever

actress with a singular capacity for holding her own and keeping a straight face.

What was it, I wondered, that had so completely upset her and smashed down all her defences. It did not take me long to decide that. She had been told that I was “a great detective” who would infallibly discover the murderer and practically my first observation had been a direct hint that her brother might be the man. A suggestion so libellous should have caused her to flame out in resentment and denial instead of which she had had to exert all her strength and will-power to keep herself from fainting. There was more in all this than one could sum up in a moment or two and I made up my mind then and there that Billy would become an object of great interest to me.

It was not difficult to learn all I wanted. The fact that most people referred to him as Billy Clevedon and that no one called him Sir William may indicate something of his general personality, though that would be to do him some injustice since the diminutive was partly born of affection and was partly a survival from bygone years. There were those who declared that his sister had been mainly responsible for the reputation Billy had enjoyed for juvenile mischief. I could well believe that, knowing her in maturer years. She would lead him on and he, being a little gentleman, would bear the blame.

But that after all is only the female way. Man was intended by Nature to carry every burden save one and that the heaviest of the lot. From my housekeeper to whom I first applied I learnt little. She had heard stories but had never known Billy Clevedon personally. I applied to both Dr. Crawford and the Vicar, but with hardly more success. They, too, had the usual legends off by heart,

but Billy had never been ill and had no reputation for piety and seemed to have kept out of the way of both doctor and parson. Tim Dallott could tell me a little more but it consisted chiefly of reminiscences of Sunday rat-hunts and fishing. Among them all, however, I built up a picture of a freckled, yellow-haired lad, full of high spirits and mischief, but honest and never afraid to face punishment for what he had done. And somewhere, not far away, hovered incessantly the figure of his sister, as irrepressible as himself but far more adroit.

But all that was years ago when they came as orphans to live at White Towers, when Lady Clevedon's husband was alive and before the late Sir Philip had succeeded to the title. In due time they both went away to school and Cartordale knew them only in the holidays. They were but shadows of their former selves as far as their general activities went, or possibly were more careful and clever at evading the results.

Eventually Billy Clevedon went into the army, but as a career, not merely as a war measure, and won some distinctions in France. But he justified his old-time reputation in that he remained apparently a somewhat incalculable quantity always doing the unexpected. His sister, having finished her education with more or less credit, accompanied her aunt to Hapforth House and settled there, though during the war she engaged in various occupations and learnt to drive a motor, milk cows, and use a typewriter.

CHAPTER XI
A VISIT FROM RONALD THOYNE

THE "Waggon and Horses" in Cartordale was one of the best known inns in the district, with a history behind it that went far beyond the printed word into the mists and myths of legend and tradition. I believe, in fact, that it possessed its own duly authenticated ghost, that of a sailor on tramp towards the coast, who had been murdered for his gold by a rascally landlord and his wife. This was well over two centuries ago and it was a long time now since the sailor's restless spirit had been seen. But the records of its appearances were definite and were at all events implicitly believed in by the Dale folk.

The inn was a favourite visiting place of holiday-makers from Midlington and on a fine Saturday afternoon or Sunday in the summer one might see sixty or seventy vehicles lined up in the wide open space before the entrance, while their passengers refreshed themselves within.

Tim Dallott, the landlord, was well known throughout the Dale and was highly esteemed. The new-fangled notion that an innkeeper is a sort of semi-criminal had no countenance in Cartordale, where they liked their ale and took it strong—as strong, that is, as a grandmotherly Control Board would allow them to have it.

And, whatever else Tim Dallott was, he was a judge of ale and would have only the best. Being an observer of my fellow-man, I

had early made Tim's acquaintance and had spent more than one interesting hour with him and his customers.

Tim, himself, was a masterful man, rather given to laying down the law, though with an occasional touch of humour that leavened his bluntness; and he had a curious habit of screwing the forefinger of his right hand into the open palm of his left when he was saying anything particularly emphatic. His build was inclined to stoutness and he was very bald for all he was still some years off sixty. His wife had died just before the war and he had neither son nor daughter. It was he, the reader will recollect, who had been foreman of the jury at the Clevedon inquest.

"Well," he said, as I entered the 'snug,' "and what do you think of it all? I haven't seen you since the inquest, Mr. Holt."

"Give me a glass of beer," I replied. "It puzzles me."

"What I'd like to know," chimed in old Tompkinson, who was verger at the parish church and gardener at the vicarage, "is why old Crimin"—have I explained that Crimin was the coroner?—"worried about that whisky bottle."

"Aye, you may say that," Tim agreed, nodding his head with an air of vague mystery.

"It seemed main foolish to me," Tompkinson went on, "and I couldn't get a grip of it nohow. Nobbut Crimin is a good crowner, I'm saying nowt agin him, an' I dessay he'd summat oop his sleeve an' all, but I'm fair bothered as to what it could be."

"It's bothering better men than you, Joe Tompkinson," Tim Dallott said dryly.

“But ain’t you got no idea, Mr. Dallott?” Joe asked.

“Perhaps I have and perhaps I haven’t,” was the cautious reply. “Now what would you say about it, Mr. Holt?”

A little, shrivelled old man, who had been seated in a corner by the fire, sipping occasionally at a glass of hot rum, interposed suddenly.

“Who was the gal they quarrelled over?” he demanded in a shrill, piping treble. “I know who it was.”

“Then if I were you I’d keep it to myself, Jonathan Crossty,” Tim said. “No names—think what you like but don’t say it out loud—that’s safest.”

Jonathan nodded as if in agreement and returned once more to his hot rum.

“Now, that whisky bottle,” Joe Tompkinson resumed, “how could any man tell it was the same. ‘Taint in sense, is it? Then why worry?”

A youth came briskly in and asked for a glass of stout. He caught Joe’s last remark.

“Aye,” he said, “but there’s more than one theory will fit that.”

“You newspaper gentlemen are wonderful fond of theories,” Tim Dallott responded. “Your papers would be none the worse if you were a bit fonder of facts.”

The youth laughed good-humouredly and took a long drink at his stout.

“Well,” he said, as he set his glass down again, “suppose that X—we’ll not mention names, the libel laws being what they are—wanted to poison Z. ‘Bring me a whisky and soda,’ says Z. And X, as he brings the bottle, drops a dose of prussic acid in it. Good!”

“I see nowt good in that,” Joe Tompkinson interrupted.

“You should skin your eyes, then,” Tim Dallott retorted brusquely.

“Well, it’s good enough, anyway,” the pressman went on. “So Z drinks his whisky and falls down dead. Then X creeps in, takes away the doped bottle, and smashes it, and puts another of the same brand in its place. Could anyone tell that the bottle had been changed?”

“Meaning by Z, Sir Philip Clevedon,” Joe interposed, “and by X—”

“Didn’t I tell you to mention no names,” Tim interrupted angrily. “If you’re intent on dragging folk in by name go and do it outside and not in this snug.”

“No offence meant,” Joe replied meekly.

“Well—no names, and stick to that,” Tim retorted.

“But there’s another way,” the pressman went on oracularly, obviously in love with the sound of his own voice and delighted with the impression he was making. “Let’s suppose that X gives Z a drink of whisky at dinner and then puts the bottle on the sideboard. Presently Y creeps in and drops the dope into the whisky and then, when Z has pegged out, comes back and changes the bottles—how about that? Y would be somebody who had a grudge against Z—perhaps he had had a quarrel with him. But the

point is here—nobody can swear it was the same bottle, that stands to reason."

"You'll not print either of these theories in your paper, I'll bet a dollar," Tim Dallott said.

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," the youth returned vaguely. "That's the editor's job, not mine."

"I know the gal they quarrelled over," Jonathan Crossty chimed in suddenly.

"Who quarrelled over?" demanded the youth, wheeling round. "Oh, you mean—"

"I mean I won't have any names in this snug," Tim interrupted angrily. "Don't I keep saying it? What a lot of cross-grained, gossiping old hags it is. X's and Z's are all right, but not names."

"But that came out in evidence—that they'd quarrelled," the reporter said.

"The girl's name didn't, and it might be anybody."

"But I know who it is," Jonathan persisted.

I finished my drink and nodding a good night all round took myself off, but not very far because I waited in the shadows until old Jonathan Crossty came hobbling out. I met him in the doorway.

"Hallo!" I cried. "Not home yet, Mr. Crossty?"

I swung round and we went down the road together. He lived in a little cottage nearly opposite Stone Hollow, and it was thus quite natural that we should be going the same way.

“And so you know the lady they quarrelled over,” I remarked, after a few preliminary observations.

“Yes,” he replied, “but I’m not telling. My grand-darter’s ‘tween maid at Hapforth and she knows all about it. They quarrelled over her right enough.”

“Over your grand-daughter?” I queried.

“Over Lucy!” he said scornfully. “Don’t be a big fule, mister. Why should they quarrel over Lucy? She’s a good girl and she’s only sixteen. Don’t you go for to mix her up in this business.”

“No,” I said, “I’m sorry. Lucy, who’s as good as she’s pretty and—”

“Nay, she’s nowt to look at,” the old man said, with a chuckle.

“And so Lucy told you that both Sir Philip and Mr. Thoyne were in love with Miss Kitty—”

“She never said nowt o’ th’ sooart,” the old man retorted. “It’s none of her business, is it?”

“Not at all,” I agreed.

I changed the subject after that and we discoursed on various matters of no great interest to either of us until we parted at the gate of Stone Hollow.

Later, when I had dined comfortably and well, and was seated in my study smoking a cigar, Mrs. Helter, my housekeeper entered with the information that Mr. Thoyne had called and wished to see me.

“He says he will not keep you long,” Mrs. Helter explained, “and his business is not immediately pressing if you are otherwise engaged. But, if not, he says it would be convenient if you could see him now.”

“Mr. Thoyne,” I echoed. “H’m, that’s rather funny. But show him in, anyway.”

Ronald Thoyne entered the room a moment or two later, a large, rather lumbering figure in appearance but moving with a curiously alert lightness. His bulk signified strength, not fat. I rose and greeted him, then returned to my own chair.

“You will wonder why I have come,” Thoyne began, as he took the seat indicated and selected a cigarette from the box I offered him. Apparently, he wanted to maintain at least an appearance of friendship. “No, thanks, I’ll have nothing to drink,” he added, as I motioned towards the whisky on the table. “But, now, as to the reason for coming, well, in the first place, I have wanted to make your acquaintance. The fact that you are a near neighbour renders you—shall I say?—an object of interest. No, do not smile. If that had been all I should have waited. There is something else, but we shall come to that presently.”

I nodded, but offered no comment on these obviously preliminary observations. I was quite well aware that this was no mere friendly call—that Thoyne had some very definite purpose in his mind—and I was quite content to wait until it should suit him to disclose it. Thoyne, probably, had expected some sort of a reply, something that would, so to speak, open a conversation and for a moment or two he paused. But he did not allow my calculated silence to disconcert him.

“I dare say,” Thoyne began again, “that my manner may seem a little abrupt to you, Mr. Holt, but I always go straight to the point. Perhaps it would have been more tactful if I’d talked a bit first—yes. I have noticed that the people of these old countries like to go round and round the mulberry bush before they come to the point, but that is not our way—no, sir. I had a lesson on that from old Silas Pegler when I was a very young man. He was president of the Trans-Central and scores of other big things and he pulled all sorts of wires. I had to see him once about a deal and I began: ‘Good morning, Mr. Pegler, a fine morning, isn’t it?’ But he only wrinkled his ugly old face and glared at me. ‘Young man,’ he said, ‘I am here to talk dollars, not weather.’ And since then I have cultivated the habit of straight talk. It pays in New York but not so well in this country. A lot of people write me down as bad form and a man over here who is once labelled bad form had far better be dead and buried.”

I lay back in my chair and regarded my visitor smilingly. Certainly for a person who cultivated a habit of straight talk, he was singularly discursive.

“Are you intending to remain in Cartordale?” Thoyne asked, seeing that I remained silent.

“I shall be here for a little while yet, though I cannot say that I have made any definite plans,” I replied.

“But I mean as a permanent resident. You see, somebody, I think it was Dr. Crawford told me—hinted that you—. Now, if you wanted to sell this house, I’d like to buy it.”

The suggestion was so surprising that for a moment I had nothing to say, but I recovered quickly, knowing that if there was an explanation it would appear in due course.

“What are you prepared to offer for it?” I demanded cautiously. “Since, apparently, you want the house, you should be prepared to bid high for it. That makes a difference, doesn’t it? The seller who wants to sell would take less than—”

“Well, it’s like this,” Thoyne said persuasively. “I shouldn’t have thought of it but for Dr. Crawford. He gave me the idea. ‘I wish he were staying amongst us,’ he said, ‘but I’m afraid, he’ll not be here long! A very charming young—’ yes, those were his words.”

“Almost photographic in their accuracy,” I said dryly.

“‘But he wants a customer for his house—hankers after the fleshpots of London,’ said the doctor. And I thought that perhaps—”

“I believe I did make some such remark—casually,” I said. “But Dr. Crawford took it too seriously. This place improves on acquaintance. No, on the whole, I don’t think I want to sell.”

“But—”

“Oh, let us forget Dr. Crawford. I do not want to sell, therefore I must be tempted. It is your turn now—to tempt me.”

“I would give you—four thousand pounds.”

“The place isn’t worth that.”

“No, but I’m willing to give it.”

“Very good—it is yours. There is a charming little cottage just by the church that I could get for six hundred. It would suit me exactly.”

Thoyne frowned heavily and spoke as if choosing his words with some care.

“I should attach to my offer a condition—that you leave Cartordale—and do not return. For that I would make it five thousand.”

“Ah, now we really are getting to the straight talk,” I said smilingly. “Suppose we make it absolutely straight. You want to get me out of Cartordale—why?”

Thoyne sat silent for the space of fully two minutes.

“Straight talk doesn’t seem so easy as you thought—is that it?” I asked. “But you owe me some explanation surely.”

“The talk is straight enough,” Thoyne responded half sullenly. “I want to get you out of Cartordale—yes, that is true, and I have told you so frankly enough. What do my reasons matter? I am willing to pay.”

“Yes, it’s plain enough,” I returned. “I will be equally straight. I decline to go. Did Miss Kitty Clevedon send you here?”

“What has she to do with it—or you with her?” he demanded angrily.

But I saw easily enough that my chance shot had hit the mark. And I sat eyeing him thoughtfully for a moment or two wondering how far it would be safe to go.

“I suppose,” I said, speaking calmly, even casually, as if it were a matter of no great moment, “it was over Miss Kitty Clevedon that you quarrelled with the late baronet.”

“You have no right—” he began explosively but I pulled him up.

“Oh, yes I have,” I replied, “you see I am retained, in a semi-professional capacity—”

“Yes, I know,” he cried. “That damned old fool—”

“Meaning whom?” I interrupted.

“Oh, I beg her pardon,” he said. “Yes, I meant Lady Clevedon. Why did she want to drag you into it? You have a reputation, haven’t you, for solving such puzzles as—”

“Some little,” I agreed. “I shall solve this.”

“Yes,” he said, “and I don’t want it solved. At least, I want to see it buried and forgotten. The thing’s a damned nightmare. There, now it’s out. We want you to drop the case—to go away and leave it alone.”

“We?” I echoed. “Does Miss Clevedon know of this visit?”

“No, but she knows I am to try and persuade you to drop the case. She asked me—”

“It is for her sake you want me to leave it alone,” I commented. “It is not for yours.”

“Mine—no—it doesn’t concern me,” he replied, “except as everything that interests her, concerns me.”

“But—doesn’t concern you?” I asked. “Yet you were the last person known to have quarrelled with—”

“If you mean to accuse me of the murder—”

“I don’t,” I interrupted promptly, “but look at the sequence. You quarrel with Sir Philip Clevedon and a few hours later he is dead. Then a celebrated detective—that I am neither a detective nor celebrated is only a detail—is put on the case and you try to buy him off, to bribe him in fact.”

“It is a complete case,” he admitted, with a quick grin.

“Yes,” I agreed, “the sort of completeness that is too good to be true.”

“Not at all,” he added, as the grin widened. “I can already feel the rope round my neck.”

He ran his finger along the inside of his collar with a very expressive gesture.

“On the other hand,” I went on, still speaking with off-hand tranquillity, “though you did not murder Sir Philip Clevedon you think you know who did.”

He drew himself slowly up from the chair and stood over me with a face that had gone curiously grey.

“I have in point of fact already begun my inquiries,” I went on, rising in my turn and looking him straight in the eyes. “Why hasn’t Sir William Clevedon come to Cartordale to take up his title and estate? He left his quarters in Ireland on the 19th, three or four days before Sir Philip Clevedon died. He is still absent from duty.

You can learn a lot by well-placed telegrams in a very short time. Where is he now? Where was he on February 23rd?"

I knew now what Thoyne and Kitty Clevedon feared. He stood glaring at me for a moment or two, then buttoned his coat with fingers that trembled.

"I'll go now," he said. "I don't know that I have done anybody much good by coming here but it seemed the quickest and straightest way."

He did not offer his hand nor did he say another word, but opened the door himself without waiting for my help and disappeared.

CHAPTER XII
RONALD THOYNE DISAPPEARS

THE next move in this very curious game was made by Pepster who called on me a few days after my interview with Ronald Thoyne.

"I have a warrant for Tulmin's arrest," he announced.

"Yes," I said, "I am not surprised. I could see you were edging that way."

"It's the right way. Tulmin has disappeared."

"Has he? That is interesting at least."

"Yes, he went from White Towers to Lennsdale—that is Mr. Thoyne's house, you know. Thoyne engaged him the day after the inquest and he went at once. And now he has gone altogether."

"Engaged him as what?"

"Same as Clevedon—valet, and so on."

"How do you know?"

"I put someone on to watch him of course. I wasn't going to let him slip away. But he has managed it, at least so my man reports and he must be a damned fool, as I told him. He hasn't been seen for two days."

"Your man hasn't?"

“No, I mean Tulmin.”

“Thoyne should know where he is.”

“He says he doesn’t but I haven’t seen him myself. I am going up to Lennsdale now to question him. Would you care to come?”

At first I thought not, and then I altered my mind. After all, Thoyne really was right in the thick of it.

When we reached Thoyne’s house Pepster took the lead and rang lustily at the bell, which was one of the old-fashioned type with a long, hanging handle of cast-iron. He had to ring three times before he obtained any response and then the door was slowly opened to disclose a very old, white-headed man standing blinking at us with watery eyes. To Pepster’s question as to whether Mr. Thoyne was at home he only shook his head, but whether in negative reply or merely in stupidity we could not quite make out. The old man’s face at all events was devoid of expression.

“Do you mean he is not at home?” I demanded sharply.

“We will see for ourselves,” Pepster said, pushing past the old man into the hall. “Now, then, who else is in the house, and be careful what you say or we may be taking you with us.”

Pepster was very angry that Tulmin had slipped through his fingers and apparently regarded the old man as an ally of the enemy.

“Taking me with you!” the old fellow cried, in the quavering accents of age. “Taking me where?”

“To prison, old chap,” Pepster replied cheerfully. “People who won’t answer questions often find themselves in gaol.”

It was pure bluff and Pepster's superiors would probably have had something rather drastic to say had they overheard it. But the detective knew pretty well how far to go, and with whom it was safe to go even that distance.

"But, dear sir, I have done nothing wrong," the old man said, manifesting a sudden fluency which caused Pepster to turn on him with a sharp glance. "I am a very old man, gentlemen, seventy-seven, and I have never been in any trouble of that sort, never, gentlemen."

"You are making for it now," Pepster rejoined dryly.

"But, gentlemen, I—"

"Look here," Pepster said, "we asked you a question—where's Thoyne? If you mean to answer that, get going, and quick. If you don't mean to answer it, don't talk at all."

"But, sir, I—"

"Where's Mr. Thoyne?"

"But, gentlemen, if you would—"

"Where's Mr. Thoyne?"

"He—I don't know."

"Is he in the house?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't know who Mr. Thoyne is, I—I never heard of him."

“You are in his house.”

“Yes”

“Where are the other people—the servants—the housekeeper—?”

“There is nobody here but me, gentlemen, truly there is nobody here. I am alone in the house, me, Silas Ballaker, seventy-seven—”

“How long have you been in this house?”

“Not long—I came to-day—”

“Came to-day—what do you mean, you came to-day?”

“Sir, I am Silas Ballaker and—”

“Yes, you said that before, and you are seventy-seven years of age. Neither statement interests us. We want Mr. Thoyne.”

“Hallo! hallo!” cried suddenly a new voice. “Silas, who are these gentlemen? Ha! Mr. Pepster, I did not recognise you. Have you come to take my house?”

“No, Mr. Bannister,” Pepster replied slowly. “I haven’t come to take any house.”

He paused, a little irresolute, knowing that Mr. Bannister was a different proposition from old Silas Ballaker and that he would have to be a little more careful.

“May I ask what you are doing here?” Pepster went on.

“Now is that a kindly personal inquiry from a friend or is it asked in an official capacity?”

Mr. Bannister was a little fat man, with two small, keen eyes peering out of a sallow, bearded face.

“Oh, purely personal,” Pepster replied, a little impatiently. “We came to see Mr. Thoyne. I was merely surprised to see you where we expected—someone else.”

“Oh, Thoyne, yes, he was my tenant. But he has gone. Gave me notice some days ago, paid me up and cleared out. A good tenant, very good. I was sorry to lose him—yes. He said he was going back to America and he left this morning. I sent old Silas here as caretaker. Good old chap, Silas, but—”

He tapped his head significantly with the forefinger of his right hand. The old man did not see the movement but he caught the words.

“They have come to take me to prison,” he said mournfully.

“To prison!” cried Mr. Bannister. “Nonsense! What for? What have you been doing, old Silas?”

“I haven’t been doing nothing,” Silas quavered. “But this stout gentleman seemed mortally offended and—”

“Oh, we’ll see, we’ll see,” Mr. Bannister said. “Now, Mr. Pepster, what does all this mean?”

“We want to see Mr. Thoyne and—”

“He isn’t here.”

“Well, we should like to look through the house—”

“Yes, yes, and no doubt you have a search warrant?”

“I have no search warrant,” Pepster said patiently. “I am asking your permission.”

“No, no, let’s do everything in order. No warrant, no search. An Englishman’s house, et cetera, you know. Can’t be done, Mr. Pepster, can’t be done. Think what would happen if the papers got hold of it. High-handed action by a Peakborough detective—eh?”

“The papers will not get hold of it if you don’t tell them,” Pepster said quietly.

“Oh, one never knows. How do these fellows get hold of things? It’s wonderful, but, you know, it’s their job. And your Chief is just a bit nervous, isn’t he?”

“I could get a warrant in an hour,” Pepster said.

“Well, why not? The house won’t disappear in an hour. It will still be here and so will old Silas. But if it’s Thoyne you want, a warrant’ll not help you. He isn’t here.”

“His furniture is,” I interposed.

“No,” Mr. Bannister replied, with an oily smile, “you are wrong there also. The furniture’s mine. I let it furnished.”

“Did you see Mr. Thoyne go?” I asked.

“Yes, I was here. He handed me the key.”

“Had he a man named Tulmin with him?”

“He had a servant, a little man, but I don’t know what his name was.”

“They have gone away together,” Pepster said, turning to me. “Come along, there’s nothing more to do here!”

“If you want to go through the house—” Mr. Bannister began.

“We don’t,” Pepster rejoined promptly. “We’ll take your refusal and if anything occurs we’ll call you as a witness.”

“But—”

“Is Thoyne in the house?”

“He isn’t.”

“Then good day to you.”

We turned away and though Mr. Bannister did not quite seem to like it, he made no effort to detain us.

“Yes, they’ve gone away together,” Pepster repeated, as we strolled towards Stone Hollow. “Why has Thoyne taken Tulmin out of the way?”

“It may be only a coincidence,” I observed.

“It would be a curious coincidence,” Pepster remarked. “Not that I rule coincidences out myself. They happen. I have run up against some very queer instances in my time. I once had a case in which a man prepared a dose of poison for another man. The latter died of poison and the other gave himself up to justice. A clear case—but when the post-mortem took place it was found that the victim had died of quite another sort of poison altogether. He had, in fact, committed suicide and had never taken the dose prepared for him by the would-be murderer!”

“But if this isn’t a coincidence, then there must be an explanation,” I said. “How would this do? Ronald Thoyne quarrels with Sir Philip Clevedon over Miss—over a woman. Then Thoyne pays Tulmin to assassinate Sir Philip. That is why Thoyne took the man into his service so promptly. But they find the chase getting too hot for them and so they clear out. What?”

“Is that the story?” Pepster demanded, evidently impressed.

“No,” I replied, “I am quite sure it isn’t. But it would fit the facts up to date, wouldn’t it?”

“I shall go after Tulmin, anyway,” Pepster rejoined.

I nodded smilingly, but did not further discuss the matter though I divined Thoyne’s move. He had taken Tulmin away in order to divert suspicion from young Clevedon. How far Thoyne had taken Tulmin into his confidence I did not know. Perhaps he had bluffed him as he had tried to bluff me. And at all events he would have paid him well. Whatever faults Thoyne may have possessed any form of parsimony was certainly not one of them.

CHAPTER XIII
THE VICAR'S STORY

IT was by means of the Vicar that the story was carried a stage further. I had made the old man's acquaintance soon after I first came to Cartordale and had conceived a great liking for the gentle, kindly old parson and his bustling, energetic, rather autocratic wife.

The Rev. Herbert Wickstead was an elderly man, with a thin, colourless face, short-sighted eyes and a scholarly stoop. As a preacher, he was not very much, for, though he did some hard thinking and was now and again original, he possessed very little gift for literary expression and none at all for oratory. Nor was he very much more successful in parochial work, though that did not greatly matter since his wife—Mrs. Vicar, as she was generally labelled—possessor of the quickest of tongues and the kindest of hearts, took the heaviest part of that burden upon her own shoulders.

I met him by the vicarage on the afternoon of the day following our visit to Thoyne's house and when he asked me to go in and have some tea I accepted chiefly because I thought he, or at any rate Mrs. Vicar, might be able to tell me some of the things I wanted to know. You see, I was still very much of a stranger in Cartordale with only a vague and shadowy knowledge of its people. In some ways that may have been a gain though, generally speaking, it was a handicap. He began on one of the subjects uppermost in my mind almost as soon as we were seated at the table.

“I was very sorry to learn to-day that we are losing Mr. Thoyne,” the Vicar said, in his halting drawl.

He took off his spectacles and polished them with the corner of his handkerchief, peering mildly at the rest of us the while, though his remark had evidently been addressed to his wife.

“He very seldom came to church,” Mrs. Vicar snapped.

“No, not frequently,” the Vicar admitted, “not so frequently as I could have wished. But he was very generous—very. Any story of distress or need was very sure of a sympathetic hearing. I have dipped rather deeply into his purse more than once.”

“Who told you he was leaving?” his wife asked.

The Vicar selected a slice of bread-and-butter with great deliberation from the plate before him.

“I was sorry I had no opportunity of bidding him good-bye,” he went on, apparently ignoring his wife’s question though most likely he had not heard it. “True I saw him yesterday but I had no chance then. I was returning from a visit to Sarah Blooms—poor woman—”

“She died this morning,” his wife chimed in, a little snappily I thought, though that may have been because I was not quite used to her conversational style.

“Ah, yes—dear me! dear me!”

The Vicar relapsed into silence.

“You were telling us, sir—?” I ventured, after a pause.

“Yes, yes, of course, I was returning from my visit to Sarah Blooms and was passing the end of Pallitt’s Lane when Mr. Thoyne passed me in his motor-car. There was a lady with him, Miss Clevedon, I think, though I could not be very sure of that.”

“Were they alone in the car?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, as far as I could see, quite alone.”

“With Mr. Thoyne driving, perhaps?”

“Oh, no, they were in the body of the car. There was the chauffeur and another man on the front, a servant, I think.”

“You did not recognise the second man?”

“Well, no, to tell you the truth I did not take particular notice of him.”

It was at least level betting that the second man was Tulmin. But what interested me most was the fact of Kitty Clevedon’s presence in the car. It seemed to suggest that whatever was going on, she had a hand in it.

“I have heard their names coupled more than once—Mr. Thoyne and Miss Clevedon,” Mrs. Vicar declared.

“Is that so?” the Vicar queried. “I had not heard it. But it would be a very suitable match too. He has money and physical strength and she has youth and beauty. That should make an ideal combination. They seemed very happy and comfortable—I noticed that. As they passed me he was talking to her, but they both saw me. Thoyne nodded to me as they went past.”

“And how do you know he’s gone for good?” Mrs. Vicar demanded.

“Oh, yes, it was Miss Kitty who told me that. I met her again an hour or two later and I asked her if she thought Mr. Thoyne would take the chair next Wednesday. She said he couldn’t because he had left Cartordale and had given up his house. She said, I think, that he was going abroad—”

“On his yacht, I expect,” Mrs. Vicar chimed in.

“Lucky man!” I interjected. “So he possesses a yacht, does he?”

“A lovely vessel,” Mrs. Vicar replied, with enthusiasm. “I haven’t seen it, but he gave us a lecture with limelight views, ‘Round the World by Steam’ he called it, and he showed us a lot of pictures of his yacht. The *Sunrise* its name is, and he says he gave it that name because he uses it to go where the sun is—one of the privileges of wealth, Mr. Holt,” she added, with a sigh.

“Had Mr. Thoyne been long in Cartordale?” I asked.

“Oh, well, it would be about two years, or, let me see, perhaps a little longer,” Mrs. Vicar replied. “He fought in the war, you know, and was wounded. He stayed as a lodger for some months at Lepley’s Farm and then took Lennsdale which belongs to Mr. Bannister of Peakborough, an auctioner and agent and all sorts of things generally, who lets it furnished—”

“Lepley,” I murmured, “that name seems familiar—”

“Yes,” Mrs. Vicar went on, right in her element now, “you will be thinking of the girl who gave evidence at the inquest, Nora Lepley, tall, good-looking, with dark eyes. She lives at the farm though she

sometimes stays at White Towers with her aunt, the housekeeper there. I remember there was some talk about Ronald Thoyne and Nora Lepley, but there was nothing in it, or, anyway nothing came of it. Talk's easy in a place like this, you know—there is nothing else to do. And there's always been plenty of talk round Nora Lepley—"

"A good girl, my dear, a good girl," the Vicar mildly interposed.

"Oh, yes, quite," Mrs. Vicar admitted.

"Exceptionally well able to take care of herself I should imagine," was my own comment, whereat Mrs. Vicar nodded emphatically.

It was two days after that conversation that I met Detective Pepster in the village.

"Ah, Mr. Holt," he said, "I was coming to see you. I have found out where Mr. Thoyne is."

"Why," I returned, "there was no particular mystery about that, was there? He'd made none so far as I know. What is the point?"

"Well—he disappeared."

"Disappeared? Do you call it that? He left the furnished house he'd been occupying and went off to his yacht, the *Sunrise*, but that isn't disappearing."

"No—well, perhaps in a way it isn't. But I'm going to interview Mr. Ronald Thoyne for all that and with a warrant in my pocket—"

"It hardly seems likely that Thoyne—"

“I don’t put my money on what is likely,” Pepster interrupted. “I’ve been had that way. I once had a case of the theft of a diamond ring. There were only three men possible—a bookmaker who’d once been in prison for horse-doping, a defaulting bankrupt and a clergyman. I arrested the horse-doper and kept an eye on the bankrupt, but it was the parson who had the ring.”

“You ought to write your reminiscences,” I remarked dryly.

“I am looking forward to doing so when my pension falls due,” Pepster returned, entirely unabashed. “But, now, let’s talk business. The warrant isn’t for Thoyne himself, but for Tulmin. Thoyne will come into it later—accessory after or before the fact, you know. Tulmin will do to be going on with.”

“You think Thoyne has taken Tulmin on board the yacht with him?”

“I don’t know—perhaps—perhaps not. But Thoyne has spirited Tulmin away somehow, somewhere. Isn’t that clear? And why has he done it?”

“Yes, I know, you explained before that Thoyne had paid Tulmin to murder Sir Philip—”

“No, Mr. Holt, that was your theory,” Pepster explained patiently. “And you said you didn’t believe it. No, Thoyne may have done the murder himself, or he may not, and Tulmin may have spotted him at it. But, to tell the truth, I’m not worrying about that just now. It is Tulmin I want. There’s enough against him to be going on with, anyway, and I mean to get him and to learn why Thoyne carried him off. Will you come down to Ilbay with me?”

“Ilbay?”

“Yes, the yacht’s there.”

“When do you go?”

“To-morrow.”

“No,” I said slowly, “I can’t go to-morrow. I could go the next day, but not to-morrow.”

“Well, that’ll do,” he replied. “There’s a breakdown in the machinery and he can’t shift for at least four days. I’ve got that much anyhow. The day after to-morrow, then. I’ll send you a list of the trains.”

An hour or so later I called at Hapforth House and was shown into the presence of Lady Clevedon and Miss Kitty.

“Well,” said the old lady, a little tartly, “have you made any discoveries?”

“Yes,” I returned equably, “several. But I have run up against a brick wall and I’ve come to you to pull it down for me. I can’t get over it or under it or round it.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about!” the old lady cried irascibly. “The question is—do you know who killed Philip Clevedon?”

“Well,” I said, “it depends. Perhaps I do, and possibly I am wrong.”

I glanced casually at Miss Kitty Clevedon, over whose pretty face some inward emotion had drawn a greyish pallor that extended even to her lips. It was quite certain that the last thing she wanted to hear was the name of the person who had killed Sir Philip

Clevedon. But she was seated a little behind the old lady who noticed nothing.

CHAPTER XIV
KITTY SENDS A TELEGRAM

"AND when will you arrest him?" Lady Clevedon demanded.

"Ah, yes," I returned slowly, "that is just it. You see, the difference between knowing and proving is several thousand miles and this brick wall—"

"Oh, you and your brick walls!" the old lady cried, waving her hands with an impatient and fretful gesture. "I want to see the murderer hanged and the whole thing cleared away and forgotten. He was stabbed with my hatpin and there are people silly enough to—"

"But, Auntie, Mr. Holt must be able to prove his case before he can arrest—anyone," Miss Kitty Clevedon chimed in.

She spoke naturally and the colour had returned to her cheeks. My graphic description of the difference between knowledge and proof had apparently brought its consolation.

The old lady snorted disagreeably but seemed to have no convincing retort ready.

"And what is the brick wall you chatter so much about?" she demanded.

"I want to know," I said slowly, examining the back of my left hand with apparent solicitude, "what hold the late Sir Philip Clevedon had over Miss Clevedon that she broke off her

engagement with Mr. Ronald Thoyne and consented to marry the late baronet?"

There was for a moment or two a dead silence in the room, a silence that could be felt and almost touched. It was the old lady who finally exploded in a manifestation of wrath.

"My niece was never engaged to Ronald Thoyne," she cried. "You are impertinent."

"Never?" I queried, ignoring her concluding sentence.

"And she never promised to marry Sir Philip Clevedon."

"No?"

She turned suddenly on the girl who, as I have said, was seated a little behind her.

"Was that what they meant at the inquest?" she demanded. "They said—that housekeeper, wasn't it?—that Philip Clevedon and Ronald Thoyne quarrelled over—over a—a woman. Was that it? Tell me the truth."

"I don't know what Mr. Holt is talking about," the girl replied carelessly.

She had entirely recovered her equanimity and was completely mistress of herself again.

"You were not engaged to Mr. Thoyne?" I asked.

"I was not."

"And Sir Philip did not want to marry you?"

“Yes, he did,” Lady Clevedon interposed. “He proposed to you a year ago and you refused him. Was it over you they quarrelled, Kitty?”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Miss Clevedon returned a little wearily. “I don’t know why they should.”

The old lady rose from her seat and strode towards a little bureau in one corner of the room from which she took a bundle of newspaper cuttings.

“Yes, here is the report,” she said, and she began to read an extract from Mrs. Halfleet’s evidence in a loud, rather strident voice.

> *“I heard Sir Philip say, ‘You are talking nonsense. I cannot compel her to marry me against her will. The decision rests with her.’ He was not exactly shouting but was speaking a little more loudly than usual. Mr. Thoyne seemed angry. ‘You must release her from her promise,’ he said. His voice was hoarse and he struck the table with his stick as he spoke. I think Sir Philip stood up from his seat then. I did not see him, of course, but I seemed to hear him walking up and down. And he spoke sharply, almost angrily. The words appeared to come out with a sort of snap. ‘I have nothing to say in this matter,’ Sir Philip declared. ‘I neither hold her to her promise nor release her from it. The decision rests solely with her. If she notifies me that she cannot marry me, I have no power to compel her. But I am not prepared to take your word for it. The decision must come from herself.’ Mr. Thoyne said,*

‘That is your last word, is it?’ to which Sir Philip replied, ‘My first word and my last. As far as I am concerned I am engaged and remain engaged until the young lady herself notifies me that the engagement is at an end.’ Then Mr. Thoyne said, ‘If you don’t release her I shall find a way of making you—I shall find a way.’”

The old lady ceased reading and glanced at Kitty over the top of her spectacles.

“What is behind it?” she cried. “Tell me, what is behind it all?”

“I don’t know,” Kitty said. “How should I know?”

“But—was it—who was it?”

“It may have been—Nora Lepley.”

I think she uttered the name quite on the spur of the moment and with no previous intention of taking that way out. At all events, for a moment or two the suggestion seemed rather to impress the old lady, then she shook her head.

“I don’t say that Nora Lepley—Philip Clevedon was like all other men, I dare say, no better and no worse. But he wouldn’t want to *marry* her. They might fight over Nora Lepley, yes, but it wouldn’t be because either of them wanted to marry her.”

“Why shouldn’t they want to marry Nora—she is very nice?” Kitty said.

“Don’t talk nonsense, child,” the old lady cried.

“These are democratic days—” I was beginning, but the old lady turned on me almost ferociously.

“I wasn’t asking you for your views,” she said. “And we’ll leave it at that. These two men quarrelled over Nora Lepley, or Jane Smith, or Martha Tompkins, and so—”

I rose from my seat and stood regarding them with a smile.

“And so my question goes unanswered,” I murmured, “and my brick wall remains.”

The old lady looked from me to Miss Kitty Clevedon and then back again.

“Yes,” she said, “and that ends the case. You must drop it—do you hear?—drop it. I am getting in deeper than I thought.”

I laughed quietly and then went towards the door.

“I am seeing Mr. Thoyne at Ilbay to-morrow,” I said, pausing there to make quite sure Kitty heard me, “and I will ask him.”

I left them, probably wondering what might be the precise meaning of that last promise—or was it a threat?—and finding my way out strolled slowly down to the big gates.

Once in the public road, however, I indulged in a course of action that might possibly have seemed a little strange to an uninitiated spectator. First of all I stood glancing here and there around me as if looking for someone or something. Then I made my way to the side of the road and clambered to the top of a small pile of boulders on the summit of which I found a seat on a flat stone, so placed that I was invisible to anyone coming from Hapforth House or proceeding in either direction along the road. Having made

myself as comfortable as the circumstances permitted, I took out my watch. “Now for the test,” I murmured. “Unless I am out in all my deductions Kitty Clevedon will emerge from Hapforth House in something like half an hour.”

In point of fact it was precisely twenty-three minutes, and curiously enough she did exactly as I had done—stood outside the big gates and looked carefully about her in all directions. But there the resemblance ended. She did not, like me, climb any of the neighbouring rocks, but set off at a smart pace in the direction of Cartordale village, whither also in a very few minutes I followed her. “Mistake number one, young lady,” I murmured. “You should have taken your car into Midlington. You wouldn’t have lost much time and you would have made it safe. Now, then, for the post office.”

I was right again. It was into the little village post office that Kitty Clevedon turned. I did not follow her, but instead stepped into the garden that ran alongside the house and sat myself down on a rustic seat that stood just below a small window, and was hidden from the roadway by a huge, black, soft-water butt. It had been a discovery of my own, made quite casually a few days previously, and merely noted as I noted everything. From that seat it was possible to hear quite plainly the tapping of the telegraph instrument within. Ah, there it was now, tap-tap-tap-tap, H, TAP-tap-TAP, K, TAP-tap, N—oh, yes, of course “H. knows—”

Poor Kitty! She did not dream that the man she dreaded was seated under that little window reading her message as easily as if she had shown him the form on which she had written it. “H. knows your address and is coming to-morrow to see you.” I sped out of the garden and through the village, and taking a short cut met Kitty on

her way back to Hapforth House. I was strolling along dragging my stick behind me, and I stopped as I reached her.

“Have you sent your telegram to Mr. Thoyne?” I asked.

She was trying to bluff me and I did not mean to spare her. Why should I? It was she who had declared war.

“My—my—I do not understand you, Mr. Holt,” she stammered, for once taken off her guard.

“Quite a random shot of mine,” I replied smilingly. “I inadvertently let out that I was going to Ilbay to see Mr. Thoyne, and it was natural you should want to warn him.”

“But what have I to do with—with Mr. Thoyne, and why should I want to warn him? Why shouldn’t you visit him if you wish?”

“But you did send him a wire, didn’t you?” I persisted.

“You are impertinent, Mr. Holt!” she cried.

“Yes, I fear I am,” I agreed. “One often has to be in such jobs as this. And it is your own fault, you know.”

“My fault!”

“Yes, you challenge me by your whole attitude. Your visit that night—”

“I have already denied any visit.”

“You adhere to that—good. But, don’t you see that that is the challenge? And now we have this quarrel between Thoyne and Sir Philip Clevedon—”

She turned on me swiftly with flaming cheeks and eyes that sparkled angrily, but I interrupted the coming outburst.

“I am sorry I have offended you,” I said, “but I am afraid that was inevitable. You would have done better to trust me. Anyway, I am in this case and I intend to solve the problem it presents. If it is to be war between us—”

“I do not understand you, Mr. Holt.”

“Let it be war, then, and we’ll fight it out.”

And I continued on my way, still dragging my stick behind me.

CHAPTER XV
ON RONALD THOYNE'S YACHT

ILBAY we discovered to be a very tiny village, hardly more than a cluster of cottages, a small inn and a church.

There was a jetty, built of stone in a rough-and-tumble fashion that clearly betokened amateur workmanship, and flanked on either side by a semi-circular sweep of sandy beach that ended in a jumble of rocks lying at the bases of tall cliffs. The road came over the hills after threading its way through vast moorlands and dipped steeply down to the village and the sea.

"The yacht is still here," Pepster announced, on his return from what he described as "an early morning prowl round."

"Can we get a boat?" I asked.

"I have already annexed one," Pepster replied. "We mustn't waste time in this case. The yacht may up-anchor and steam off at any minute. The boat is ready and the men are waiting."

"The sooner the better," I agreed. "It is understood that you do all the talking?"

"It shouldn't need much talking, but anyway I'll start it."

"Then the sooner the better," I repeated.

"Let us be off."

Ronald Thoyne met us on the deck of the yacht and stood with his hands clasped loosely behind him, surveying us with a queer, twisted smile on his face. He waited for us to speak and evidently had no intention of helping us out. If he wondered how we had caught his trail he said nothing.

“We have come,” Pepster began, “for a word or two with Tulmin.”

“Tulmin!” Thoyne exclaimed. “What a disappointment when I thought it was a friendly call on myself. Though I can’t say you look very friendly or I might invite you to stay to lunch. I have quite a good cook, a negro, certainly, but in his way a genius. Now if—”

“I suppose,” Pepster said with a smile, “you are talking to gain time.”

“No, not at all,” Thoyne replied calmly. “Why should I? Let us come down to bedrock facts. Tulmin isn’t here.”

“We traced him here,” Pepster interposed in his small, squeaky voice. “He was here, you know.”

“Was he?”

“You see,” Pepster went on, “I have a warrant for his arrest, and if you continue to conceal him you are interfering with the law, always a rather dangerous proceeding.”

“Your little lecture is interesting,” Thoyne replied carelessly, “but doesn’t apply. You see, I am an American citizen and your law doesn’t interest me. This ship sails under the Stars and Stripes, you know, and you daren’t forcibly seize anyone from under that flag. No, don’t get angry—it won’t pay you. I have a dozen men on

board who will obey my lifted finger. If I told them to pitch you into the water, into the water you would go."

He turned his back on us and leaning his elbows on the brightly polished rail, gazed down into the cool, green depths of the water that was lap-lapping idly against the sides of the vessel.

"But I am not angry," Pepster explained, "only interested. Is that your case—that Tulmin is aboard the vessel, but that I dare not take him off an American ship? If that is so—"

"Don't be a damned fool!" Thoyne retorted roughly, facing us again.

"I won't—more than I can help," Pepster responded mildly.

"Well, anyway, you can search the yacht," Thoyne went on. "Tulmin isn't here—I know nothing of him."

He took a whistle from his pocket and blew a shrill note which was answered almost simultaneously by a sprightly youth, who must have been waiting near at hand, so rapid was his appearance.

"Bender, take this gentleman over the yacht and show him everything—everything, damn you!"

"Yes, sir."

Pepster glanced at me but I shook my head. I intended to have a few words with Thoyne on my own account.

"I'm no good at a search," I said. "That is police work. I'll leave it to you."

It was the first time I had spoken since we had boarded the yacht.

“And now,” Thoyne said, facing me with glaring eyes, “perhaps you’ll tell me what the hell sort of game you think you are playing.”

I regarded him smilingly for a moment or two.

“Did you get Miss Clevedon’s telegram?” I asked.

“Why,” he said quickly, “did she tell—oh, I don’t know what you are talking about. And I don’t understand why you want to butt in on this. What business of yours is it, anyway?”

“Well, I thought perhaps it was the telegram that caused you to send Tulmin away so hurriedly yesterday,” I remarked.

He stood glaring at me for a moment or two, then turned away with a quick laugh.

“Why should I let you go now you are here?” he said. “Tell me that. You are in my power and I could carry you and that fat fool who came with you to the ends of the earth. What could you say?”

“I am sure it would be an enjoyable trip,” I replied.

“Oh, it would be all right. I would see to that. I shouldn’t ill-use you—only keep you locked up until we were well away.”

“Yes,” I remarked, “it sounds all right. But in the first place, you can’t move until your missing machinery comes to hand and—”

“What the devil do you know about my missing machinery?” he roared. “But, of course, I was only talking off the top,” he went on. “I am doing nothing desperate. But, now, man to man, what is the game? Put your cards on the table, face up.”

“And yours?”

“I’ll see.”

“You mean you’re not playing your own hand. Well, it’s a one-sided bargain, but I’m willing. Listen carefully and then do just as you like, with this certainty in your mind that what you try to hide I shall nevertheless discover. I need only remind you of what I have already told you—Miss Clevedon’s wire and Tulmin’s hurried departure, not to mention the missing machinery. You may deny as much as you like but you know full well it is all true. Now, then, for the story. Pepster wants Tulmin in order that he may arrest him for the murder of Sir Philip Clevedon. Not that he believes Tulmin to be the principal or is quite sure that he actually did the killing. But—why are you keeping Tulmin out of the way?”

“Perhaps I was the—”

“Perhaps you were,” I agreed equably.

Thoyne glared at me speechlessly for a moment or two, then threw back his head with a great, bellowing roar of laughter.

“And is that your theory?” he demanded, when he had regained breath.

“No,” I replied, still speaking with careful deliberation. “I am not very keenly interested in Tulmin nor in yourself, except just in passing. It is someone—quite—different. Who stands to gain most from Sir Philip Clevedon’s death? Tell me that.”

His face went as white as Kitty Clevedon’s had done when I made a similar suggestion in her presence at Hapforth House.

“But I am not clear on details,” I went on, “and what I want to know—the real reason, indeed, for my being here—is why Miss Kitty Clevedon promised to marry Sir Philip, though it is quite obvious that her affections are—otherwise bestowed. Now let us take the course of events. You quarrelled with Sir Philip Clevedon over a woman—and that woman was Miss Kitty Clevedon.”

“It is a lie—a damned lie!” he said thickly, clenching his great fists.

“It was stated by Mrs. Halfleet at the inquest—”

“Kitty’s name—Miss Clevedon’s name was never—Mrs. Halfleet mentioned no name.”

“Miss Clevedon promised to marry Sir Philip and you quarrelled with him in consequence. Why did she promise?”

“It’s a lie—she never did.”

“Then perhaps you will tell me the name of the woman over whom you quarrelled.”

“It was nobody you know.”

“I have been told—it was suggested—that it was Nora Lepley.”

“Nora Lepley! What the devil has she to do with it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It is not my suggestion because, you see, I know who the lady was. The one missing link in my chain of evidence is not the lady’s identity but her reason for throwing you over and saying ‘Yes’ to Sir Philip.”

“Why do you want to know? What has it to do with the—the murder?”

“I cannot tell you until I have all the facts.”

“You will not get the lady’s name out of me.”

“But I don’t want her name,” I retorted tranquilly, “I know that already.”

“It was not Miss Clevedon.”

“No?”

“Nor Nora Lepley.”

“No, I am sure of that. But the name doesn’t matter. Will you tell me why Miss Clevedon agreed to marry Sir Philip?”

“I will tell you nothing—nothing at all. You are a damned Paul Pry. What business is it of yours?”

“Very well, then I—but here comes Mr. Pepster, unsuccessful as I see and as I knew he would be. I will not worry you any more just now, Mr. Thoyne, but I will let you know how I go on.”

I nodded cheerfully and made my way to the side where our boat was moored, and, indeed, I think that if I had not moved out of his way just then he would have hit me.

In tackling a case of this sort, any case, indeed, I like to build up as I go along and leave no blank spaces. Very often I have spent much time over some detail that had eluded me, and occasionally I have found that time wasted. But far more frequently it has happened that the fitting in of one missing piece has straightened out much that followed. And I like to observe my chronology.

This question of Kitty Clevedon and her engagement to the baronet may seem trifling and I had no certainty myself of its relative importance, but I was quite assured in my own mind that I could make very little of what followed until I had straightened that. There was no reasonable doubt that Kitty Clevedon was the mysterious lady of the quarrel—she fitted so completely into the picture. That both these men wanted her was common gossip in the Dale and it seemed equally evident that her preference was for Ronald Thoyne. Yet, apparently, she had promised herself to the baronet. Why? And why should Thoyne quarrel with him over it? It was her right to choose. The only possible explanation was that the promise had been extracted from her by some means that had not left her a free agent. And there was my missing piece. Why had Kitty Clevedon promised to marry Sir Philip?

I received my first glimmer of light from Pepster, though it was quite unconscious on his part.

The inn at Ilbay was a delightful old place, full of odd, mysterious corners, quaint unexpected doorways and queerly shaped rooms that were always a step or two below or a step or two above the passage that led to them and thus constituted traps for the unwary visitor. Pepster and I had a small parlour to ourselves, a queer room with five walls and a couple of huge beams crossed on the ceiling. It had a wide, open fire-place but no grate, the pile of blazing logs resting on the hearth, while the flames roared and spluttered into the darkness of a capacious chimney. The room had only one small window that looked out over the jetty and the bay, and was shrouded at night by warm crimson curtains; and one had to climb three steps in order to reach the door which opened into the bar.

Chief among the furniture was a black oak dresser with an inscription on the panel, reading, “John and Annie Tumm, 1671,” but all the rest was new and neither good nor artistic. The “pictures” consisted of the faded photographs of a past generation, framed funeral cards and a Sunday School certificate awarded to Elizabeth Tumm, 1874. The black oak dresser and that document bridged 200 years of Tumms.

“Comfortable quarters,” Mr. Pepster remarked, as he sat in a big wicker chair toasting his toes at the fire and sipping at a glass of hot whisky.

“Very,” I agreed, being similarly situated and occupied at the other side of the hearthrug. There was another long silence between us, which again Pepster broke.

“Do you know,” he said, “I am a little worried—no, that is hardly the word—a little interested in Sir William Clevedon.”

“Yes?”

I did not add that Sir William Clevedon was just then the centre of all my own inquiries, but I was curious to hear what he had to say about it.

“You see,” Pepster went on, “he has never been to take up his title or the money. The title I could understand. There are too many of them about in these days to make any of them really worth while. But he stands in also for the cash—there was no will and Billy Clevedon takes the lot. Where is he?”

“Do you mean that he has disappeared?”

“Well, that’s rather a long word. But nobody seems to know where he is.”

“You have made inquiries?”

“Oh, yes. He started a long leave on February 20th—his battalion is in Ireland, you know—and is straightway lost. But as to where he is—”

“His sister will know.”

“She says she doesn’t.”

“Did Miss Clevedon tell you that herself?”

“Well, no, not directly. It was old Parfitter, the family lawyer, who dropped a hint, so to speak. ‘Sir William Clevedon ought to be home looking after this business and helping to clear up the mess,’ I said to him. The old chap wagged his head mysteriously. ‘Aye,’ he replied, ‘he’ll be Sir William now, of course—yes.’ I hazarded the opinion that his long-delayed appearance was breeding rumours. ‘For his own sake he should come,’ I said. The old fossil took the alarm at once. ‘Rumours? he asked sharply. What rumours?’ He glared at me as if I were in some way responsible. ‘Oh, nothing definite,’ I said, ‘just rumours, mere talk.’ And then he opened out and let go, said he would like to ask my advice and so on. In short, they didn’t know where Billy Clevedon was, none of them knew, not even his sister. And there it is. He will turn up in good time—if he hasn’t some reason for stopping away. The question is, has he?”

“Has he what?” I demanded.

“A good reason for stopping away.”

That was precisely the point at which I had arrived myself.

CHAPTER XVI
THE MYSTERY OF BILLY CLEVEDON

"TELL me," I went on, "all you know about young Clevedon. His continued absence is certainly interesting."

"I am not sure that I know very much about him," Pepster said. "You see, he never came under my survey professionally, though according to accounts that was rather by way of good luck than actual desert. When they were children, brother and sister were inseparable and were always up to mischief of some sort. Their parents died when they were babies and they went to live at White Towers with old Lady Clevedon. When she went back to Hapforth House on the death of her husband, they went with her and in due time were packed off to school—"

"Yes, all that is common knowledge," I interrupted. "But what about Ireland?"

"He is a captain in the 2nd Peakshires and they are stationed in Ireland."

"But apparently he isn't in Ireland now."

"I don't know that he isn't. He went off on leave which began on February 20th and started for Dublin. But whether he ever reached that city or what he did next nobody knows."

"They were very fond of each other, these two, I suppose."

“Meaning the brother and sister?”

“Yes.”

“They were inseparable until their school-days came.”

I lay back in my basket chair and sent a long wraith of blue smoke curling and winding towards the ceiling.

“There may be nothing in it,” I murmured, “and yet why does he remain away? Suppose Thoyne and Clevedon quarrelled over Kitty and young Billy interfered—”

“I won’t say it is impossible,” Pepster interposed, “and if it had been a bullet or a blow from a fist or a stick I might have looked at it seriously, but poison is not Billy Clevedon’s line.”

“One never knows—there are no such things as impossibilities. There is a story behind all this.”

Pepster sat for some minutes gazing meditatively into the fire.

“There is a story behind it—yes,” he said. “Do you really think young Clevedon—?”

I smiled at that and shook my head.

“So far,” I said, “we have brought him to Dublin and that is a long way from Cartordale.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Pepster agreed. “We must bring him a bit nearer home. I wonder where Tulmin is.”

“You trot off to Dublin and look up young Billy,” I replied. “I will hang about here for a day or two and see what I can pick up.”

Ilbay, as I think I have already said, consists only of a score or so of tiny cottages clustered together at the foot of a tall cliff to the left of the jetty, while to the right a rough road goes upwards through what seems to be a narrow valley running inland. I determined upon a walk, not that I expected to discover anything thereabout, since the presence of the *Sunrise* at Ilbay appeared to be due more to accident than design. When I had been walking about half an hour I met an old white-headed man, who had apparently emerged from a jumble of hillocks and rocks by the roadside where perhaps he had been resting. He stood leaning heavily on his stick and surveying me with bleared, age-dimmed eyes which, however, showed no surprise nor any other interpretable sentiment.

"Where does this road go?" I asked.

"The road—where does it go?" he repeated, mumbling his words from a mouth that was evidently all but toothless, "wey, it goes over yonder"—and he pointed vaguely into the grey distance.

"How far is it to the next village?"

"Oh aye, that'll be Little Upton, a matter of seven mile maybe and maybe twelve."

He turned abruptly away and continued his walk towards the coast.

The road ran desolate and unfrequented, with open moorland on either side, as grim and forbidding as open moorland can be in early spring before winter has taken its final departure. The little fishing hamlet lay behind me hidden by the rising ground, while before and around me were only illimitable open spaces within an unbroken pall of grey sky overhead—no sign of human habitation

anywhere visible. I decided that Ilbay was the more attractive and that I had nothing to gain by going on.

And it was just here at the loneliest and dreariest turn of the road that I met Ronald Thoyne again coming towards me with long, swinging strides. He stopped and faced me with a rather twisted grin.

“Still on the trail, Mr. Holt?” he said, with half a sneer: “Any discoveries?”

“Several,” I returned cheerfully. “I am, in short, getting on.”

“You must possess a really attractive collection of mare’s-nests,” he retorted.

“A few—yes. But this isn’t one. Not but what there are still puzzles in it. I can well understand that when Miss Kitty Clevedon told her brother that she had been compelled to promise to marry Sir Philip, he should offer to set her free by threatening to mur—no, keep your hands off me, Thoyne. But what I haven’t yet settled is why she promised to marry Sir Philip or what hold he had over her. There is a story behind it that would solve the puzzle, but I haven’t got it yet. I shall get it though, and if it involves young Clevedon—”

I broke off there with a short laugh, stepping back just in time to avoid the quick, nervous blow Thoyne aimed at me with his stick. He recovered himself on the instant and grinned a little ruefully.

“If you think Billy Clevedon murdered Sir Philip,” he said, “you are hopelessly out of your reckoning. A bullet or a blow, perhaps, but not poison. That isn’t Billy’s way.”

Pepster, I remembered, had said the same thing and I merely duplicated my reply.

“Oh, as for that,” I said, “one never knows. Where is he, anyway?”

“You don’t know?”

“No,” I responded. “I never pretend a knowledge I do not possess. I don’t know where he is—do you?”

“No,” he replied slowly, “I don’t. I would give £5,000 at this moment if I did.”

“If he is innocent,” I said, “he is a fool for stopping away, and no less, perhaps, if he is guilty because, at least, his guilt has to be proved. If you are hiding him you are doing him no service. I am not looking for him but the police are.”

“The police!”

“Could you expect otherwise? Here you have a title and a fortune and the owner refuses to come and take them. Why?”

“I wish,” he said a little wistfully, “that you and I were on the same side of the wall.”

“Meaning by that—”

“That you were with us instead of against us.”

I paused long and my reply to that was very carefully considered.

“Mr. Thoyne,” I said, “I am not on any side—I am not for or against anyone. I deal only in facts. If I convinced myself that young Clevedon murdered Sir Philip, I should say so. I have no reason for thinking that he did and certainly no desire to drag him

into it. I am not fighting you nor anybody. You do not think young Clevedon murdered Sir Philip, or you try not to think so, but at the back of your mind is the fear that he did. You are therefore prejudiced but not, as you may think, in his favour. Your very horror of the possibility persuades you to treat it almost as a probability. But I, on the other hand, consider only evidence. I have no personal views in favour and certainly no prejudices against."

"And what evidence have you?" he demanded.

"None," I replied, "except what you and Miss Clevedon have provided and what his absence emphasises. If you and she had kept out of it and he had been at Cartordale, as he should have been, no suspicion ever would have attached to him. At this moment the only evidence against him is the belief you and Miss Clevedon harbour, that he—"

He paced from one side of the road to the other and then back again.

"I wish I dared tell you the whole story," he said. "I believe you could help us."

Without another word he resumed his walk and plodded steadily on without so much as a backward glance.

But I knew now that my surmises were accurate—that Sir William Clevedon's continued and unexplained absence was breeding deadly and sinister fears in the bosoms of his friends, of his sister especially. That she was at the bottom of Thoyne's mysterious activities seemed clear enough. It was for her sake, probably at her instigation, that he had tried so hard to envelop me in fog. And it

seemed evident that she was in possession of knowledge which, so far, neither Pepster nor myself had penetrated. It would be my business to discover what that was. I had not, however, very long to wait.

CHAPTER XVII
MORE ABOUT BILLY CLEVEDON

THOYNE must have started off immediately for Cartordale because it was no later than the next morning, while I was seriously considering whether I should return home or follow Pepster to Dublin that I received a wire from Thoyne reading: "Can you see K.C. and self at C. to-morrow?" K.C. was Kitty and C. was Cartordale and I was not long in making up my mind. I wired off a prompt reply suggesting Stone Hollow as the place of meeting. They were awaiting me when I arrived and they had evidently agreed that Thoyne should start the talking.

"We want to know," he began slowly, "which side you would take if—"

He stopped there, perhaps expecting me to help him out. But I remained stubbornly silent.

"Suppose," he went on, taking a sudden plunge, "you proved that—that Clevedon did—was involved in—in the death of Sir Philip—would you take your proof to the police?"

"I will make no promises either way," I replied. "You sent for me and I am here. Why did you invite me to come and what have I to do with it, anyway? You need say nothing unless you wish. And in any case, I am not a detective but a writer of books—"

"Then why need you tell the police?" Kitty interposed softly.

“Tell them what?” I demanded, turning suddenly upon her.

She paled a little and shrank back.

“I did not say I should tell the police,” I went on. “Indeed, I decline to discuss the point. I retain absolute freedom and if you prefer to say good-bye, well, the decision rests with you.”

“The fact is,” Thoyne blurted out, “the thing is so much a nightmare to us, that we must settle it one way or the other. It would be better almost to know the worst than to rest in continual doubt.”

“But why come to me?”

“Because we think you can help us.”

“I am not a detective: I take no fees: I go my own way: I make no promises.”

“We accept your conditions,” Thoyne said, with a glance at Kitty who nodded an affirmative.

The story they told me was certainly interesting and what they omitted at the first telling, I managed to elicit by subsequent questioning.

Sir Philip Clevedon, it seemed, had given Kitty to understand that her brother was in some danger, though he had been judiciously vague, depending more upon hints, suggestions and innuendo than on definite statements. He was easily able to startle an impressionable girl where a man or an older woman might have been able to extract the truth from him by a process of cross-examination.

Only one thing stood out clear, that Billy was in some kind of a mess from which it would cost far more money than she possessed to extricate him, and that Sir Philip would find the cash if she consented to marry him, which she did. Sir Philip's action could only be justified by the old adage that "All's fair in love and war." Undoubtedly he was very much in love with her which may be urged as his justification. "I have wealth and a title and I am not an old man," he said to her, "and you have youth and beauty; it is not an unequal bargain." That was true enough. Marriages far less appropriate occur every day. But nothing would have induced Miss Kitty Clevedon to consent except the thought that by her sacrifice she was saving her brother from some disaster, the details of which she did not understand.

Then came a very difficult task, to tell Ronald Thoyne that their little romance was ended and that she was going to marry Sir Philip Clevedon. Thoyne seems to have written straight off to Billy Clevedon, in which he was wise, and then went and had a row with Sir Philip, which was foolish.

Billy Clevedon as soon as he received Thoyne's letter seems to have rushed off to Midlington where he summoned both Thoyne and Kitty to meet him. There under pressure from him, not unassisted perhaps by Thoyne, she told the story of her interview with Sir Philip.

"The swine!" Billy cried. "The unbuttered swine! I'll wring his filthy neck for him. You'll not marry him, Kitty, I'll do for him first."

He was very angry and swore mightily, but they paid little heed to his wrath. It was characteristic of him to be a trifle over-emphatic in his expressions.

“I asked him to lend me some money, it is true,” he said, “but it wasn’t as much as he told you and it didn’t matter in that way. I was in a hole but that was nothing new and there was no disgrace attached to it. But I’ll settle it—you leave to me. Kiss Ronny Thoyne and make it up with him.”

Billy took two or three turns up and down the room, spitting out the words as he went.

“It’s blackmail,” he continued. “But of course it’s nonsense. He can’t make her if—does she *want* to marry him?”

“She does not,” Thoyne told him promptly.

“No, I should think not. He’s twice her age and more. But I see his game—he must be an infernal cad. I didn’t suspect that of him. He is cold and selfish but I did not think he was that sort of reptile. I knew nothing of this, Thoyne—you believe that, don’t you. I am a mixture like most men but I am not that sort.”

He resumed his restless pacing to and fro.

“I had no idea of it, none at all,” he repeated. He did not tell them what the trouble was nor why he had wanted the money.

“I would have lent—” Thoyne was beginning, but Billy airily dismissed the suggestion.

“I’m all right for a bit and I’ll make the blasted baronet shell out somehow,” he said. “Don’t you worry. But I’m busy now—an

engagement I must meet. I'll see you later on. Meanwhile you cut clear of the swine."

"Aren't you coming to Cartordale?" Kitty asked him.

"Presently," he told them, "but not to-night. Thoyne, you take her home."

Thoyne did and left her at Hapforth House early in the evening.

The next day—the fatal 23rd—passed without any word from Billy. We know what happened on that day—Thoyne's quarrel with the baronet and Kitty's visit to White Towers in the evening. But the latter did not return directly to Hapforth House. She ran her little two-seater into Midlington only some twelve miles distant and called at the hotel at which she had met her brother on the previous day. But he was not there. He had paid his bill, packed his bag and departed.

She returned to Cartordale but her car broke down on the way and she pushed it to the side of the road and tried a short cut to Hapforth House, missing her way in the fog and landing in my study. The next day came the tragic story of Sir Philip's death and though both she and Thoyne affected to believe that Billy could have had nothing to do with it, they were nevertheless terribly anxious and alarmed, the more as the days went on and nothing was heard of or from him.

"And now let me reduce it to definite dates," I said. "You will check me if I am wrong. You left your brother at the 'King's Head' in Midlington on the afternoon of February 22nd. He left the hotel on the morning of February 23rd. Sir Philip Clevedon died on the night of the 23rd."

They nodded a joint affirmative.

“In other words, and to put it in its most brutal form, he left Midlington and came secretly to Cartordale, having first obtained some poison, secured an entrance to White Towers, poisoned Sir Philip’s whisky, disappeared—”

“But I don’t believe—” Kitty began.

“No,” I said, “of course you don’t, but that summary of possibilities represents your fears.”

“Why doesn’t he show up?” Thoyne interposed.

“Yes,” I agreed, “that is precisely the question we have to answer. Could he have got into White Towers without being seen? You and he lived there as children and I have been told that you were veritable little imps of mischief. All sorts of things would be possible in connection with a big and ancient mansion like White Towers.”

Kitty looked woefully distressed and turned with white-faced, pathetic pleading to Thoyne.

“I should tell everything, Kitty, dear,” he said.

“There is a secret way into White Towers which we discovered years ago,” she replied. “We agreed to keep it to ourselves and I have never told anyone. I don’t think anyone knows of it except my brother and myself.”

I regarded her thoughtfully for a moment or two.

“Well, now,” I said, “you know of that secret way—could you have entered White Towers and placed the poison in that bottle without being seen?”

“Surely, you don’t think I—”

“Could you?”

“Yes, but—”

“Well, now, look,” I said, importing a sudden harshness into my tones, “you hated the thought of marrying Sir Philip and his death would mean your release, besides which it would mean wealth to your brother and a happy issue from his financial—”

“But the suggestion is infamous, intolerable!” Thoyne cried.

“Don’t be a fool,” I advised him. “I am not accusing Miss Clevedon; I am summarising the case against her brother. The first essential is to establish a motive and there you have one twice over—Sir Philip’s death would release his sister from a hateful marriage and it would—he would succeed to the dead man’s title and money. I am being purposely brutal because I want to put it at its worst. He comes to Midlington, a few miles from Cartordale on the day before the tragedy, he leaves Midlington for some unknown destination, which may, however, have been Cartordale, a few hours before the murder, he knows a secret way into White Towers, and he has a dual motive for assassinating Sir Philip. You have summed all this up in your own minds, haven’t you? It has been a dark shadow in your thoughts ever since that tragic day. Isn’t that so?”

There was a long silence.

“Yes,” Thoyne said at length, “you are perfectly right. You have described exactly what, as I said before, has been a ceaseless nightmare to us. And you have omitted the main difficulty. Why doesn’t he come to Cartordale?”

“But, now,” I went on, “let us take the other side. There is no evidence of any sort that Clevedon ever had any prussic acid in his possession. Or is there?”

“We know of none,” Thoyne assented eagerly.

“And you?” I asked, turning to Kitty.

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “I never heard of any.”

“And then there is the possibility that when he left Midlington he never came to Cartordale at all. That is where our investigation begins. Where did he go when he left Midlington? Let us return to your interview in the ‘King’s Head.’ At what time did it take place?”

“In the afternoon,” Thoyne responded. “It would be three o’clock when we left the ‘King’s Head.’”

“And did he give you no indication of the nature of his engagement?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Did he say when he was coming to Cartordale?”

“No, I don’t think he mentioned it—at all events, nothing definite.”

“Well, now, let me put it like this. Suppose that after the meeting at Midlington there had been no tragedy, would your brother’s prolonged absence have worried you?”

“Oh, no,” Kitty replied. “One never knew what Billy was going to do and frequently he wasn’t sure himself. He would just do it.”

“Did you know,” I asked, “that your brother was going on a long leave. It is rather a wonder that Thoyne’s letter ever reached him, but evidently it did. The fact that he had obtained leave before the receipt of that letter suggests some contemplated purpose—the visit to Midlington was only a break in the journey.”

“Yes,” Thoyne said, “we have thought all that out. But why hasn’t he come back when—it is unbelievable that he should have seen nothing—no account of the—”

“Unlikely, but not impossible,” I observed. “He may have met with an accident, for example.”

“We should have heard of it,” Thoyne said, shaking his head.

“Well, anyway,” I returned, as cheerfully as I could, “suppose we accord him the right every Briton has under the law, of being regarded as innocent until he is proved guilty. Is he, by the way, interested, do you know, in any—lady?”

“In about a hundred, I should think,” Thoyne returned.

“Yes, I dare say he would be. At his age one is. But I mean any special lady?”

But they could give me no help in that.

CHAPTER XVIII
THE ANONYMOUS LETTERS

THE first thing I had to settle was as regards the entrance to White Towers of which Kitty Clevedon had spoken. We had to pick up Billy Clevedon's tracks after he left Midlington, and if he really had gone to White Towers, it would probably be by that route. At all events there was absolutely no evidence he had been seen at any of the usual entrances. Kitty agreed to guide us, and told us to meet her the following morning at the main gates to White Towers; and she advised us also to put on some old clothes as we should have to creep part of the way on hands and knees.

We were prompt to time and Kitty took us through the park to some very rough ground at the rear of the house, though not far away from it, and there she showed us a narrow cleft in a mass of rock and told us that was the entrance. It was partly choked by a jumble of fallen boulders overgrown with the rough vegetation of the moor, probably rank enough at some periods of the year, but lying now for the most part dry and dead. I looked for any sign of recent entrance, especially for footmarks; but the ground was too hard and revealed nothing, though the rubbish at the entrance seemed to have some appearance of being trampled. I took out my flash lamp and pushed my way into the opening, followed by the others, though it was a very tight fit for Thoyne.

A wall of rock confronted us at about four feet, but Kitty bade us turn to the left and there I saw an opening low down which seemed to lead to a passage that descended somewhere into a mass of pitch

darkness. We had to get on hands and knees and crawl along so for quite a long distance through a low, narrow tunnel that appeared to be for the most part natural, though here and there, it had evidently been widened at least, if not entirely pierced by human agency.

Presently, after going steadily downwards for many yards, it went forward on the level, and was there a little higher and wider; but at no point did it enable us to stand erect. It was a case of creeping all the way. I understood now why Kitty had advised the oldest possible clothing. It meant ruin to the knees of one's trousers. And then the tunnel ended abruptly against a wall of solid rock; but Kitty cried out that there was an iron ring close to my right hand, and that I must take hold of it and pull hard.

I obeyed; there was a grinding and groaning as of rusty machinery and then the rock in front swung back and we found ourselves in an open chamber with walls and floor of natural rock, but a roof of worked stone formed of square flags, all save one supported by pillars Of rusty iron. There were nine stone flags, each six feet by four, and eight pillars, and the dimensions of the cellar or cave were thus eighteen feet by twelve. The height would probably be about eight feet. We could at least stand upright. I took my flash lamp and carefully examined every corner, not, as it turned out, quite unremuneratively. I dropped my hat and then stooped to pick it up again—and with it something I had noticed lying there.

My find was a hairpin still fresh and bright and with no sign of rust about it.

If Kitty Clevedon had passed that way I should have supposed that she had dropped it. Ladies shed things of that sort as they go. But she had assured us that she had not been near the spot; in which

case a knowledge of the existence of the passage, supposed to be confined to Kitty and her brother, was shared by someone else, and that a woman.

“Which is the way out?” I asked, saying nothing of the hairpin which, at a favourable opportunity, I thrust into my waistcoat pocket.

Kitty pointed to the one unsupported flagstone and told us that it worked on a swivel and could be pushed up if one could reach it, whereupon Thoyne swarmed up the nearest pillar and tried to move the stone but failed, though whether because the axle was rusty or because there was some fastening on the other side we could not say. Thoyne selected another pillar and once more gave the stone a push, but with no more success than before. From his position, clinging monkey-like to the pillar, he could exert very little leverage. He slid down again and suggested that I should mount his shoulders so as to be right under the stone, a manœuvre which was promptly attempted with satisfactory results.

The stone moved, though slowly and stubbornly and with much creaking and, swinging myself up through the opening thus disclosed, I found myself in a cellar full of a miscellaneous collection of rubbish, baskets, boxes, barrels, chairs, broken furniture of all sorts, books and papers and so on. I fixed the stone in position, because left to itself it would simply have swung back again into its place, and then I passed down to the others a short ladder which I found lying against one of the walls of the cellar.

When the others had joined me, Kitty explained that we were under the older portion of White Towers, the East Wing, which was partly in ruins and uninhabited.

I was easily able to explain the tunnel—I had seen something of the sort in other old houses. It was simply a way of escape for those inside if enemies became too pressing. Peakshire had played a strenuous part in the Civil War, most of the big men being on the side of the King and White Towers, the older part of which dated back beyond Elizabeth, had probably been a Royalist stronghold and meeting place. If enemies, in the shape of Cromwell's men, came along, the Cavaliers would only have to creep through the tunnel in order to escape the Roundheads. Or it may have been constructed in even earlier days for the benefit of Roman Catholic refugees.

That, however, was mere speculation, though not without interest. For many years evidently it had been unused and forgotten until it was rediscovered by the two children who had kept it a delightful secret to themselves and had, no doubt, brought it into many exciting games. The question for us, however, was—had Clevedon used it recently, and if so, for what purpose? It was certainly interesting and possibly significant that somebody evidently had been that way not so very long before. But Clevedon at all events did not use hairpins.

"There seems to be no evidence that your brother ever came this way," I said, as we stood looking round us. "True, the vegetation at the entrance to that passage bore some appearance of having been trampled down, though that may have been the weather or—"

"I did that," Thoyne broke in quickly. "Kitty told me about this before I saw you and I went to look for myself."

I glanced at him casually. It was quite likely he spoke the truth.

"Did you get as far as this?" I asked.

“Oh, no, I didn’t get beyond the entrance.”

“And you think you trampled that brushwood?”

“I—it is possible I may have done.”

“You did not notice its condition before—?”

“No, I didn’t, I wasn’t looking for that. I see you still distrust me,” he added quickly, “but I am perfectly honest about it. I am sorry I came.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” I returned carelessly. “If you hadn’t been there, the signs might have proved that Clevedon hadn’t either, whereas now it is an open question. But the fact that somebody may have been there is of minor importance unless there is accompanying evidence that the somebody was Clevedon himself. Of course, there is the fact that he alone knew of the entrance—he and one other. I suppose you haven’t been here lately?”

I turned suddenly on Kitty Clevedon and rapped out the question with the abruptness of a pistol shot. She started a little, then shook her head.

“Not since I was a child,” she replied.

“Can we get out of this without returning by that passage?” I asked.

“Yes, through that door is a flight of stone steps leading to what used to be the kitchen of the old White Abbey.”

“We’ll go that way,” I decided.

When I had parted from my two companions, with a promise to see them again later in the day, or, possibly on the following morning,

I went into the post office and from my waistcoat pocket produced a hairpin.

“Have you any of that sort in stock?” I asked, then, noting her look of surprise, I added, “I hope you won’t give me away if I tell you that I use them to clean my pipe. They are the best things I know for that.”

“Well, I didn’t suppose you wanted them for your hair,” she said pertly. “Yes, we have plenty of that sort in stock. Indeed, I don’t think we have any others.”

“Then I suppose every lady in the Dale uses them,” I remarked jestingly.

“Most of them,” she agreed. “I do—see, here is one”—and she extracted a specimen from her own abundant head-covering. “A few may get some others when they go into Midlington, but most come here for them. Lady Clevedon had three boxes only a week ago.”

“Lady Clevedon,” I echoed, “then they must be an aristocratic brand. Does her ladyship do her own shopping?”

“Oh, they are good enough. No, Lady Clevedon didn’t come for them—Miss Kitty fetched them. She said they were for Lady Clevedon, but she took some for herself too, so I suppose she wears them.”

Evidently the hairpin was not going to be of much use to me, at all events as a means of identification. There would be too many of them about the Dale for that.

When I reached Stone Hollow again I found Detective Pepster awaiting me, looking, for him, a little disconsolate.

“Well,” was my greeting, “how has Fate treated you?”

“No luck, none at all,” Pepster said gloomily. “I am just back from Dublin with no news. Clevedon went to Dublin on February 20th, but there all trace of him ended. I could learn nothing.”

“I have been more fortunate than you,” I returned smilingly. “I can carry him a bit farther than that. He was in Midlington on February 22nd and left there on the morning of the 23rd.”

“Do you *know* that?”

“Yes, for certain.”

“Did he go to Cartordale—to White Towers?”

“I can’t say for that.”

“And where is he now?”

“Nobody knows.”

“And his sister—?”

“Is as ignorant as you or I.”

“She is bluffing?”

“No.”

“She really doesn’t know where he is?”

“She really doesn’t.”

“But—anyway we must find him.”

“I am busy at it now.”

“Any traces?”

“None.”

“It is a weird development. Did he do it? Is he keeping out of the way because—?”

“It is impossible to say. We know that he came to Midlington, but that he came to Cartordale or ever had any prussic acid in his possession—”

“Yes, you’re right. We must bring him a little nearer than Midlington. But if he didn’t do it, or, for the matter of that, if he did, he is a fool for keeping out of the way.”

Which at least was a self-evident proposition.

“And now that we have disposed of Billy Clevedon for the time being,” Pepster went on, “tell me what you think of this.”

With great deliberation he took a letter-case from his pocket and from it extracted a sheet of paper which he handed over to me. It was lined paper, torn evidently from a notebook, and on it was printed in capitals:

YOU ARE ON THE WRONG
TRAIL ALTOGETHER. IF
YOU WANT TO KNOW WHO
KILLED CLEVEDON KEEP
YOUR EYE ON THOYNE.

“That is No. 1,” Pepster said. “Here is No. 2.”

He handed me a second document, but this time it was a plain white paper on which the ink had run rather badly, though the letters were quite legible. It was, too, much shorter, simply reading:

THOYNE MURDERED CLEVEDON.

“Anonymous letters by some crank, who thinks he has made a discovery,” I remarked.

“Yes,” Pepster agreed, “but here is No. 3.”

The third communication was written in red ink on a buff-coloured slip of paper, such as Government offices use, and read:

YOU ARE MISSING YOUR
LIFE’S CHANCE. ARREST
THOYNE AND I WILL PRODUCE
THE EVIDENCE.
TRUST ME.

“Were they addressed to you personally?”

“Yes, and to my private address.”

“Apparently somebody who knows you.”

“Looks like it.”

“Come by post?”

“Yes.”

“Postmark?”

“Two Cartordale, the third Midlington. Now, is the writer merely a crank, or has he something up his sleeve?”

“If you do nothing he’ll probably write again and may be more explicit.”

“Well, of course, Thoyne is very deep in this thing, but there is nothing definite connecting him with the murder—is there?”

But I merely shook my head vaguely at that. In this curious case one never knew what a day might bring forth. The changes and developments were as rapid as a cinema show.

CHAPTER XIX
THE HAIRPIN CLUE

IN point of fact the first real clue I secured in this case consisted of that hairpin I found on the floor of the lower cellar, though its bearing on the mystery was not at first apparent. But it introduced me to a new set of circumstances and took me a step or two on the road I wished to travel. Until then I had been wandering round and round in a circle. My first thought was that the hairpin belonged to Kitty Clevedon and that she had deliberately deceived me when she declared that she had not visited the cellar prior to conducting Thoyne and myself thither. My suspicion was that she had been there and that she had found and removed some traces of her brother—that she was, in fact, still playing a game of bluff; though I did not believe that this time Thoyne was in it. She was hoodwinking him as well as myself.

I set a watch on the cellar beneath the ruined wing, making myself a hiding-place by clearing out some of the furniture in one corner and restacking it so as to leave a narrow passage in which I could conceal myself if I wished. And I set little traps of a very simple description, but sufficient to show me on my next visit that somebody had been there in my absence and had penetrated to the lower chamber by way of the swinging flagstone; but I was more than astonished when during one of my periods, behind my little rampart, I discovered that the visitor was not Kitty Clevedon at all, but—Nora Lepley.

In all my imaginings my thoughts had never once turned to her. She came in without faltering or hesitation, as one who knew her way intimately, and swung open the trap-door, which she propped up by means of a board. Then, taking the short ladder which I have already mentioned, and which I knew by means of my little arrangements had been used during my absence, she let it down, and by it descended to the lower cellar.

As soon as her head had disappeared I crept to the opening on hands and knees and saw her lift out a rough block of stone which concealed a small opening not unlike a natural cupboard. Then she took a small flash-lamp from the pocket of her big apron and sent a beam of light into the hollow place, but situated as I was I could not see whether she put anything in or took something out. For a minute or two she stood pondering almost as if she were trying to make up her mind on some doubtful point, then with a quick sigh she replaced the lamp in her pocket and restored the stone.

I flitted back swiftly and noiselessly to my own corner whence I watched her return from the lower depths, close down the stone and lay the ladder along the wall, all with sedate, unhurried movements, as one who had no reason to fear interruption. When she was quite safely away, and I followed her to make sure, I went in my turn into the lower cellar to investigate that little cupboard. It was evidently her own private safe, containing all sorts of oddments a young girl might hide away when she found too many prying eyes at home—a bundle of letters, an envelope containing £20 in Treasury notes, some oddments of jewellery and so on.

But what most attracted my attention, because they were in such curious contrast with the rest of the collection, were a drinking-glass and a small phial wrapped in white paper. I picked the latter

up and noticed a number of figures lightly pencilled on the wrapper arranged in double column thus:

9.37	3.17
11.21	4.28
12.18	5.19
1.34	6.37

What they could mean I could not imagine, nor did I worry very long about them. I removed the wrapper, to find inside a small phial labelled “Pemberton’s Drops,” which were described as “a safe remedy for headache, sleeplessness, and all nerve troubles.” The dose was forty drops to be taken in water or other liquid. I turned the bottle over and saw a circular, red label, not much larger than a sixpence, on which was printed in small, white letters “Grainger, Midlington”—obviously the chemist from whom Nora Lepley had purchased her sleeping drug. I could well understand that she did not want her friends to know that she took an hypnotic composition of this character.

Almost without knowing what I was doing I removed the cork, and then with a sudden jerk realised what it was I had stumbled upon. I smelt the unmistakable odour of bitter almonds. Whatever the phial had contained when Grainger of Midlington sold it to Nora Lepley, it was nearly full now of a strong solution of hydrocyanic acid. I took up the glass, but it was perfectly dry and odourless, despite which I had no doubt that it had been the vehicle by which Sir Philip Clevedon had taken the poison.

The real art and science of the detective lies in building up one fact upon another until the edifice begins to assume intelligible shape. I

am far from saying that a Sherlock Holmes is impossible. On the contrary, I have met people possessed as he was of a sense of intuition almost as keen and certain as seeing and hearing in ordinary men. But they are few. The average detective, though he may indulge in theories, depends really on facts and is wise not to wander very far from them. And he will find, if he is sufficiently practised and astute, that facts breed facts, and that a clue, even if it does not lead to the required solution, does often produce other clues that continue the chain unbroken. A “clue” that leads nowhere never was anything but a false clue from the beginning. And a detective is largely dependent upon what ordinary folk describe as luck or chance. His skill consists in making use of chance and in missing nothing that luck brings him.

The police have, in addition to the natural astuteness of individuals, the assistance of a singularly complete and effective organisation that enables them to push their inquiries far and wide and, when they have settled on their man, to weave round him a net from which escape is all but impossible. By telegraph and telephone, the police of the whole country can be put on the alert, descriptions can be circulated in a few minutes, information conveyed and facts gathered until the story is complete. The English police work under some difficulty since the methods of questioning and even bullying that are legal in France and are frequently permitted in America are rigidly forbidden here. English law really does try to live up to the theory that a man is innocent until he is proved guilty and that he must not be trapped into any unwary admission. I do not mean to say that the English police invariably abide by the strict letter of the law or always observe it in spirit. There are occasions when it is worth while to take risks. But, generally speaking, the law as it is

and as it is administered aids the criminal and hampers the police, despite which, however, the latter are wonderfully successful.

Still, I can hear someone saying, many crimes go unpunished, many criminals remain undiscovered. True, but one has to remember that many criminals are known against whom there is no clear proof. The conviction of a wrong-doer is a matter of evidence not of belief. I am acquainted with two persons, one a man very well known in business circles, the other a lady of great charm and important position, who, I am quite sure, are murderers. The police are equally aware of the fact. But so skilfully have the criminals covered every trace that anything like proof would be wholly impossible.

And, again, it must not be forgotten that the criminal may be a person of first-class education, alert mentally, intrepid, with money, position and influence to aid him, and that he not only prepared the ground before the crime without hindrance or suspicion but was able to use his skill and resource in confusing the pursuit after it. A burglar, jewel thief, or the like, may be a person of the Bill Sikes variety, but he is quite as likely to be a University man with a profession and income and a wide circle of friends.

When brains are pitted against brains it is a straight fight and the best brains win quite irrespective of right or morality. The pursuit's most valuable and useful asset lies in the fact that most criminals sooner or later make mistakes, and crime as a rule leaves no margin for error. The alert detective misses nothing of that sort and loses no opportunity his opponent may concede to him. But when all is said, facts remain the detective's chief stock-in-trade, and it is the connected chain of established facts that eventually leads him to the solution required and the person wanted.

So far, for example, in this Clevedon case I had been groping in the dark, hanging grimly on to the few facts I had; and my blunderings and stumblings had led me to that little phial of poison in Nora Lepley's secret hiding-place. I could not see yet the full bearing of that discovery, but it was a new fact which I had reached simply by following my nose.

Of course, I made a special journey into Midlington to look up Grainger, the chemist, who, I learnt, had been in business in the city about thirty-five years, was widely known, and very highly respected. I made a small purchase, and noticed that there were several bottles of Pemberton's Drops in the large glass case that was full of various proprietary medicines.

"Is that stuff any use for sleeplessness?" I asked, pointing to one of the bottles.

"I don't know," he replied. "It seems fairly popular but I have never tried it."

"Is it dangerous to take?"

"I shouldn't think so," he replied, "though personally I should say that all hypnotic drugs are better left alone. The preparation is a secret. I do notice that people who take them come back for them, which seems to suggest that they are effective."

I went straight to Peakborough and interviewed Mr. Pepster.

"I've something I want you to do," I said to him.

"Good! Is it important?"

"I think so. I fancy things are beginning to move."

“I’m glad to hear it,” he retorted grimly. “As for me, I’m absolutely fed up. The case is getting on my nerves. But what is it?”

“I want to know all there is to be known about Nora Lepley.”

“Yes?”

“And about Grainger, a Midlington chemist.”

“But what connection is there—?”

“I don’t know yet. I want to know. Probably there is none. But I have traced prussic acid to Nora Lepley—”

“Gad!”

“And in a bottle that came from Grainger’s shop.”

“Good Lord!”

“Yes, it’s a queer development, isn’t it?”

“But—”

“I know absolutely nothing more than I have told you.”

Pepster nodded thoughtfully, then touched a bell.

“What is the next train for Midlington?” he asked of the police clerk who answered his summons.

CHAPTER XX
STILL MORE ABOUT BILLY CLEVEDON

AND now I come to a very pretty and pleasant little adventure which has its own place in the sequence of events. Only part of it came under my own immediate observation; the rest I had to piece together by adroit questioning and the aid of a little imagination.

It began with Kitty Clevedon, who, as she was crossing the park that partly surrounds Hapforth House, was a little startled to see an aeroplane coming rapidly to earth. It alighted only about sixty yards away, and a young man jumped out and came towards her.

"Hallo! Kitty Clevedon, by all that's lucky!" he cried. "I thought it was, which was why I gave the order to come down."

"Jimmy! but you are a stranger," Kitty returned smilingly, as they shook hands. "Are you still in the Air Service? I thought you had been de—"

"Oh, yes, this is my own. I do it for fun now. Care to step aboard the old bus and see what it is like?"

He helped her in and then gave some signal she did not comprehend, and up they went.

"What are you doing?" Kitty demanded. "You have no right to take—"

“None at all,” he admitted cheerfully. “But it would be a dull world if we only did what we have a right to do, wouldn’t it?”

“You must let me get out, Jimmy,” she said, stamping her foot.

“I’m not stopping you,” he retorted, with a laugh, “but it’s a longish step down to Mother Earth—about 600 feet, I should judge. Would you like to have a look out? You are not frightened, are you? Have you ever been up before?”

“Yes, twice,” she replied. “No, I’m not frightened—of the aeroplane.”

“Well, you’re not frightened of me, anyway,” he said. “I’m fierce, but not frightful.”

He pulled back a leathern flap, disclosing an opening, through which he thrust his head. “You ought to go in for flying, Kitty,” he went on. “It’s the real sport—there’s nothing like it. Motoring is tame—and I tell you what, I’ve a good mind to carry you off to see old Billy and butt in on his honeymoon.”

“Billy!” she cried, turning on him suddenly. “Do you mean my brother?”

“Here, steady on!” he said. “You’ll have the old bus over if you jolt us like that.”

“You must put me down at once,” she went on. “I must see Mr. Holt and Mr. Thoyne. Do you hear? At once.”

Jimmy Trevor saw that she was serious, and immediately gave the order to descend.

“I’m awfully sorry, Kitty,” he said. “I was only—it was only a bit of a joke. I would like to apologise, if you—”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Kitty replied sharply. “Only be quick, and don’t talk until we are out.”

“But you will forgive—”

“Oh, yes, yes; and now *don’t* talk. Let me think.”

They made a safe landing, and Jimmy helped Kitty to alight.

“Now tell me,” she demanded, turning on him suddenly, “do you know where my brother is?

“Why, yes,” he replied, evidently a little mystified at her manner.

“And—and did you say—honeymoon? Is he—married?”

“Good Lord! didn’t you know?” he shouted. “Have I put my beastly number nine foot into it again? He didn’t tell me it was a secret. I was his best man, you know, and saw them off to Jersey for their honeymoon. But he said nothing about keeping it secret. Didn’t you know?”

“Will you come with me to see Mr. Holt?” Kitty asked.

“I will go anywhere you say, anywhere at once,” Jimmy replied.

Kitty started off immediately in the direction of the village, Jimmy Trevor keeping pace with long strides, muttering apologies to her and imprecations on himself at intervals. As they passed through the big gates into the main road they met Thoyne, who glanced at her companion a little questioningly. Jimmy Trevor was a very personable youth, and jealousy is easily aroused.

“Oh, Ronald, this is Mr. Trevor,” Kitty said. “He—he knows where—where Billy is.”

“The devil he does!” Thoyne cried. “And where is he?”

“He is”—she began to laugh a little hysterically, then pulled herself up—“on his—his honeymoon.”

“His honeymoon!”

Thoyne stood stock still in the middle of the road and gazed, first at Kitty and then at Jimmy Trevor, who grinned appreciatively.

“It seems to be news,” the latter said dryly. “Didn’t you know? Am I making the first announcement? I seem to have created a sensation by posing as an amateur *Morning Post*. Why shouldn’t Billy get married if he wants? And she was a deuce of a nice girl, too!”

“But—the murder—!” Thoyne stammered.

“Murder? What murder? We are talking about a marriage, not a murder.”

“The murder of Sir Philip Clevedon,” Thoyne replied rather angrily. “You must have heard of it.”

“Not a word,” Jimmy responded. “I’ve been abroad, and only returned to England two days ago. Sir Philip Clevedon—why, that’s—then Billy is Sir William and doesn’t know it.”

“We must tell Mr. Holt,” Kitty broke in, and Thoyne nodded his agreement.

And thus it was that they came to me with their story. I listened to them in silence and then put a few questions.

“Had Clevedon arranged that you should be his best man?” I asked Trevor.

“Not at all,” he said, “nothing of the sort. I met him quite by accident on Midlington station, and—”

“What date was that?”

“It was February 23rd.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Yes, it was February 23rd right enough, because that was the day I had to be in London. It had been fixed up with the lawyer chaps, Finns and Tregarty, who did all my uncle’s business. I went down from Blankester by a train that stops five minutes at Midlington—beastly hole it is, too! Looking out, I saw Billy on the platform. We were at school together, you know, and then in France—good pals. He pulled me out of a damned mess once—a good story that, which I’ll tell you some day. He’s one of the very best, is Billy. I shouted out to him, ‘Billy, Billy,’ and he came up. ‘Good egg, Jimmy,’ he said, ‘I was getting a bit fed up with my own company.’ There was a vacant corner seat, and he took it and we travelled to London together.”

“What time would that be?” I interrupted.

“Let’s see; it was the 11.23 at Midlington, and 4.7 in London. We put up at the Terminus Hotel, both of us, had dinner there, and went to see *Jimson’s Joy Ride* at the Lyric. Then we trotted round

to one or two places we know of and got back to the Terminus at 1 a.m., and so to bed, as What's-his-name would say."

"If we could make absolutely sure of the date—" I began.

"The date is right enough," Jimmy Trevor replied. "You don't come into a little wad of fifteen thousand pounds every day, and that date is in red letters in my almanac. But ask the lawyers—they'll have it down—or try the Terminus Hotel. Our names will be in the register."

"Well," I returned, "you went to see *Jimson's Joy Ride*, then to bed. Next morning—?"

"'I've got to go to Jersey!' Billy said to me, 'to get married. The young lady is there, waiting for me—suppose you come with me and be best man.' I had four weeks or so empty and plenty of money, so I said 'Right ho!' The lawyers had come down with some coin and didn't want me for a bit until they'd straightened things some more. And then Billy got a telegram, 'Lost my luggage; bring some clothes—Elsie.' So off he went to a large shop and interviewed the manageress. 'I want some clothes for a young lady,' he said, 'all sorts of clothes: nightdresses, stockings, whatever young ladies usually wear; plenty of them, and some frocks—and you see that young lady over there with the red hair?' The manageress cast her optics round. 'Yes, I see her,' she said, 'but you'd better not let her hear you describe her hair as red.' Old Billy was a bit put out. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but she is about the build. What'll fit her will fit the other.' It was all easily arranged—anything is easy to arrange, you know, when you have the money to pay for it, and Billy seemed to have plenty. He came out of the shop carrying a brand new suit-case containing about eighty

pounds' worth of female garments. When he told me about it I said he was a silly Juggins; that what the telegram had meant was that he was to go to her flat and tell her maid to pack another box; which is what she told him when we got to Jersey. 'We'll do both,' Billy said, and we went to the flat and got another lot of feminine mysteries. So we got to Jersey, and I saw him tied up and then went on to St. Malo. That's how I never heard anything of Sir Philip Clevedon, and I bet Billy's heard nothing, either."

"And who is the—the girl?" Kitty demanded, quite naturally a little angry when she recollected the suspense and misery she had endured through her brother's unexplained absence.

"She's Elsie MacFarren," Jimmy replied.

I knew her quite well. Miss Elsie MacFarren was a youthful American actress who had come across with a boisterous Yankee comedy, entitled *Chick Tottle's Turnout*. The play itself had been a failure, but Elsie had been a success, and had remained here to earn one of the big salaries the British theatre-loving public willingly pays to those who take its fancy. She was not only pretty, but clever; and invitations to return to America—invitations heavily larded with dollars—were cabled to her at short intervals. But she stayed here proof against all temptations.

"And now," I added briskly, "the next thing is to wire Sir William Clevedon to return immediately. He must come back. His presence here will dispel a lot of suspicion, and the story of his romance will counteract some ugly rumours. We will meet them in London."

When I told Pepster the story I thought he would never stop laughing.

“This case,” he said, “is the absolute limit.”

“You’ll come with us to London?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for a fortune.”

We duly met the honeymoon couple at Paddington.

“Where the hell have you been?” Thoyne demanded harshly.

“Where?” Billy echoed. “On my honeymoon. There is Mrs. Billy Clevedon, and—”

“No,” I interrupted suavely; “Lady Clevedon.”

He swung round facing me.

“Who the hell are you, and what the devil do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Sir Philip Clevedon is dead,” I replied quietly.

He stood glaring at me for a moment or two, as if he thought I was mad, then, reading confirmation in the faces around him, he turned to his wife.

“Do you hear that, Elsie?” he shouted. “Sir Philip is dead, and I am Sir William, and you are My Lady, and, yes, by gad! I’ve got pots of money. By Jove! yes. Poor old Philip—he was a bit of a—but there, he’s dead. What a life it is!”

“The fact is,” I went on, cutting short his excitement, “that Sir Philip Clevedon was murdered, and”—I paused a moment or two so that I might get the full effect—“there is a warrant out for your arrest.”

“Murdered!” he echoed. “Arrest!”

“Well,” Pepster interrupted slowly. “I wouldn’t say arrest. The police are interested—you see, your absence seemed to require—”

“And where the devil do you come into the picture?” the new Sir William demanded.

“I—oh, I am the police,” Pepster retorted.

“But, surely,” Kitty said haltingly, “Mr. Trevor has proved—Billy was in London on the night of the 23rd—an alibi—”

“There can be no alibi in a poison case,” I returned gravely. “The crime is committed, not when the victim dies but when the poison is placed—wherever it is placed. For example, if I were to put prussic acid now in some whisky which you were to drink next Sunday, I might go off to Paris, or be on the high seas far off enough, anyway, when you drink the whisky, but I should still be guilty of—”

“Is that the story?” Billy broke in. “Did I put prussic acid in Philip’s whisky? Come, we’ll get back to Cartordale. I am Sir William and White Towers belongs to me. I’m going to take possession. And if anyone thinks I killed Sir Philip, well, let them prove it and be damned to them.”

He broke off with an angry laugh and stood facing us. His lovely little bride thrust her hand through his arm.

“Yes,” she said, in that musical voice of hers that had charmed huge crowds on two continents, “let them prove it and—be damned to them!”

But her laugh was one of real amusement. Lady Clevedon was looking forward to enjoying life and had no objection to a sensation or two. Possibly she had found the honeymoon just a trifle slow. Anyway, she made a charming picture of loyalty and confidence as she stood arm-in-arm with her husband facing those who were practically accusing him of murder.

CHAPTER XXI
WHY TULMIN BLACKMAILED CLEVEDON

SIR WILLIAM and Lady Clevedon settled down in Cartordale and very quickly made themselves popular with their neighbours. Billy himself was of a buoyant and friendly disposition, and even if he had been far less genial, Lady Clevedon would have pulled him through. I never met a sunnier person than she was, and if she had designedly set out to dissipate any possible suspicion that may have gathered round her husband, she could not have gone a better way about it.

But if she had any such intent she did not show it. They both acted as if they took it calmly for granted that any idea of Billy's participation in the tragedy was futile nonsense. Nor did they hesitate to discuss it, and apparently accepted my interposition as a matter of course. No doubt Thoyne and Kitty had explained to them my part in the story. As they became more and more immersed in their plans for refurnishing White Towers and in various social activities, the mystery dropped more and more into the background. That was all the better for me. The necessity of consulting other folk and especially of explaining, or of concealing, because it more frequently amounts to that, is always something of a nuisance when one is engaged in delicate investigations.

But I had a little passage with Lady Clevedon the elder that was not entirely without entertainment. I was passing the big gates of Hapforth House just as she emerged. I fancy she had seen me from

the windows of the lodge and had come out with the intention of intercepting me. She stood with both hands on her stick surveying me with a dry smile.

“So, Mr. Detective, you haven’t yet discovered who killed Philip Clevedon,” she said.

“I don’t know that I haven’t,” I returned. “But knowledge isn’t proof and there are libel laws to be watched.”

“That is an easy way of getting out of it,” she cried mockingly. “A detective ought—”

“But I am not a detective,” I interrupted.

“No, you are not, that’s true enough,” she agreed grimly, as she turned abruptly and began walking towards Hapforth House.

When I reached Stone Hollow again, I found waiting for me a little wizened man with indeterminate features and a general air of dilapidation, though his eyes under shaggy grey brows were bright and piercing.

“Hullo, Stillman!” I cried, “you at last, is it? I have been expecting you for some time, but I suppose it wasn’t an easy job. Have you got it?”

Stillman sat for a few minutes gazing into the fire. I knew his habit well and did not attempt to hurry him. He was a very methodical person, with a way of arranging his thoughts and choosing his words that was sometimes a little irritating to those wanting to hear what he had to say. I, knowing him well, merely waited until he was ready.

“You told me to find out—” he began and then paused, glancing at me as if in inquiry.

“Why Tulmin was blackmailing Sir Philip Clevedon,” I replied promptly. “Tulmin had some hold over Clevedon—what was it?”

“Precisely.”

I had “discovered” Stillman some years before, and had made much use of him. What his past was I did not know, though I suspected that it would not bear a too detailed investigation. He was certainly an expert burglar, as I had more than once put to the test; he could copy a signature with the fidelity of the camera; he could empty a man’s pocket with the dexterity of a professional; he knew every possible trick with the cards; he seemed, in short, to be an expert in every form of roguery, and yet, as far as I knew, he had never engaged the attention of the police. If he had been a rogue, he had covered his tracks with singular skill.

But he may only have been, like myself, a student of roguery. I was an expert pickpocket, an accomplished burglar, could open a safe by listening, and would guarantee to copy any man’s signature so as to deceive even himself; and more than once during my investigations I had found my accomplishments extremely useful. I should have made a very dangerous criminal, but I kept within the law, and I was willing to give Stillman also the full benefit of the doubt. As a sleuth, I never met his equal; in the patient, persistent, unwearying, remorseless pursuit of an individual, in turning a person, man or woman, inside out, in penetrating the most sullen reserve and uncovering the secrets of the past he was unapproachable.

I had the first taste of his quality in the Strongeley case. He brought me some information and I happened to remark that I must have Robert Strongeley shadowed. “Try me,” he said, and as I was just then too busily occupied to do it myself, and had nobody else whom I could put on, I agreed. He followed Strongeley half round the world, and wormed out secrets that even Strongeley himself had forgotten.

Since then I had many times employed him, and he always promptly answered my call, possibly because I paid well, but even more, I think, because my cases were nearly always interesting. How he lived or what he did in the unemployed intervals I cannot say and never inquired. A lack of curiosity is often a form of wisdom.

I had placed Tulmin in his hands. “This man,” I said, “has been blackmailing the late Sir Philip Clevedon and I want to know why.”

And there I left it. Stillman, I knew, would sooner or later bring me the information I required.

“I went down to Ilbay,” Stillman said, “but I could not get on board the yacht. But chance helped me there. Mr. Thoyne came off the ship bringing Tulmin with him. The latter went to London and so did I. Whether Thoyne had given Tulmin an address, or whether Tulmin went there on his own, I didn’t know, but I followed him and obtained a room in the same house. Later I learnt that the house was one in which Tulmin had lodged when he first came over from America and before he went to Cartordale.”

“America?” I interposed. “Did Thoyne know him in America?”

“That is the story,” Stillman replied, with a quiet grin. “Thoyne—Clevedon—Tulmin—all from America. Tulmin had some money of his own, but Thoyne was making him a fairly generous allowance, is still, for that matter. But to begin at the beginning. When Sir Philip Clevedon—er—died, Mr. Thoyne offered Tulmin a job as steward on his yacht.”

“Did Tulmin say why the offer was made?”

“No—no special reason, anyway. He was out of a job and Thoyne wanted a steward. But it is a little curious that Mr. Thoyne offered him about twice the usual pay if he would go then and there at once.”

I smiled appreciatively. It was, indeed, a little curious,

“Though, if he hadn’t done that,” Stillman went on, “Tulmin probably wouldn’t have gone, because he wasn’t short of money. At all events he went. But hardly had he got to know his way about the yacht when a telegram came. ‘I want you to go to London and wait for me there,’ Mr. Thoyne said to him. And that seems to be the whole story.”

“Did Tulmin see the telegram?”

“No, Mr. Thoyne burnt that when he had read it.”

That, of course, was Kitty Clevedon’s telegram warning Thoyne of my threatened visit.

“It was lucky Tulmin went to London—what should you have done if he hadn’t?” I asked, with some little curiosity.

“Oh, I should have found a way,” Stillman replied. “Perhaps an opportunity of boarding the yacht would have presented itself, or I

might have learnt its destination and met it there. I should have found Tulmin some way. But that telegram eased matters considerably. I am much obliged to whoever sent it."

In all his confidences Thoyne had never told me why he took Tulmin away, nor had he given me any indication that he knew where he was.

"As to Tulmin," Stillman went on, "I had rather a lot of trouble with him. He wasn't exactly an easy subject. But I got there in time. He is too fond of his whisky to keep many secrets. And I have spent a lot of money in whisky. At to-day's prices, you know, whisky does cost money. But I had to drag it out of him almost a word at a time and piece it together as best I could. But I think I have it straight now."

The story was very simple. As Stillman had said, the three men had all hailed from America where Clevedon, known then as Calcott had been an object of much attention from the police. Tulmin himself was a "crook," though of rather smaller dimensions than the other, and they had occasionally worked together. Then Calcott disappeared and it was given out that he was dead.

It was some time after Calcott's ending that Tulmin, finding the police in America inconveniently eager to make his acquaintance, crossed over to England, which offered at once a refuge and a fresh field for his operations. It was in London that he met Sir Philip Clevedon as the latter was going from a taxi towards the dignified entrance to his club. They faced each other at the foot of the stone steps.

"Calcott!" Tulmin cried, with a welcoming grin.

“I beg your pardon,” Sir Philip replied, with the icy composure that characterised him.

“I said ‘Calcott,’” Tulmin retorted, in no way perturbed.

“Yes, I heard you, but I don’t know what it means,” Sir Philip made answer.

“It’s a clever bluff,” Tulmin responded. “And I’ve heard of doubles, of course. But do you know that Felter is in London”—Felter was head of the Chicago detective bureau, and a man whom the late Calcott had good reason to fear—“on some stunt or other and looking as foxy as ever? It gave me a turn of the shivers when I ran up against him suddenly in Oxford Street. I wonder if you could persuade him to believe in doubles or whether he might not want to see that scar on your left knee. He put it there, you know, didn’t he, and could identify it. Anyway, I am looking for a job as confidential man—valet, secretary—something soft and clean and well-paid. I am tired of being a ‘crook.’”

What Tulmin actually would have done, or even could have done had Clevedon bluffed it out, I don’t know. But apparently the latter funked the risk and the end of it was that Tulmin was installed at White Towers as Sir Philip Clevedon’s confidential valet. That, in brief, was the story Stillman told me, nor was it difficult to supply the missing lines. Clevedon had never expected to succeed to the title since there were several lives in front of him, but they disappeared one by one, and accordingly he shed his Calcott existence like a discarded hat. He was accepted on this side without question or demur, and indeed, there seems to have been no doubt regarding his identity. The whole story was extremely interesting, but I did not see that so far it helped much in the

solution of my own particular mystery. I was a good deal more concerned with Thoyne's part in the play.

"The hold Tulmin had over Clevedon seems clear enough," I observed reflectively. "But I don't quite see how he managed to hook Thoyne on unless Thoyne was also—"

"No, there is nothing against Mr. Thoyne," Stillman responded promptly and decisively. "He is paying Tulmin to keep out of the way, but I think that is simply so that there may be no scandal—no public identification of Clevedon with Calcott."

"Then he knew that Clevedon was Calcott?"

"Yes, Tulmin says so."

"I wonder how he knew."

"I am not sure about that, but Tulmin was positive that he did know, and that he was keeping Tulmin out of the way so as to keep the name of Clevedon out of the mess. Isn't Thoyne marrying into the Clevedon family? Anyway," Stillman added, with a queer chuckle, "Tulmin doesn't expect him to go on paying for ever. 'As long as it lasts,' in his own phrase. The hold isn't a very strong one; and I don't think myself Tulmin will turn nasty when the money stops. His own record isn't so clean that he need court publicity."

"I am not quite clear about it yet," I remarked. "You said there was no special reason assigned for Thoyne's action in making Tulmin his steward at double pay, but now—"

"Oh, yes, I was not quite clear. Mr. Thoyne did not give Tulmin any reason when he offered him the job. It was afterwards that he explained what he had in mind—to make sure that nothing got out

regarding Calcott. Indeed, I am not quite sure that he actually explained in so many words. But he knew about Calcott—Tulmin is sure of that—and perhaps Tulmin jumped to the conclusion that that was his motive."

"Yes, I dare say it would puzzle Tulmin to know why Thoyne should appear so friendly."

I made up my mind at all events that I would interview Tulmin myself. Not that I had any specific aim in view. But it would at least be useful to learn all I could regarding Clevedon's past. Stillman's story had opened new possibilities. If Tulmin could recognise Clevedon as Calcott, others might have done so. It might easily be that one would have to go back into those dead years to solve the mystery of the Clevedon tragedy. And among those possibilities was Thoyne. He may have known Clevedon in America and have had good reason, quite apart from their rivalry for Kitty Clevedon's affections, to desire his death.

At all events I determined that I would have an interview with Ronald Thoyne before many hours were out. I felt that I had a legitimate grievance against him. He had known more about Tulmin and Clevedon than he had ever told me and though he had invited me to investigate the mystery, he had given me only a half-confidence. I could at least teach him a lesson on that, I thought rather grimly, besides which, somewhere at the back of my mind was a queer suspicion that Thoyne had deliberately thrown me off the scent, telling me, with every appearance of frankness, much that did not matter, but remaining stubbornly reticent on several things that did.

CHAPTER XXII
MORE ANONYMOUS LETTERS

I SENT Stillman back to keep an eye on Tulmin until I could myself interview him and then set myself to arrange a meeting with Thoyne. He was staying at White Towers and I had no difficulty in finding him.

"Hallo!" he cried. "You look very serious, Holt. What is the matter? Have you made a fresh discovery?"

"Yes," I said, "I have."

"Well, cheer up. I can't say you look pleased about it."

"Thoyne," I responded, looking him straight in the face. "Did you ever hear the name of Calcott?"

He sent me a quick glance that was partly, I think, surprise but was not entirely devoid of wrath. The name had evidently no very pleasant sound in his ears.

"You see," I went on, interpreting his half-instinctive movement in my own way, "you have given me a lot of quite unnecessary trouble. Had you been frank with me—"

"I was frank on everything that mattered," he said sullenly.

"You thought the fact that Clevedon had been an American crook known as Calcott whom you had met in Chicago—"

"That's a lie, anyway."

“You needn’t get excited about it,” I rejoined equably.

“Excited, the devil!” he cried. “I am not excited. I’m as calm as you are.”

“Then perhaps you would like to tell me the whole story.”

“What story?”

“The story of Calcott, the crook, and what you knew about him in Chicago.”

“I did not know him in Chicago.”

He sat himself down and ran his fingers two or three times through his thick hair.

“You are rather a marvel,” he said, with a smile that was just a little rueful. “How you get these things sorted out amazes me. First one and then another, you get them all straightened and leave no loose ends. No, I never knew Calcott, though I’d heard of him. But I had known Tulmin in Chicago. I caught him looting my baggage—it was in the car outside my house and he was just moving off with a bag. I caught him and thrashed him and let him go. I recognised him when I met him here, and he knew me also. I didn’t interfere. He seemed to be living an honest life as far as I could gather and I didn’t want to rob the poor devil of his chance. It was he who told me about Calcott. You see, after they quarrelled—”

“Quarrelled!” I repeated. “Did—but I must have the whole story now. There is more in this than I thought. If there was a quarrel—”

“Yes, what of it?”

Thoyne spoke a little impatiently as if he were tired of the whole subject and merely wanted to bury it.

“Well, a quarrel—is sometimes a motive for murder—”

“I always thought Tulmin did it,” he responded quietly. “But I’ll tell you all I know and then perhaps you can leave me alone. Damn Clevedon and damn Tulmin. Why should I be worried about their affairs in this fashion? I didn’t ask to be mixed up in it, did I? Of course, I did it to help Kitty, and would do it all again, and more for her. And all through the infernal foolery of this secret marriage. Why couldn’t Clevedon tell his sister he was going to be married? The whole thing’s been a nightmare to me and I’m dead sick of it. I didn’t murder Clevedon and I don’t know who did, unless it was Tulmin. If you would find the assassin and tie him up I might get some peace.”

“But it was you who took Tulmin away and hid him,” I replied.

“Yes, I know it was—what of it?”

“But if you thought he was the murderer—?”

“Of course I thought he was the murderer. You don’t think I should have involved an innocent man, do you? Yes, I persuaded Tulmin to go away in order to keep suspicion off Billy Clevedon. Kitty was terrified and I was a bit anxious myself.”

“And as to this quarrel?” I interposed.

“I don’t know the rights of that, except that Tulmin had wanted more money than Clevedon was willing to pay. Kitty had told me, you know, that Clevedon had wanted her to marry him and that she intended to consent. We were not formally engaged then, though it

was all but fixed up between us. But the word lay with her, of course, and I was trying to be as philosophical as I could over my dismissal when one night Tulmin came to me with a queer, mixed yarn, of which at first I could make nothing. ‘What have you come to me for?’ I said. ‘I’ve come to sell you a secret,’ he replied. My first idea was to give the swine a good sound kicking and pack him off. ‘I could tell you something about Sir Philip that’ll make Miss Kitty impossible,’ he added, and at that I waited.

“I dare say you’ll blame me, but I don’t pretend to be any better than anybody else, and besides, he’d stolen her from me. So I listened. He told me he knew something against Clevedon, who had been paying him to keep silence. Now he wanted to go back to America—Tulmin did, I mean—and had asked Clevedon for a lump sum, and Clevedon had threatened to shoot him. That is the best thing I ever heard about Clevedon. Tulmin is a little rat, for whom shooting is a lot too good. But Clevedon had stolen my woman and I didn’t mean to lose any chance that came. I said he could have the money if I found the secret worth it. He wanted it in advance, but I told him he’d have it my way or no way. And then he told me what Clevedon had been across the water.

“At first I took him to mean that Clevedon was an impostor and had no right to the title and estates, but it seems I was wrong there. I went off to Clevedon next day and we had a right royal rumpus about it—that was the interview described at the inquest. I didn’t mention Tulmin’s name—the little rat had made that a condition. ‘You can’t deny it,’ I said to Clevedon. ‘I come from Chicago, you know. I recognised you months ago.’ He seemed impressed and it was rather a good lie. ‘But I didn’t interfere,’ I went on, ‘until you tried to steal my woman, and we Americans are always ready to fight for our women.’ That housekeeper woman didn’t hear all that,

apparently. Then Clevedon denied the whole story and we began to get angry."

"I see," I interposed, "and when you said you'd find a way of making him give Miss Clevedon up, you meant—"

"I meant I would get the Chicago police on his trail."

"Did you know that Clevedon gave Tulmin a cheque for £500 the day before the murder?"

"No, did he? Well, evidently Tulmin didn't think it enough."

"What day was it Tulmin came to see you?"

"It was that same morning, February 23rd."

"Clevedon gave Tulmin £500, which was less than Tulmin wanted, so Tulmin double-crossed Clevedon and came to you."

"That seems like it."

"It opens all sorts of fresh avenues," I remarked.

"Don't say that," Thoyne murmured, with a groan. "I was hoping it would end the case. I never want to be mixed up in another murder mystery. It is the very deuce."

"Suppose Clevedon, having quarrelled with Tulmin, and knowing you also had penetrated his secret—"

"Do you mean it was suicide?" Thoyne cried, his whole face lighting up. "If you could prove that I would—I would give you a cheque for ten thousand pounds. It would settle such a lot, wouldn't it? Suicide, yes, I think after all it must be suicide."

He gazed eagerly at my unresponsive face, then shrugged his shoulders a little angrily.

“Yes,” I replied slowly, “but then, what of the hatpin?”

His face fell at that.

“Clevedon certainly didn’t stab himself with a hatpin,” I added. “But you may as well finish the story,” I went on, “and tell me why you spirited Tulmin away.”

“Oh, that’s quite simple,” he replied. “Kitty was worried about her brother, whose absence puzzled her, as it did the rest of us. So I offered Tulmin a job, and he jumped at it.”

“Did you tell him—”

“Of course not, I’m not a fool.”

“And was that why you offered to buy my house?”

He laughed at the recollection of that particular interview.

“I dare say you thought me an awful idiot,” he said.

“And now you’ve told me everything.”

“Yes,” he responded, “everything.”

The truth or otherwise of which will appear in due course.

On my way out old Lady Clevedon met me, grimmer and more caustic than ever.

“Any discoveries, Mr. Detective?” she cried. “But I suppose I need not ask. Have you seen the *Midlington Courier* to-day? It has an

interesting article on the Clevedon Case—I forget how many weeks gone and nothing done. It wants to know if the police—"

"But I have nothing to do with the police," I interrupted smilingly.

Pepster, whom I found awaiting me at Stone Hollow, began on the newspaper article as soon as we met.

"What do you think of that?" he cried, waving the cutting as if it had been a flag. "Have you read it? 'Unfortunately, we cannot congratulate the police, who seem to have been waiting, like the famous Micawber, for something to turn up.' What do you think of it?"

"Oh, newspaper writers are very fond of dragging Mr. Micawber in," I replied. "He is overworked."

"Damn Micawber!"

"Yes," I rejoined, with a quiet laugh. "I should feel like that if I belonged to the police."

"Well, you're in the case, anyway," Pepster said tartly. "And that reminds me. I have some news for you. At least, I think I have. But with you one never knows. Quite likely you have it all entered up already. Did you ever hear of Mary Grainger?"

"No, who is she?"

"Thank God, I've got a novelty at last. She's daughter to Grainger, the Midlington chemist. Did you know he had a daughter?"

"No, does she live at home?"

"She doesn't *live* anywhere, she's dead."

“Yes?”

“Did you know that?”

I shook my head to express a negative.

“Then it really is one to me,” he said, with an air of great satisfaction.

“Yes,” I agreed, “it is one to you if it means anything. I take it there is more behind. The decease of a young lady I never met is hardly a matter for excitement in itself.”

“Yes, there is more behind,” he said slowly, nodding his head. “There is, for instance, Nora Lepley behind. She and Mary Grainger both attended the High School in Midlington and have been for years inseparable friends. Nora frequently spent weeks at a time with the Graingers at Midlington and apparently had the run of the shop. She goes frequently to see the old man even now. She was there one day last week. Now suppose—well, Nora Lepley could have got the prussic acid that way.”

“It is certainly one to you,” I agreed, slowly and thoughtfully.

“I have something else,” Pepster went on, taking out his wallet.

“More anonymous letters?” I queried.

“Yes, two.”

He handed them across to me. One was a fragment of blue paper, on which was printed in red ink:

THOYNE IS STILL AT
LIBERTY. WHY?

The other was a picture postcard—a view of the Midlington Parish Church—and the message, in pencil, ran:

WHY ARE YOU PROTECTING
THOYNE. HAS HE PAID YOU?

"It wasn't sent open like that," Pepster explained. "It came in an envelope. It's a popular card, printed by the hundred and sold by every stationer in Midlington. Somebody seems to have a rare grudge against Thoyne."

"Does he know anything of these?"

"I haven't told him."

"Nor of the others?"

"No"

"It might be a good idea—just to see how he took it."

"If there was anything in them it might put him on his guard."

I did not press the matter further just then, though I could not help wondering what story there was behind this queer series.

"Put a personal in the *Courier*," I suggested, "inviting the writer of communications to the Peakborough police to send his address confidentially."

"I did."

"No result?"

“A personal in reply which ran, ‘Take him first and then I will.’ You know he said in one of the other letters that if we would arrest Thoyne he would supply the evidence.”

“No, you can’t do that,” I agreed. “And now,” I added, “if you’ll sit still and not interrupt I’ll tell you a long story.”

And I proceeded to recount the past history of Sir Philip Clevedon and Tulmin, and Thoyne’s connection with it. Pepster heard me to the end in silence.

“This case,” he said, when I had finished, “is the very devil. I’m half inclined to think Tulmin did it after all. At any rate there are three of them in it—Tulmin, Thoyne and Nora Lepley, but which is which—or are they all three in it?”

It was a possibility that had occurred to me more than once.

CHAPTER XXIII
TULMIN'S QUEER STORY

DURING my journey to London I devoted careful and prolonged thought to the difficult problem of Mr. Ronald Thoyne, whose exact place in the story I had by no means satisfactorily determined. He had played a very curious game all through, and though there was an explanation in his anxiety to help Kitty Clevedon and relieve her anxiety regarding her brother, the facts as I knew them would equally have fitted a desire to throw pursuers off his own scent.

I did not attach undue importance to the series of anonymous letters received by Pepster, and yet, in the light of Thoyne's queer and frequently mysterious actions, I did not feel inclined entirely to ignore them. I was fully aware that so far I had not found the key to the mystery. Did Thoyne hold that or was it Nora Lepley? Thoyne was an American and, as far as I had been able to gather, came of a wealthy and highly respectable family in Chicago. There was absolutely nothing of any sort against him and yet it seemed queer that he had settled down in England and had apparently no intention of returning to America. Even Kitty Clevedon was not sufficient to account for that. She would certainly have gone with him had he asked her. Even if he had not actually encompassed Clevedon's death, was he privy to it? Then I remembered suddenly—the first time it had occurred to me—what the Vicar's wife had told me. Thoyne, when he first went to Cartordale, had lodged at Lepley's farm and gossip had coupled his name with Nora's. What was there in that? Little, probably; perhaps nothing.

And so I maundered on, my thought flitting from one thing to another and back again, but with no tangible or coherent result. I could not fit Thoyne into the picture anyhow. If he had set out to fool me he had succeeded, for all I had tripped him up so many times. That again was curious. Practically everything he had told me had been dragged out of him. Very little had come from him voluntarily. He became confidential enough when he knew that I knew, but he offered nothing.

I walked to the address in Bloomsbury Stillman had given me. He met me on the doorstep, and taking me into his room made a few minor alterations in my appearance, not sufficient to merit the word disguise, but enough to prevent Tulmin from recognising me. I had never spoken to him, but I had been on the jury when he was a witness and he might know me again.

And then I gave Stillman another mission—Grainger, Mary Grainger, Nora Lepley.

"Anything particular?" Stillman asked.

"No," I said. "Everything. I don't know what it will lead to. It is absolutely new ground."

I told him all I knew and left him to it.

When Tulmin came in Stillman introduced me as a friend of his named Spencer and for a time we talked on all sorts of topics until Stillman mentioned quite casually that Tulmin had come from Cartordale.

"Did you know Sir Philip Clevedon?" I asked, "the man who was poisoned? A cousin of mine was housekeeper there, name of Halfleet."

“Mrs. Halfleet, yes, she is the housekeeper,” Tulmin said.

“She thinks he committed suicide,” I observed.

“Nay, she’s wrong there,” Tulmin replied, “he wasn’t the suicide sort.”

“Tulmin,” I said suddenly, “why, I remember that name. You were his secretary, weren’t you, or something of the sort.”

“Yes, that’s right, something of the sort,” Tulmin responded, with a grin.

I was a little taken aback at his almost good-humoured frankness. His was certainly not the attitude of a man who stood in fear of pursuit.

“But surely,” I said, “it’s you the police are looking for.”

“Me? What should they want with me?” he growled, sitting suddenly upright.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’m not very well up in the case. It was my cousin that told me. ‘I believe, myself, it was suicide,’ she said, ‘but the police think differently, and they’re looking for Tulmin, who ran away.’”

He rose from his seat and thumped the table angrily, though his face grew a little white. Stillman, who had been watching him carefully, poured out a glass of whisky and handed it to him. Tulmin gulped it down at a draught and seemed to recover his nerve.

“But didn’t you run away?” I asked.

“No, I didn’t, damn you! Who said I ran away?”

“But you disappeared.”

“Mr. Thoyne knew where I was.”

“Who is Mr. Thoyne?” I asked. “My cousin said nothing about him. Is he suspected also?”

“Why,” he responded, with a queer laugh, “you might guess again and get farther off.”

“Do you mean he did it?” I asked.

“I don’t mean anything,” he replied cautiously, and then he added, “It was Mr. Thoyne who sent me here.”

“But why did he do that?” I demanded. “So that the police would—think things?”

“If you didn’t do it you were a fool to quit,” Stillman said.

“Yes, I was a fool, that’s plain enough,” Tulmin muttered, with an unpleasant sort of laugh. “Thoyne’s had me for a fool.”

He reached out his hand for some more whisky, which Stillman supplied.

“I see now,” Tulmin went on, almost as if talking to himself, “that was why Thoyne offered me a job and was so anxious to get me away. Yes, and then he almost pushed me off that blasted yacht of his, and told me to come to London and wait for him. I see his game. He wanted me out of the way, so they’d think—but I didn’t do it, though I know who did.”

I did not allow so much as an eyelid to quiver. If Tulmin stopped talking now I might never get him again.

“It was Thoyne himself—the swine,” he went on. “I saw him give Clevedon the dope that killed him—in a white packet. ‘You’ll sleep all right after that,’ he said, and laughed. He wasn’t far out. He put Clevedon to sleep sound enough.”

“Did you tell Thoyne what you saw?” I asked. “When did he give it to him?”

“Why, Clevedon called on him that night. They’d quarrelled over a girl, and Clevedon went to—I don’t know what he went for.”

“Went where?”

“To see Thoyne—at Thoyne’s house. I followed him. I couldn’t hear all they said, but I could see everything.”

“And you didn’t tell Thoyne what you saw?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“But, why?”

“Oh, well, I was keeping that,” he said, with a maudlin grin. “I thought it might come in useful—later on. But Thoyne did it right enough.”

“Do you know what was in the packet?”

“No.”

“Then you can’t possibly say—”

“They both wanted the same girl—I know that—and Thoyne took his chance. He came to the door with Clevedon. I was hid in the bushes. ‘Take a dose of that stuff, and it’ll put you to sleep,’ Thoyne said. And, by God, it did! Suicide, no. He didn’t commit suicide. Thoyne killed him.”

And then he flung his arms over the table and fell into a stupid, drunken sleep.

I glanced at Stillman, who shook his head.

“No jury would take his evidence,” he remarked.

I wondered for a moment or two if Tulmin had written the anonymous letters. But then I remembered that they had borne the Midlington postmark.

“Has he been away from London at all?” I asked.

“No.”

“Not even for a day?”

“No.”

Of course, he might have got somebody in Midlington to post them for him, but I doubted it. I did not think he had written them. His accusation merely came in queer corroboration of their statements. But anonymous letters and a drunken gutter-thief from Chicago. I should have to get a better case against Thoyne than that!

I stayed three or four days in London, having a good deal of business with publishers to transact, and for that period I left Cartordale and its concerns entirely alone. It was a visit from Stillman that plunged me once again into the thick of the mystery.

“It’s only a preliminary report,” he said, “but as far as it goes it is simple enough. Miss Grainger died at Long Burminster, a small village in the Midlands, about sixty miles from London. That was some months ago, and she left behind her a little baby girl, who has been adopted by the people—themselves childless—with whom Miss Grainger herself had been lodging. She wrote to her father, it seems, but he refused to visit her or to have anything to do with her child—said they could send it to the workhouse, which, however, they refused to do.”

I remarked that this seemed a very good and generous action on their part, to which Stillman replied with his characteristic, unbelieving grin, that they were being well paid for it.

“By whom—Grainger?” I asked.

“No,” Stillman replied. “Not by Grainger, but by Mr. Ronald Thoyne.”

“Thoyne!” I exclaimed. “Thoyne again! It seems to be always Thoyne. But what had he to do with Mary Grainger?”

Stillman went on with his story. He reminded me, in the first place, that Mary Grainger and Nora Lepley had been close friends, and that Thoyne had lodged at Lepley’s farm when he first went to Cartordale. He might have met her there; though he believed—he had not yet actually verified this—that Thoyne had been a patient in the hospital at Bristol where Mary Grainger and Nora Lepley had both served, the former as nurse, the latter as V.A.D.

“And is the suggestion, then, that Thoyne is the father of this baby?” I demanded.

But Stillman knew nothing as to that; it might be so, or it might not, but it was quite certain that Thoyne was paying for the child now. And there was another interesting point he had forgotten to mention. When Mary Grainger went to Long Burminster she called herself Mrs. Blewshaw, and wore a wedding ring, which, in fact, was buried with her.

It was when she was ill and knew she could not recover, that Mary had written to her father, who had replied with a violent refusal either to see her or to forgive her. Happily, Mary herself had never seen that letter. She died peacefully and painlessly before it came.

Mrs. Greentree had shown it to Ronald Thoyne, who bade her sit down and write a letter from his dictation, in which she informed the Midlington chemist that his daughter was dead, and asked what wishes he had to express regarding the child. The old man replied in person, but had proved a rather grim, forbidding and unpleasant visitor. He had refused to attend the funeral, or to pay for it, and would not even see the little girl; whereupon Thoyne had come to the rescue, settling all the bills, and arranging that Mrs. Greentree should take charge of the child for the ridiculously generous payment of two pounds a week.

I whistled when I heard that, and Stillman nodded his head.

“It seems a lot, doesn’t it?” he murmured. “If she wasn’t his daughter, I mean.”

The first lesson I learnt when I began my studies in crime and criminology—because crime is not merely the commission of an unlawful deed, but is of itself a complicated psychological problem—was to distrust the obvious. Crime itself is sub-normal, super-normal, extra-normal, anything but normal; and the obvious

is always likely to be untrue because there are always people interested in arranging it.

For my part, I never believe what I see or hear until I have also proved it; and, accordingly, though it would seem to one's ordinary intelligence a certainty that Ronald Thoyne was the father of Mary Grainger's baby—possibly Mary Grainger's husband, possibly not; but certainly in some intimate relationship with the dead girl and the living child—I did not take anything for granted. I had yet to learn the other side of the story. Not that I had any reason to suppose that Thoyne was better than his fellows, or that such an entanglement was impossible to him. He certainly had never occurred to me as a saint.

The story seemed fairly clear, though, of course, I lacked many details. Thoyne had met Mary Grainger either at the hospital in Bristol, or while he was lodging at Lepley's farm, and then, after an interval regarding which we had no information, the girl was found to be living at his expense, and when she died he paid for the maintenance of her child. Added to all this was the other ascertained fact that Nora Lepley, in whose possession I had discovered the phial of prussic acid, was Mary Grainger's dearest and most intimate friend.

But, then, what had all that to do with the death of Sir Philip Clevedon? Was there any connection at all between the two stories? Certainly I could discern none of even the most shadowy character, and yet I somehow felt that Thoyne was the pivot on which the whole business swung, though so far the key which would open the door of the mystery remained out of reach. It was interesting, too, to recollect that Thoyne's serious courtship of Kitty Clevedon had not begun until Mary Grainger was safely out of the way—

interesting, but whether or not it had any significance, I could not say.

I told Stillman to continue his inquiries, and myself returned to Cartordale.

CHAPTER XXIV
THE WRATH OF RONALD THOYNE

"I WANT you to come with me to Midlington," I said to Pepster, whom I met soon after I reached home. "I am going to try a long shot, and I would like you to be there."

"A long shot at what?" he demanded.

"Well," I replied, "I don't quite know. I can't quite reckon it up yet, but it seems worth trying, anyway."

Pepster nodded, and waited for me to continue.

"Those anonymous letters," I went on. "We are going to see their writer."

"Oh. And who may he be?"

"Grainger, the chemist."

"But that's—well, anyway, I'm ready. Shall we go now?"

We found Mr. Grainger behind the counter of his shop, but I was just in time to see a skirt flashing through the door that opened into the little room behind. That it was Nora Lepley I felt sure, though I did not see the face.

"Mr. Grainger," I began, "we have come to see you about those letters you wrote to the police."

He shrank back against the shelves behind him, and his face went suddenly grey. He pulled himself together immediately.

“I know nothing of any letters,” he said, moistening his lips. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, yes,” I responded cheerfully, “you promised to provide the evidence if—”

“Has Ronald Thoyne been arrested?” he broke in, with hardly concealed eagerness.

“Ronald Thoyne?” I echoed. “Did I mention Thoyne?”

“No, no,” he said, “you were referring to the—to Sir Philip Clevedon—yes.”

“I don’t think I even mentioned Clevedon,” I replied.

Grainger passed his hand wearily across his forehead, then faced me once more.

“No,” he said, almost as if he had made up his mind on a point on which he had been in some doubt. “I know nothing of any letters.”

“And you are not ready with the evidence you promised—?”

“I don’t understand,” he returned.

“Of course, I know you promised that if Thoyne were arrested you would provide—but then, in point of fact, there is nothing against Thoyne, and we must have the evidence in advance. If you know anything it is your duty to help us, surely. You say you have evidence against Thoyne—”

“I have not said so.”

“Oh, yes, you said so in that letter you wrote to the police at Peakborough.”

“I wrote no letter.”

“You see, if we did arrest Thoyne, as you suggested, and then your evidence failed, we might be in a very awkward position. Now, if you could give us some idea of its—”

“I know nothing of it.”

The door from the little room behind the shop slowly opened, and Nora Lepley came out.

“What is it you want?” she demanded. “Why are you badgering the—Mr. Grainger in this fashion?”

I turned smilingly towards her.

“Not at all,” I responded equably. “Mr. Grainger wrote to the police and told them that if they would arrest Mr. Thoyne, he would produce evidence that he—Mr. Thoyne, I mean—murdered Sir Philip Clevedon.”

She blazed up in very queer fashion, and wheeled suddenly upon the old man.

“Did you say that?” she demanded.

“I wrote no letters,” he responded half sullenly. “I don’t know what they are talking about. It isn’t true.”

He had gone very white, and his hands were trembling violently.

“I think you’d better go,” Nora said quietly. “He will be ill if you worry him any more. I will talk to him, and let you—and see you again. But you’d better go now.”

I nodded to Pepster, who followed me out of the shop.

“He wrote those letters,” Pepster said, as we walked along.

“Yes, that seems fairly evident.”

“But what does it all amount to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why should he accuse Thoyne?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did Thoyne murder Clevedon?”

“I don’t know.”

“But there must be some reason for those letters.”

“Oh, yes, the reason is plain enough—he had a bitter grudge against Thoyne. His daughter seems to have come a cropper, and he suspected Thoyne—yes, that is why he wrote the letters.”

I told him in a few words what Stillman had discovered regarding Thoyne and Mary Grainger.

“It’s a rum story,” Pepster said thoughtfully. “Of course the child is Thoyne’s, and that would account for the grudge, as you say. But it doesn’t explain why he should accuse Thoyne of murder. He must have had something at the back of his mind. It can’t be wholly an invention.”

“I saw Tulmin a day or two back.”

“Gad! and where is he?”

“In London. I asked him who murdered Philip Clevedon, and he replied that Thoyne did it.”

“He replied—what!”

“That Thoyne did it.”

I recounted as much as I thought proper of my interview with Tulmin. But Pepster shook his head.

“The thing’s beyond me,” he said. “It wants a lot of sorting out. But Tulmin’s evidence would go for nothing, and Grainger, if he knows anything, won’t speak. We must wait a bit yet.”

On my way up to Cartordale from the station I overtook Thoyne going in the same direction.

“I am bound for White Towers,” he said. “I am staying there with Sir Billy and his wife.”

“Do you happen to know,” I said, when our preliminary conversation languished a little, “of anyone who has a grudge against you?”

Thoyne regarded me frowningly for a moment or two.

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “there is nobody. I can say that, Holt, freely enough. Clevedon—but he is dead, anyway, and there’s no one else.”

“Did you ever hear,” I asked, “of a girl named Grainger?”

He gave me a quick glance sideways.

“Yes,” he said. “I knew Miss Grainger very well.”

We relapsed into silence which lasted for several minutes.

“Shall I tell you the story?” I asked softly, “or will you tell me?”

“What story?” he demanded roughly.

“The story of Mary Grainger,” I returned.

“There is no story,” he said. “The poor girl is dead. Let her rest.”

“Yes, but—”

“I tell you I won’t talk about it—about her. She is dead, and death ends all stories. Leave it there.”

“But if I have a story—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“The Clevedons might be interested.”

“It is no business of theirs.”

“They might not agree with that.”

“I tell you it has nothing to do with them. The girl’s dead.”

“But there is more in it than that—her father isn’t dead.”

“Well, what of her father?”

“He says you murdered Philip Clevedon.”

He stood speechless for a moment or two, then turned away with a short laugh.

“What the devil do you mean?” he shouted. “What blasted foolery have you in mind now? You are a damned fool, the damndest of damned fools. I have never seen Miss Grainger’s father, and he has never seen me. I am getting sick of the very sight of you about. You persistently follow me up as if you thought that I killed Clevedon. Well, if you do think so, why not arrest me and have done with it. I would sooner face a jury and take my trial than put up with this perpetual persecution.”

“It is your own fault,” I returned equably. “You will tell me nothing, and your whole attitude is a challenge. You kept secret your knowledge of Clevedon’s past, but I found that out. You did not tell me where Tulmin was, but I tracked him down. You have said nothing about Mary Grainger. Then there was Clevedon’s visit to you on the night of his death, and the medicine you handed him which—”

“I never have committed murder,” he cried, turning on me with a savage intensity which betokened the inward strain, “but I am nearer to it at this moment than I ever thought I should be. If I stay here I shan’t be able to trust myself. I—”

He left me abruptly, and vaulting a low rubble wall, made off at a quick pace across some fields which gave him a short cut to White Towers.

But in something under two hours he had joined me at Stone Hollow.

“I apologise,” he said, as he strode into my study. “I apologise for everything I said. You were right, and I was a fool. You told me that Grainger had accused me of murdering Clevedon. Well, now he has written to Billy—”

“About the murder?” I asked.

“No, damn the murder—something a lot worse than that,” he responded. “He accuses me of bigamy—says I have a wife living. It’s got to be sorted out now—because of Kitty—and I’ve come to you.”

He took a fragment of paper from his pocket.

“There’s a copy of the infernal thing,” he said. “Read it.”

The letter was terse, and to the point.

> *“Sir,*
>
> *“Mr. Ronald Thoyne, who, I understand, is engaged to marry Miss Kitty Clevedon, has been guilty of bigamy. He may have a wife now living, but I cannot say that for certain. All I know is that he married my daughter under false pretences, and then, when he had tired of her, told her he had a wife living in America. He is keeping her child—his child. I advise you to institute careful inquiries into these statements, which you will find can easily be substantiated. The child is being cared for by some people named Greentree, who live at Long Burminster, and Mr. Thoyne is contributing two pounds a week for her maintenance.*

"Yours truly,
"Robert Grainger."

"Well," Thoyne demanded, "and what do you think of it?"

"It is true about the child and the two pounds a week?"

"Yes."

"And the other?"

"No."

"Does anyone know the real story?"

"Yes, Nora Lepley knows all about it. She is at White Towers now. I want you to come back with me and straighten it out. Then we will see Grainger together. It has got to be cleared up now."

"Yes," I replied. "I'll come. And, Thoyne, did you ever suffer from sleeplessness?"

"What the devil has that to do—?"

"Perhaps nothing, but did you?"

"Yes—at intervals. It is a legacy from the war, a result of being gassed. Perhaps for a fortnight I may not be able to sleep, and then it passes, and I am all right for months."

"Do you take anything?"

"Not if I can manage without. I have a horror of drugs. But occasionally a dose of Pemberton's Drops—"

"Have you any by you now?"

“No, I gave the last bottle to Clevedon. He looked rotten, and, I think, felt worse even than he looked. I hated the fellow, but I couldn’t help pitying him.”

“He called on you earlier on the night of the—”

“Yes, he did.”

“And that was when you gave him the bottle of Pemberton’s Drops?”

“Yes, what of it?”

“Nothing. Let us get on to White Towers, and have a word with Nora Lepley.”

But on our way I called at the post office and had a long conversation on the telephone with Detective Pepster.

CHAPTER XXV
THE STORY OF MARY GRAINGER

AT White Towers we found the family party assembled, apparently awaiting our coming, though old Lady Clevedon, grim, forbidding and unbelieving, flung up her hands as I approached.

"And what may you be doing here, Mr. Detective?" she said. "This is a family council, and strangers—besides, what have you to do with this? It is the other mystery you are engaged on, and you might as well not have been, for all the good it has done."

"It is all right," Billy Clevedon interposed, a little brusquely. "Holt is here at my suggestion."

"If we might all sit down—" I began.

"Do you know who killed Sir Philip Clevedon?" the old lady demanded.

"Yes," I said, "I do know who killed Sir Philip Clevedon, and before this evening is out I shall probably tell you."

"Has this—this other business anything to do with it?" the old lady asked.

"Everything to do with it," I replied. "But, now, let us straighten this out first. I will tell you what I know as fact, and Thoyne can supply any embroidery that may be necessary. In the first place, Miss Grainger—that is Robert Grainger's daughter—and Thoyne

were in the hospital at Bristol at the same time. They left within a few days of each other, Thoyne first and the girl a day or two later. That is fact. Then comes a long interval. When next Mary Grainger is seen she is living in Long Burminster with her baby girl. Whether Thoyne was actually keeping her then, I don't know, but after her death he paid her debt to her landlady and all the funeral expenses, and since then he has paid two pounds a week for the child."

"Not much if she is his daughter," the old lady interposed bitingly.

"But a good deal if she isn't," I retorted.

"You mean you think she is."

"I don't mean anything except what I have told you, I deal only in facts."

"But why should he keep a baby girl if she isn't his daughter?"

"If that is a conundrum—"

"It isn't."

"Then if it is a suspicion—"

"It isn't—it is merely a question."

"Good! Then Thoyne himself will, sooner or later, supply the answer. But I have not finished my record yet. Just before she died, Mary Grainger wrote to her father, telling him she had secretly married an American soldier, who was in hospital in Bristol, only to find later that he had already a wife—"

"Ronald Thoyne is an American," old Lady Clevedon muttered.

“I have heard so,” I rejoined. “But that is the story. Those are the ascertained facts. It is Thoyne’s turn now.”

“But before he says anything,” Kitty Clevedon interposed suddenly, “I want to tell you all that I don’t believe a word of it.”

“The detective man said they were *facts*,” the old lady remarked dryly.

“Perhaps,” Kitty retorted, flushing hotly.

“I don’t remember that there was any perhaps about it,” old Lady Clevedon replied.

“The story, as far as Holt has told it, is perfectly true,” Thoyne said slowly. “But now there is one other person who knows the whole truth, and I want you to ask her.”

“Her! Who?” Lady Clevedon demanded.

“Nora Lepley.”

“Nora—Lepley, but—”

“She was a V.A.D. in the hospital where Miss Grainger was a nurse,” I interposed. “Yes, she may know—if we could send for her—”

“She is in the house now,” the younger Lady Clevedon chimed in, speaking for the first time. “I will ring for her.”

Nora came, and I handed her a chair. For a moment she hesitated, then sat down with a glance round the semicircle of perhaps not very friendly faces. I sat back watching the girl closely.

“Now then, Mr. Detective, ask her what you want to know,” old Lady Clevedon rasped. “Oh, yes, it’s your job. You’ve got to fill in your interval, you know.”

I glanced at Thoyne, who nodded affirmatively, and then I turned to Nora Lepley.

“You served as a V.A.D. in a hospital in Bristol,” I said. “Mary Grainger was there as a nurse. Then Mr. Thoyne came in as a patient. You remember all that?”

“Yes—what of it?”

“You were there when Mary left, and—”

“No, I wasn’t. I had come home. I turned up ill and they sent me home.”

“Then you were not at Bristol when Miss Grainger ran away with Mr. Thoyne and—”

“Ran away!” she cried. “With Mr. Thoyne!”

She sat straight up in her chair and laughed in my face.

“Mary didn’t run away,” she went on. “She was married. I was there as her bridesmaid. I met them in London specially for it, and Mr. Thoyne was there, too, as best man. She married an American named Blewshaw. He was a patient in the hospital, like Mr. Thoyne. The marriage had to be kept secret because Mr. Blewshaw’s father would object. I didn’t like it, neither did Mr. Thoyne. He told me so. But it was Mary’s business, not ours, and she had agreed. They took a flat in London—oh, I know what you mean. When she died, Mr. Thoyne was paying for her, and he has kept her baby since. But that was because he had introduced

Blewshaw to her, and Blewshaw had let her down. He thought he was in some sort of way responsible. I didn't see it myself but he did. Blewshaw went off to America, and she followed him, only to find that he had a wife there already. When she discovered that she came back to England—she wouldn't touch the money Blewshaw offered her—and tried to earn her living. But she didn't tell anyone, not me, not her father. Mr. Thoyne found her just as she was almost at her last gasp, and he looked after her. Her father would have nothing to do with her nor with her baby. Mr. Thoyne found her quite accidentally, and he told me about her. I went down to Long Burminster to see her. That is the whole story."

"Thoyne comes well out of it, anyway," I said cheerfully.

Kitty went to him and kissed him, and I think with very little provocation would have kissed me too. She had loyally asserted her belief in him, and possibly had actually persuaded herself that it was genuine. But it was easy to see that she was enormously relieved when she heard Nora Lepley's corroboration. After all, Mary Grainger had been a very pretty girl, and Thoyne was only a man.

When Nora had gone, Thoyne told us Mary Grainger's story in more detail, though I can summarise it here in a few lines. It was just as she had recounted it to him, with annotations where necessary, from Mr. and Mrs. Job Greentree. Mary found work at first in Liverpool, where she landed on her return to England, and then, when that failed her, she left her baby with the people with whom she had been lodging, and set out to walk to London, a mad project, as it seemed, though she did better than one might expect.

Many helped her on the way, and eventually she reached a little Midlands village, still over sixty miles from her destination. It had grown dark, and was raining heavily; and as she stood in the shadow, gazing rather longingly at a warmly lighted inn, the door of which stood invitingly open, revealing an interior that seemed to be all bright reds and warm browns, and which, at all events, promised shelter, a heavy motor-van, on the sides and back of which was painted, in big, white letters, "Job Greentree, Carrier," drew up, and from it descended a big man muffled in enormous coats, and sporting a huge beard. He lifted three or four parcels from the interior of the van, and strode into the inn, leaving the door of the vehicle a few inches open.

Mary crept forward. Here, at all events, was shelter and a means of covering a few more miles. That it might be going in an opposite direction did not occur to her. She clambered easily into the car, and, creeping into the shadows at the far end, lay down on something soft, warm, and comfortable, though whether sacks or rugs, she did not know. What happened thereafter was a total blank to her. She lapsed straightway into a stupor that was more unconsciousness than sleep, and lay thus, oblivious to everything.

When she came to herself she was seated, swathed in blankets, before a wood fire that roared and crackled half-way up the chimney of an old-fashioned grate, while, bending over her, with a mug of steaming brandy in one hand and a spoon in the other, was the motherly, anxious face of a woman.

The carrier—he combined the office with those of village wheelwright, blacksmith and undertaker, and was known far and wide as Job—had drawn up with a rattle at the door of the cottage

that stood alongside the smithy, had dismounted and lumbered round to the back of his van.

“By gum!” he said slowly. “That’s a rum un—it is an’ all.”

The door of the cottage was open, sending a shaft of warm light across the roadway.

“Hallo! hallo! Mother, come here and look at this,” the big man shouted.

The woman standing in the porch caught a wrap from one of the hooks behind the door and flung it over her head, then went to the car, where her husband stood with the light of his electric lantern blazing upon Mary, who lay wet through and motionless from utter weariness and exhaustion.

“A girl! Who is she, Job?” the woman asked.

“I don’t know,” the bearded man replied. “I never saw her before. I wonder where she got in.”

“Well, pick her up and bring her through,” the woman said. “She can’t lie there—she’s terrible wet, poor dear!”

The bearded man stooped down, and, lifting Mary as if she had been a doll, strode with her into the house and placed her in an easy chair before a roaring fire in the warm, well-lighted kitchen, and there she lay, with the water dripping from her skirts and forming tiny rills on the hitherto spotless floor.

“Poor dear, she’s worn out!” the woman said. “Now you go and look after your van, and I’ll see to her. It’s bed she wants, and something hot to drink. You keep out of the way for a bit, and I’ll get those clothes off her and some warm blankets round her.”

She ran bustling upstairs, returning in a minute or two with an armful of blankets and some big towels. In three or four minutes she had Mary stripped and then, after a vigorous rubbing, wrapped her in half a dozen blankets, until there was nothing visible save a small, white face peering out from what looked like a bale of woollen goods in a furniture store.

But the exposure and suffering had had their effect, and Mary fell into an illness from which she emerged—it was a surprise to those who nursed and tended her that she came out at all—but a wreck of her former self, with her mind a confused tangle, and her memory gone.

Physically, she made a little, very slow progress, but mentally, she seemed to be at a standstill. And thus it was that Ronald Thoyne found her.

She was seated on the long, wooden bench that flanked the porch of the cottage, when a motor-car drew up suddenly, and Thoyne, leaping therefrom, came towards her with long strides.

“Mary!” he cried. “Is it really yourself, Mary?”

For a moment or two the girl’s brows were knit in a puzzled frown, and then she shook her head. A woman came running from the cottage and laid a hand on his arm.

“Do you know her?” she asked.

In a few, rather incoherent sentences, she told him the story of Mary’s arrival and of her subsequent illness. But she had hardly finished her story—had not, in fact, completed it—when Mary almost sprang at her, shaking her roughly by the arm.

“My baby!” she cried. “Where is my baby?”

They soothed her gradually and when they had heard her story Thoyne took her to Liverpool himself, where they found the child safe and well cared for, a matter on which those responsible had good cause to congratulate themselves when they received Thoyne’s very handsome present. Thoyne took Mary back to the home of the carrier and his wife and there the girl remained until she died.

“And that,” Thoyne concluded, “is the whole story, which I never intended to tell, never should have told, but for the suspicions that seem to have arisen out of it.”

“You were a fool,” Lady Clevedon the elder said tartly. “You had better have told me or Kitty all about it and left it to us. We would have looked after the baby.”

CHAPTER XXVI
NORA LEPLEY'S EXPLANATION

"AND now," Lady Clevedon said, "who was it killed Sir Philip? You promised to tell us, you know."

"I will," I responded, "but I am not yet quite ready."

"No, but dinner is," the younger Lady Clevedon interrupted. "Suppose we have that first."

"And after that," I added, "I should like to see Nora Lepley again, but alone this time."

"That is easily arranged," was the reply. "She is staying in the house to-night. But dinner first. Are you really going, though, to tell us—?"

"I have every hope of it," I responded and there I left it, though during dinner I was subjected to a sort of oblique catechism, chiefly by the two ladies, which I parried as best I could. Not that they addressed many questions directly to me but their conversation, ostensibly between themselves, really amounted to that.

My interview with Nora Lepley took place in the study, the room wherein Sir Philip Clevedon had been found dead, though I don't think Lady Billy had any particular thought in mind when she sent us there; it merely happened to be convenient. I was not sorry the room had been chosen, though it had not occurred to me to suggest it.

“Now sit down, Miss Lepley,” I said, “and let us talk. But first of all I want you to understand that I mean you no harm if you are frank with me.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she responded a little sullenly, giving me a flashing glance from her black eyes that was at least three parts anger. “What harm could you do me? I am not afraid of you. This is the second time you have wanted me. Didn’t you believe me? Is it about Mary again?”

“No,” I replied, “it is about yourself this time. Did you know that some time ago the police took out a warrant for your arrest?”

“Arrest!”—she sat back in her chair and regarded me smilingly—“Why should they want to arrest me?”

If Nora Lepley was in any way afraid of me or even unusually disturbed she did not show it. Her dark eyes, full of slumbrous fires and undefined passions, regarded me frankly, and a queer, rather mocking smile hovered about her finely modelled lips. She was beautiful in an unexpected, unusual fashion, but her loveliness lacked softness and charm, at least that was my reading of it. She might fascinate or infatuate many men but few of them would love her.

There was not the faintest sign or touch of weakness about her and one could hardly imagine her reduced to tears. Whatever the trouble she was facing, she would fight to the end. One could only try to entrap her with the odds rather in favour of failure unless one were very well equipped indeed. I had to try it anyway.

“They want to arrest you,” I said, speaking carelessly, though I was watching her closely, “for the murder of Sir Philip Clevedon.”

“Sir Philip Clevedon! Murder!” she cried. “Oh, but I had nothing to do with that.”

“You stabbed him with a hatpin.”

“But he was dead before—I mean—I don’t know anything about it—I don’t know what you mean.”

“How did you know he was dead when you stabbed him?” I asked.

“I—but I didn’t stab him—I know nothing about it—I never saw the hatpin—I never had one like it.”

“Sometimes,” I went on remorselessly, “the police do not tell all they know. Sir Philip Clevedon was murdered with a hatpin—just so. But we mustn’t say that. Let us suppose he died of poison and that will throw the real murderer of her guard. Or suppose he had taken poison and was still living when you stabbed him. If a doctor had been promptly brought he might have been saved. Or he may have been dying and you merely finished him. How you would stand then, legally, I mean, I am not quite sure. An interesting query would arise over which the lawyers would waste many words. Did he die from poison or from the hatpin? Either would have been sufficient, but which was first—hatpin or poison? You see, Miss Lepley, the case is not simple. If the police arrest you it may not be easy for you to wriggle out.”

“But I tell you I know nothing of it!” she cried, her voice rising a little.

“Well,” I went on, “let me tell you one or two things I have learned, one or two facts, just to refresh your memory. In France, you know, the reconstruction of a crime is part of their criminal procedure. It is not often adopted in this country—no, sit down, please—but it

may be useful now. I think you must hear me out—for your own sake and your parents'—"

"Leave my parents out of it," she cried, her face reddening violently.

"Unfortunately, we can't do that," I rejoined equably. "What affects you touches them, also. You cannot separate yourself from them. But we won't quarrel over that. Let us go back to the morning of February 24th, when you discovered Sir Philip's body—"

"He was dead when I saw him," she said, "and I know nothing of—"

"You went through your aunt's sitting-room," I continued, as if I had not heard her, "and you noticed the hatpin which Miss Clevedon had left there the previous night. You recognised it and picked it up."

"I don't know what you are talking about," she muttered sullenly.

"It was in your hand when you entered the study and saw Sir Philip asleep on the—"

"He was dead, I tell you dead!" she cried shrilly.

"Well, perhaps—you say so, anyway. You went up to the couch and plunged the hatpin into his body in such a way that had he been asleep, it would have killed him."

"He was dead," she repeated.

"Before you stabbed him with the hatpin?" I inquired softly.

“I didn’t—I know nothing of the hatpin—I don’t know what you mean.”

The words came out a little incoherently. Even her finely balanced nerves were becoming a little jangled. For the moment I thought she was on the verge of collapse. But she pulled herself together again, and sat facing me rigidly alert.

“Then you looked round you. On a little table by Sir Philip’s side was a small bottle. Your first thought was that Sir Philip had poisoned himself—”

“I knew he had,” she interrupted.

“You mean it was suicide?”

“Of course it was suicide.”

“Then why did you stab him?”

“I did not.”

“And more important still”—I slowed down very perceptibly here—“why did you carry away the bottle and hide it in a small opening in the rock wall of the passage beneath the ruined wing?”

Her face whitened a little, but she did not lose her self-control, and sat resolutely facing me.

“You wanted the world to believe that Sir Philip Clevedon had been stabbed to death. Why?”

She faced me unflinchingly—determined, as I could see, not to utter a word.

“Why did you want the world to believe that Sir Philip Clevedon had been stabbed to death?”

She did not move so much as an eyelid.

“Was it in order that suspicion might be cast on Miss Kitty, who had been wearing that hatpin?”

She rose from her seat and passed her left hand with a gesture of utter weariness across her forehead.

“Send for your policeman,” she said, “and let me be arrested. You have no right to torture me. I would sooner go to prison. I would rather be hanged than listen to you any longer.”

I stood up, too, and going towards her, laid a hand on her arm.

“I have not willingly tortured you,” I said gently, “but I had to learn the truth.”

“I have denied everything,” she replied. “I admit nothing.”

“You have denied everything—and admitted everything,” I said.

“What do you mean by that?” she demanded.

“Tell me,” I said softly, “what made you think that Ronald Thoyne had killed Clevedon? You were quite wrong, you know.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes, he had nothing to do with it.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing at all—in the way you mean.”

“But—”

“I know what I am saying—nothing at all.”

“Is that—?”

“It is the absolute truth.”

There came an interruption in the form of a low knocking at the door, followed by the entry of Detective Pepster.

“Well?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said grimly, “both well and bad. I was too late.”

He handed me a document he had been carrying in his hand.

“Grainger’s confession,” he said.

“Grainger!” Nora Lepley cried, springing forward as if with intent to seize the paper. “What do you mean by that? And where is Mr. Grainger?”

“Dead,” Pepster returned laconically. “A dose of the medicine he gave Clevedon. Dead in his own office, and with this paper left on the table.”

“Sit down,” I said, turning to Nora Lepley, “and listen. This will interest you.”

I read aloud what Grainger had written, and after that we had no difficulty in persuading the girl to talk.

CHAPTER XXVII
WHO KILLED PHILIP CLEVEDON

IT has fallen to my lot to outline the solution of a good many mysteries, but never did I have a more appreciative or attentive or admiring audience than on this particular occasion. To them I was a wonder-worker, who had straightened out what looked like a hopeless tangle. I made no attempt to undeceive them. It wasn't worth while, and it would have taken too long. But the reader who has followed my detailed recital will know how I really blundered through, how often I pursued false clues, the many side-issues that misled me, and the patient, methodical and, on the whole, not very exciting linking together of ascertained facts, which eventually conducted me to the goal I sought. That is how all detective work that is worth anything is done. The result may seen brilliant taken by itself, but in detail it is a curious mixture of luck and chance, with some amount of common sense, and a little of what is generally labelled intuition.

"And have you really discovered who killed Clevedon?" Thoyne asked.

"Yes," I returned equably, "you did."

"I expected that," Thoyne rejoined, with a wry smile. "I think you have suspected me all along. I seem to have been the villain of the piece all through."

“No,” I replied, “you do me an injustice. You were only one among half a dozen. Let me tell you the story. It is very simple, and a few words will encompass it. Grainger hated you because of his daughter, and when you ordered that sleeping mixture from him he filled the phial with prussic acid. His intention was to kill you. That Clevedon was his victim was only an accident. Clevedon called on you earlier on the night on which he died, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but I don’t know how you discovered it. I let Clevedon in myself, and not a soul saw us.”

“But it is a fact.”

“Oh yes, quite. He came to see me to tell me he had resigned any pretensions to marry”—he paused and glanced a little waveringly at Kitty Clevedon—“to the young lady we both wanted. We were friendly enough in a way.”

“You did not disclose this visit at the inquest?”

“No, the question was never asked, and I kept quiet, for fear I might say too much. I don’t regret it,” he added fiercely.

“It has worked out all right,” I replied, “though it gave me a lot of extra trouble and delayed my solution. However, you conducted your visitor to the door and stood for a few minutes in the porch, chatting to him. You were to be relatives by marriage, and had no particular desire to quarrel. You were willing to forget that he had been Calcott—”

“Calcott!” cried old Lady Clevedon, “who’s he?”

“A long story,” I returned smilingly. “Thoyne will tell you all about it some day. It has no bearing on this case. But in the course

of conversation"—I had turned to Thoyne again—"he told you that he suffered from sleeplessness, to which you replied that you had occasionally done so since you had been wounded and shell-shocked in the war, but that you had found a very useful medicine, which you advised him to try. You had got a new bottle untouched, and you offered to make him a present of it."

"Quite right."

"Then there you have the story—that is how Sir Philip Clevedon died. He took the poison Grainger had intended for you."

"What an escape!" Thoyne muttered, a little hoarsely.

"And the hatpin?" old Lady Clevedon queried sharply. "Was that an accident, also?"

"Hardly," I replied, "but that is another story, and a very curious one, too."

I had reached the most difficult part of my explanation. I had to render it intelligible, without betraying Nora Lepley's secret, which I had surprised. To put it as briefly as possible, she had thrust the hatpin through the heart of the dead man in the hope of diverting suspicion from Ronald Thoyne, whom she believed to be responsible for Sir Philip Clevedon's death.

"As I had passed through my aunt's sitting-room," she had told me, "I saw the hatpin lying there on the mantelpiece, and I picked it up, intending to return it to Miss Kitty. It was in my hand when I entered Sir Philip's study and found him dead. I knew he had been poisoned, because there was prussic acid in the bottle on the table."

She explained to me when I questioned her that she had spent much time with her friend, Mary Grainger, in the shop, and was familiar with all sorts of drugs.

"On the floor," she went on, "was a white paper, and when I picked it up I found on it some pencil marks I had made myself. I had been into Midlington and had called on Mr. Grainger, who asked me if I would deliver a packet at Mr. Thoyne's house, as he had no other means of sending it. Of course, I said I would. At the station I looked up some trains on the time-table, and having no other paper with me, I noted them in pencil on the back of the little packet Mr. Grainger had given me."

So was explained the mysterious figures on the paper I had found in Nora Lepley's curious hiding-place. I regarded her thoughtfully for a moment or two.

"You had delivered that packet at Mr. Thoyne's house?"

"Oh, yes."

"You thought Mr. Thoyne had passed it on to Sir Philip."

"That's what I thought—yes."

"That he had procured some prussic acid from Mr. Grainger, so that he might murder Sir Philip?"

"Yes—and then it occurred to me—that if Sir Philip—that perhaps they might think he had been stabbed if—if the hatpin was found."

"You did it to protect Thoyne?"

That she had been in love with Thoyne seemed evident; that she would never confess as much was equally obvious; and I had no

desire to force her confidence. The fact was sufficient for me; the motive I was content to leave in doubt, or at least, unexpressed. That was the difficulty I had in telling my story to my little audience. I was determined they should not draw the inference I had found inevitable.

“The story of the hatpin,” I said, “is very curious, but quite simple. Nora Lepley, when she found Sir Philip dead, recognised the bottle as one she had found in Grainger’s shop. She had known Mr. Grainger for many years, and had been his daughter’s bosom friend. She jumped to the conclusion that Grainger had poisoned Sir Philip, and it was in the hope of diverting suspicion from him that she took away and hid the bottle and—er—used the hatpin. There is the whole story.”

“But suppose somebody had been involved—Kitty, for example, or Ronald—would she have spoken?” the younger Lady Clevedon demanded.

“Undoubtedly,” I replied.

But I spoke without knowledge, because that was a question I had carefully refrained from putting to Nora herself. My own impression was that she would cheerfully have seen the whole Clevedon family hanging in company if that would have secured Ronald Thoyne’s immunity. But I did not tell them that.

THE END

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