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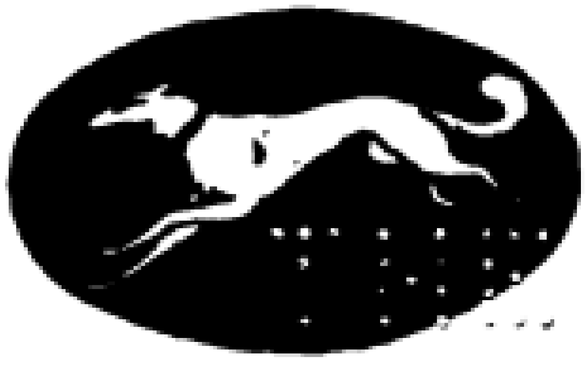

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CHAPTER I

BLACKMAIL

Half way along the north side of the main street of Highmarket an ancient stone gateway, imposing enough to suggest that it was originally the entrance to some castellated mansion or manor house, gave access to a square yard, flanked about by equally ancient buildings. What those buildings had been used for in other days was not obvious to the casual and careless observer, but to the least observant their present use was obvious enough. Here were piles of timber from Norway; there were stacks of slate from Wales; here was marble from Aberdeen, and there cement from Portland: the old chambers of the grey buildings were filled to overflowing with all the things that go towards making a house—ironwork, zinc, lead, tiles, great coils of piping, stores of domestic appliances. And on a shining brass plate, set into the wall, just within the gateway, were deeply engraven the words: *Mallalieu and Cotherstone, Builders and Contractors.*

Whoever had walked into Mallalieu & Cotherstone's yard one October afternoon a few years ago would have seen Mallalieu and Cotherstone in person. The two partners had come out of their office and gone down the yard to inspect half a dozen new carts, just finished, and now drawn up in all the glory of fresh paint. Mallalieu had designed those carts him-

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self, and he was now pointing out their advantages to Cotherstone, who was more concerned with the book-keeping and letter-writing side of the business than with its actual work. He was a big, fleshy man, Mallalieu, midway between fifty and sixty, of a large, solemn, well-satisfied countenance, small, sly eyes, and an expression of steady watchfulness; his attire was always of the eminently respectable sort, his linen fresh and glossy; the thick gold chain across his ample front, and the silk hat which he invariably wore, gave him an unmistakable air of prosperity. He stood now, the silk hat cocked a little to one side, one hand hand under the tail of his broadcloth coat, a pudgy finger of the other pointing to some new feature of the mechanism of the new carts, and he looked the personification of self-satisfaction and smug content.

"All done in one action, d'ye see, Cotherstone?" he was saying. "One pull at that pin releases the entire load. We'd really ought to have a patent for that idea."

Cotherstone went nearer the cart which they were examining. He was a good deal of a contrast to his partner—a slightly built, wiry man, nervous and quick of movement; although he was Mallalieu's junior he looked older, and the thin hair at his temples was already whitening. Mallalieu suggested solidity and almost bovine sleekness; in Cotherstone, activity of speech and gesture was marked well-nigh to an appearance of habitual anxiety. He stepped about the cart with the quick action of an inquisitive bird or animal examining something which it has never seen before.

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"Yes, yes, yes!" he answered. "Yes, that's a good idea. But if it's to be patented, you know, we ought to see to it at once, before these carts go into use."

"Why, there's nobody in Highmarket like to rob us," observed Mallalieu, good-humouredly. "You might consider about getting—what do they call it?—provisional protection?—for it."

"I'll look it up," responded Cotherstone. "It's worth that, anyhow."

"Do," said Mallalieu. He pulled out the big gold watch which hung from the end of his cable chain and glanced at its jewelled dial. "Dear me!" he exclaimed. "Four o'clock—I've a meeting in the Mayor's parlour at ten past. But I'll look in again before going home."

He hurried away towards the entrance gate, and Cotherstone, after ruminative inspection of the new carts, glanced at some papers in his hand and went over to a consignment of goods which required checking. He was carefully ticking them off on a list when a clerk came down the yard.

"Mr. Kitely called to pay his rent, sir," he announced. "He asked to see you yourself."

"Twenty-five—six—seven," counted Cotherstone. "Take him into the private office, Stoner," he answered. "I'll be there in a minute."

He continued his checking until it was finished, entered the figures on his list, and went briskly back to the counting-house near the gateway. There he bustled into a room kept sacred to himself and Mallalieu, with a cheery greeting to his visitor—an elderly

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man who had recently rented from him a small house on the outskirts of the town.

"Afternoon, Mr. Kitely," he said. "Glad to see you, sir—always glad to see anybody with a bit of money, eh? Take a chair, sir—I hope you're satisfied with the little place, Mr. Kitely?"

The visitor took the offered elbow-chair, folded his hands on the top of his old-fashioned walking-cane, and glanced at his landlord with a half-humorous, half-quizzical expression. He was an elderly, clean-shaven, grey-haired man, spare of figure, dressed in rusty black; a wisp of white neckcloth at his throat gave him something of a clerical appearance: Cotherstone, who knew next to nothing about him, except that he was able to pay his rent and taxes, had already set him down as a retired verger of some cathedral.

"I should think you and Mr. Mallalieu are in no need of a bit of money, Mr. Cotherstone," he said quietly. "Business seems to be good with you, sir."

"Oh, so-so," replied Cotherstone, off-handedly. "Naught to complain of, of course. I'll give you a receipt, Mr. Kitely," he went on, seating himself at his desk and taking up a book of forms. "Let's see—twenty-five pounds a year is six pound five a quarter—there you are, sir. Will you have a drop of whisky?"

Kitely laid a handful of gold and silver on the desk, took the receipt, and nodded his head, still watching Cotherstone with the same half-humorous expression.

"Thank you," he said. "I shouldn't mind."

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He watched Cotherstone produce a decanter and glasses, watched him fetch fresh water from a filter in the corner of the room, watched him mix the drinks, and took his own with no more than a polite nod of thanks. And Cotherstone, murmuring an expression of good wishes, took a drink himself, and sat down with his desk-chair turned towards his visitor.

"Aught you'd like doing at the house, Mr. Kitely?" he asked.

"No," answered Kitely, "no, I can't say that there is."

There was something odd, almost taciturn, in his manner, and Cotherstone glanced at him a little wonderingly.

"And how do you like Highmarket, now you've had a spell of it?" he inquired. "Got settled down, I suppose, now?"

"It's all that I expected," replied Kitely. "Quiet—peaceful. How do you like it?"

"Me!" exclaimed Cotherstone, surprised. "Me?—why, I've had—yes, five-and-twenty years of it!"

Kitely took another sip from his glass and set it down. He gave Cotherstone a sharp look.

"Yes," he said, "yes—five-and-twenty years. You and your partner, both. Yes—it'll be just about thirty years since I first saw you. But—you've forgotten."

Cotherstone, who had been lounging forward, warming his hands at the fire, suddenly sat straight up in his chair. His face, always sharp seemed to grow

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sharper as he turned to his visitor with a questioning look.

"Since—what?" he demanded.

"Since I first saw you—and Mr. Mallalieu," replied Kitely. "As I say, you've forgotten. But—I haven't."

Cotherstone sat staring at his tenant for a full minute of speechlessness. Then he slowly rose, walked over to the door, looked at it to see that it was closed, and returning to the hearth, fixed his eyes on Kitely.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Just what I say," answered Kitely, with a dry laugh. "It's thirty years since I first saw you and Mallalieu. That's all."

"Where?" demanded Cotherstone.

Kitely motioned his landlord to sit down. And Cotherstone sat down—trembling. His arm shook when Kitely laid a hand on it.

"Do you want to know where?" he asked, bending close to Cotherstone. "I'll tell you. In the dock—at Wilchester Assizes. Eh?"

Cotherstone made no answer. He had put the tips of his fingers together, and now he was tapping the nails of one hand against the nails of the other. And he stared and stared at the face so close to his own—as if it had been the face of a man resurrected from the grave. Within him there was a feeling of extraordinary physical sickness; it was quickly followed by one of inertia, just as extraordinary. He felt as is he had been mesmerized; as if he could neither move nor speak. And Kitely sat there, a hand on his vic-

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tim's arm, his face sinister and purposeful, close to his.

"Fact!" he murmured. "Absolute fact! I remember everything. It's come on me bit by bit, though. I thought I knew you when I first came here—then I had a feeling that I knew Mallalieu. And—in time—I remembered—everything! Of course, when I saw you both—where I did see you—you weren't Mallalieu & Cotherstone. You were——"

Cotherstone suddenly made an effort, and shook off the thin fingers which lay on his sleeve. His pale face grew crimson, and the veins swelled on his forehead.

"Confound you!" he said in a low, concentrated voice. "Who are you?"

Kitely shook his head and smiled quietly.

"No need to grow warm," he answered. "Of course, it's excusable in you. Who am I? Well, if you really want to know, I've been employed in the police line for thirty-five years—until lately."

"A detective!" exclaimed Cotherstone.

"Not when I was present at Wilchester—that time," replied Kitely. "But afterwards—in due course. Ah!—do you know, I often was curious as to what became of you both! But I never dreamed of meeting you—here. Of course, you came up North after you'd done your time? Changed your names, started a new life—and here you are! Clever!"

Cotherstone was recovering his wits. He had got out of his chair by that time, and had taken up a

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position on the hearthrug, his back to the fire, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on his visitor. He was thinking—and for the moment he let Kitely talk.

"Yes—clever!" continued Kitely in the same level, subdued tones, "very clever indeed! I suppose you'd carefully planted some of that money you—got hold of? Must have done, of course—you'd want money to start this business. Well, you've done all this on the straight, anyhow. And you've done well, too. Odd, isn't it, that I should come to live down here, right away in the far North of England, and find you in such good circumstances, too! Mr. Mallalieu, Mayor of Highmarket—his second term of office! Mr. Cotherstone, Borough Treasurer of Highmarket—now in his sixth year of that important post! I say again—you've both done uncommonly well—uncommonly!"

"Have you got any more to say?" asked Cotherstone.

But Kitely evidently intended to say what he had to say in his own fashion. He took no notice of Cotherstone's question, and presently, as if he were amusing himself with reminiscences of a long dead past, he spoke again, quietly and slowly.

"Yes," he murmured, "uncommonly well! And of course you'd have capital. Put safely away, of course, while you were doing your time. Let's see—it was a Building Society that you defrauded, wasn't it? Mallalieu was treasurer, and you were secretary. Yes—I remember now. The amount was two thous——"

Cotherstone made a sudden exclamation and a sharp

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movement—both checked by an equally sudden change of attitude and expression on the part of the ex-detective. For Kitely sat straight up and looked the junior partner squarely in the face.

"Better not, Mr. Cotherstone!" he said, with a grin that showed his yellow teeth. "You can't very well choke the life out of me in your own office, can you? You couldn't hide my old carcase as easily as you and Mallalieu hid those Building Society funds, you know. So—be calm! I'm a reasonable man—and getting an old man."

He accompanied the last words with a meaning smile, and Cotherstone took a turn or two about the room, trying to steady himself. And Kitely presently went on again, in the same monotonous tones:

"Think it all out—by all means," he said. "I don't suppose there's a soul in all England but myself knows your secret—and Mallalieu's. It was sheer accident, of course, that I ever discovered it. But—I know! Just consider what I do know. Consider, too, what you stand to lose. There's Mallalieu, so much respected that he's Mayor of this ancient borough for the second time. There's you—so much trusted that you've been Borough Treasurer for years. You can't afford to let me tell the Highmarket folk that you two are ex-convicts! Besides, in your case there's another thing—there's your daughter."

Cotherstone groaned—a deep, unmistakable groan of sheer torture. But Kitely went on remorselessly.

"Your daughter's just about to marry the most promising young man in the place," he said. "A young fellow with a career before him. Do you think

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he'd marry her if he knew that her father—even if it is thirty years ago—had been convicted of——"

"Look you here!" interrupted Cotherstone, through set teeth. "I've had enough! I've asked you once before if you'd any more to say—now I'll put it in another fashion. For I see what you're after—and it's blackmail! How much do you want? Come on—give it a name!"

"Name nothing, till you've told Mallalieu," answered Kitely. "There's no hurry. You two can't, and I shan't, run away. Time enough—I've the whip hand. Tell your partner, the Mayor, all I've told you—then you can put your heads together, and see what you're inclined to do. An annuity, now?—that would suit me."

"You haven't mentioned this to a soul?" asked Cotherstone anxiously.

"Bah!" sneered Kitely. "D'ye think I'm a fool? Not likely. Well—now you know. I'll come in here again tomorrow afternoon. And—you'll both be here, and ready with a proposal."

He picked up his glass, leisurely drank off its remaining contents, and without a word of farewell opened the door and went quietly away.

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CHAPTER II

CRIME—AND SUCCESS

For some moments after Kitely had left him, Cotherstone stood vacantly staring at the chair in which the blackmailer had sat. As yet he could not realize things. He was only filled with a queer, vague amazement about Kitely himself. He began to look back on his relations with Kitely. They were recent—very recent, only of yesterday, as you might say. Kitely had come to him, one day about three months previously, told him that he had come to these parts for a bit of a holiday, taken a fancy to a cottage which he, Cotherstone, had to let, and inquired its rent. He had mentioned, casually, that he had just retired from business, and wanted a quiet place wherein to spend the rest of his days. He had taken the cottage, and given his landlord satisfactory references as to his ability to pay the rent—and Cotherstone, always a busy man, had thought no more about him. Certainly he had never anticipated such an announcement as that which Kitely had just made to him—never dreamed that Kitely had recognized him and Mallalieu as men he had known thirty years ago.

It had been Cotherstone's life-long endeavour to forget all about the event of thirty years ago, and to

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a large extent he had succeeded in dulling his memory. But Kitely had brought it all back—and now everything was fresh to him. His brows knitted and his face grew dark as he thought of one thing in his past of which Kitely had spoken so easily and glibly —the dock. He saw himself in that dock again—and Mallalieu standing by him. They were not called Mallalieu and Cotherstone then, of course. He remembered what their real names were—he remembered, too, that, until a few minutes before, he had certainly not repeated them, even to himself, for many a long year. Oh, yes—he remembered everything—he saw it all again. The case had excited plenty of attention in Wilchester at the time—Wilchester, that for thirty years had been so far away in thought and in actual distance that it might have been some place in the Antipodes. It was not a nice case—even now, looking back upon it from his present standpoint, it made him blush to think of. Two better-class young working-men, charged with embezzling the funds of a building society to which they had acted as treasurer and secretary!—a bad case. The Court had thought it a bad case, and the culprits had been sentenced to two years' imprisonment. And now Cotherstone only remembered that imprisonment as one remembers a particularly bad dream. Yes—it had been real.

His eyes, moody and brooding, suddenly shifted their gaze from the easy chair to his own hands—they were shaking. Mechanically he took up the whisky decanter from his desk, and poured some of its contents into his glass—the rim of the glass tinkled

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against the neck of the decanter. Yes—that had been a shock, right enough, he muttered to himself, and not all the whisky in the world would drive it out of him. But a drink—neat and stiff—would pull his nerves up to pitch, and so he drank, once, twice, and sat down with the glass in his hand—to think still more.

That old Kitely was shrewd—shrewd! He had at once hit on a fact which those Wilchester folk of thirty years ago had never suspected. It had been said at the time that the two offenders had lost the building society's money in gambling and speculation, and there had been grounds for such a belief. But that was not so. Most of the money had been skilfully and carefully put where the two conspirators could lay hands on it as soon as it was wanted, and when the term of imprisonment was over they had nothing to do but take possession of it for their own purposes. They had engineered everything very well—Cotherstone's essentially constructive mind, regarding their doings from the vantage ground of thirty years' difference, acknowledged that they had been cute, crafty, and cautious to an admirable degree of perfection. Quietly and unobtrusively they had completely disappeared from their own district in the extreme South of England, when their punishment was over. They had let it get abroad that they were going to another continent, to retrieve the past and start a new life; it was even known that they repaired to Liverpool, to take ship for America. But in Liverpool they had shuffled off everything of the past—names, relations, antecedents. There was no

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reason why any one should watch them out of the country, but they had adopted precautions against such watching. They separated, disappeared, met again in the far North, in a sparsely-populated, lonely country of hill and dale, led there by an advertisement which they had seen in a local newspaper, met with by sheer chance in a Liverpool hotel. There was an old-established business to sell as a going concern, in the dale town of Highmarket: the two ex-convicts bought it. From that time they were Anthony Mallalieu and Milford Cotherstone, and the past was dead.

During the thirty years in which that past had been dead, Cotherstone had often heard men remark that this world of ours is a very small one, and he had secretly laughed at them. To him and to his partner the world had been wide and big enough. They were now four hundred miles away from the scene of their crime. There was nothing whatever to bring Wilchester people into that northern country, nothing to take Highmarket folk anywhere near Wilchester Neither he nor Mallalieu ever went far afield—London they avoided with particular care, lest they should meet any one there who had known them in the old days. They had stopped at home, and minded their business, year in and year out. Naturally, they had prospered. They had speedily become known as hard-working young men; then as good employers of labour; finally as men of considerable standing in a town of which there were only some five thousand inhabitants. They had been invited to join in public matters—Mallalieu had gone into the Town Council

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first; Cotherstone had followed him later. They had been as successful in administering the affairs of the little town as in conducting their own, and in time both had attained high honours: Mallalieu was now wearing the mayoral chain for the second time; Cotherstone, as Borough Treasurer, had governed the financial matters of Highmarket for several years. And as he sat there, staring at the red embers of the office fire, he remembered that there were no two men in the whole town who were more trusted and respected than he and his partner—his partner in success . . . and in crime.

But that was not all. Both men had married within a few years of their coming to Highmarket. They had married young women of good standing in the neighbourhood; it was perhaps well, reflected Cotherstone, that their wives were dead, and that Mallalieu had never been blessed with children. But Cotherstone had a daughter, of whom he was as fond as he was proud; for her he had toiled and contrived, always intending her to be a rich woman. He had seen to it that she was well educated; he had even allowed himself to be deprived of her company for two years while she went to an expensive school, far away; since she had grown up, he had surrounded her with every comfort. And now, as Kitely had reminded him, she was engaged to be married to the most promising young man in Highmarket, Windle Bent, a rich manufacturer, who had succeeded to and greatly developed a fine business, who had already made his mark on the Town Council, and was known to cherish Parliamentary ambitions. Everybody

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knew that Bent had a big career before him; he had all the necessary gifts; all the proper stuff in him for such a career. He would succeed; he would probably win a title for himself—a baronetcy, perhaps a peerage. This was just the marriage which Cotherstone desired for Lettie; he would die more than happy if he could once hear her called Your Ladyship. And now here was—this!

Cotherstone sat there a long time, thinking, reflecting, reckoning up things. The dusk had come; the darkness followed; he made no movement towards the gas bracket. Nothing mattered but his trouble. That must be dealt with. At all costs, Kitely's silence must be purchased—aye, even if it cost him and Mallalieu one-half of what they had. And, of course, Mallalieu must be told—at once.

A tap of somebody's knuckles on the door of the pivate room roused him at last, and he sprang up and seized a box of matches as he bade the person without to enter. The clerk came in, carrying a sheaf of papers, and Cotherstone bustled to the gas.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I've dropped off into a nod over this warm fire, Stoner. What's that —letters?"

"There's all these letters to sign, Mr. Cotherstone, and these three contracts to go through," answered the clerk. "And there are those specifications to examine, as well."

"Mr. Mallalieu'll have to see those," said Cotherstone. He lighted the gas above his desk, put the decanter and the glasses aside, and took the letters. "I'll sign these, anyhow," he said, "and then you

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can post 'em as you go home. The other papers'll do tomorrow morning.''

The clerk stood slightly behind his master as Cotherstone signed one letter after the other, glancing quickly through each. He was a young man of twenty-two or three, with quick, observant manners, a keen eye, and a not handsome face, and as he stood there the face was bent on Cotherstone with a surmising look. Stoner had noticed his employer's thoughtful attitude, the gloom in which Cotherstone sat, the decanter on the table, the glass in Cotherstone's hand, and he knew that Cotherstone was telling a fib when he said he had been asleep. He noticed, too, the six sovereigns and the two or three silver coins lying on the desk, and he wondered what had made his master so abstracted that he had forgotten to pocket them. For he knew Cotherstone well, and Cotherstone was so particular about money that he never allowed even a penny to lie out of place.

"There!" said Cotherstone, handing back the batch of letters. "You'll be going now, I suppose. Put those in the post. I'm not going just yet, so I'll lock up the office. Leave the outer door open—Mr. Mallalieu's coming back."

He pulled down the blinds of the private room when Stoner had gone, and that done he fell to walking up and own, awaiting his partner. And presently Mallalieu came, smoking a cigar, and evidently in as good humour as usual.

"Oh, you're still here?" he said as he entered. "I—what's up?"

He had come to a sudden halt close to his partner,

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and he now stood staring at him. And Cotherstone, glancing past Mallalieu's broad shoulder at a mirror, saw that he himself had become startlingly pale and haggard. He looked twenty years older than he had looked when he shaved himself that morning.

"Aren't you well?" demanded Mallalieu. "What is it?"

Cotherstone made no answer. He walked past Mallalieu and looked into the outer office. The clerk had gone, and the place was only half-lighted. But Cotherstone closed the door with great care, and when he went back to Mallalieu he sank his voice to a whisper.

"Bad news!" he said. "Bad—bad news!"

"What about?" asked Mallalieu. "Private? Business?"

Cotherstone put his lips almost close to Mallalieu's ear.

"That man Kitely—my new tenant," he whispered. "He's met us—you and me—before!"

Mallalieu's rosy cheeks paled, and he turned sharply on his companion.

"Met—us!" he exclaimed. "Him! Where?—when?"

Cotherstone got his lips still closer.

"Wilchester!" he answered. "Thirty years ago. He—knows!"

Mallalieu dropped into the nearest chair: dropped as if he had been shot. His face, full of colour from the keen air outside, became as pale as his partner's; his jaw fell, his mouth opened; a strained look came into his small eyes.

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"Gad!" he muttered hoarsely. "You—you don't say so!"

"It's a fact," answered Cotherstone. "He knows everything. He's an ex-detective. He was there—that day."

"Tracked us down?" asked Mallalieu. "That it?"

"No," said Cotherstone. "Sheer chance—pure accident. Recognized us—after he came here. Aye—after all these years! Thirty years!"

Mallalieu's eyes, roving about the room, fell on the decanter. He pulled himself out of his chair, found a clean glass, and took a stiff drink. And his partner, watching him, saw that his hands, too, were shaking.

"That's a facer!" said Mallalieu. His voice had grown stronger, and the colour came back to his cheeks. "A real facer! As you say—after thirty years! It's hard—it's blessed hard! And—what does he want? What's he going to do?"

"Wants to blackmail us, of course," replied Cotherstone, with a mirthless laugh. "What else should he do? What could he do? Why, he could tell all Highmarket who we are, and——"

"Aye, aye!—but the thing is here," interrupted Mallalieu.

"Supposing we do square him?—is there any reliance to be placed on him then? It 'ud only be the old game—he'd only want more."

"He said an annuity," remarked Cotherstone, thoughtfully. "And he added significantly, that he was getting an old man."

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"How old?" demanded Mallalieu.

"Between sixty and seventy," said Cotherstone. "I'm under the impression that he could be squared, could be satisfied. He'll have to be! We can't let it get out—I can't, any way. There's my daughter to think of."

"D'ye think I'd let it get out?" asked Mallalieu. "No!—all I'm thinking of is if we really can silence him. I've heard of cases where a man's paid blackmail for years and years, and been no better for it in the end."

"Well—he's coming here tomorrow afternoon some time," said Cotherstone. "We'd better see him—together. After all, a hundred a year—a couple of hundred a year—'ud be better than—exposure."

Mallalieu drank off his whisky and pushed the glass aside.

"I'll consider it," he remarked. "What's certain sure is that he'll have to be quietened. I must go—I've an appointment. Are you coming out?"

"Not yet," replied Cotherstone. "I've all these papers to go through. Well, think it well over. He's a man to be feared."

Mallalieu made no answer. He, like Kitely, went off without a word of farewell, and Cotherstone was once more left alone.

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CHAPTER III

MURDER

When Mallalieu had gone, Cotherstone gathered up the papers which his clerk had brought in, and sitting down at his desk tried to give his attention to them. The effort was not altogether a success. He had hoped that the sharing of the bad news with his partner would bring some relief to him, but his anxieties were still there. He was always seeing that queer, sinister look in Kitely's knowing eyes: it suggested that as long as Kitely lived there would be no safety. Even if Kitely kept his word, kept any compact made with him, he would always have the two partners under his thumb. And for thirty years Cotherstone had been under no man's thumb, and the fear of having a master was hateful to him. He heartily wished that Kitely was dead—dead and buried, and his secret with him; he wished that it had been anywise possible to have crushed the life out of him where he sat in that easy chair as soon as he had shown himself the reptile that he was. A man might kill any poisonous insect, any noxious reptile at pleasure—why not a human blood-sucker like that?

He sat there a long time, striving to give his attention to his papers, and making a poor show of

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it. The figures danced about before him; he could make neither head nor tail of the technicalities in the specifications and estimates; every now and then fits of abstraction came over him, and he sat drumming the tips of his fingers on his blotting-pad, staring vacantly at the shadows in the far depths of the room, and always thinking—thinking of the terrible danger of revelation. And always, as an under-current, he was saying that for himself he cared naught—Kitely could do what he liked, or would have done what he liked, had there only been himself to think for. But—Lettie! All his life was now centred in her, and in her happiness, and Lettie's happiness, he knew, was centred in the man she was going to marry. And Cotherstone, though he believed that he knew men pretty well, was not sure that he knew Windle Bent sufficiently to feel sure that he would endure a stiff test. Bent was ambitious—he was resolved on a career. Was he the sort of man to stand the knowledge which Kitely might give him? For there was always the risk that whatever he and Mallalieu might do, Kitely, while there was breath in him, might split.

A sudden ringing at the bell of the telephone in the outer office made Cotherstone jump in his chair as if the arresting hand of justice had suddenly been laid on him. In spite of himself he rose trembling, and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead as he walked across the room.

"Nerves!" he muttered to himself. "I must be in a queer way to be taken like that. It won't do!—

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especially at this turn. What is it?" he demanded, going to the telephone. "Who is that?"

His daughter's voice, surprised and admonitory, came to him along the wire.

"Is that you, father?" she exclaimed. "What are you doing? Don't you remember you asked Windle, and his friend Mr. Brereton, to supper at eight o'clock. It's a quarter to eight now. Do come home!"

Cotherstone let out an exclamation which signified annoyance. The event of the late afternoon had completely driven it out of his recollection that Windle Bent had an old school-friend, a young barrister from London, staying with him, and that both had been asked to supper that evening at Cotherstone's house. But Cotherstone's annoyance was not because of his own forgetfulness, but because his present abstraction made him dislike the notion of company.

"I'd forgotten—for the moment," he called. "I've been very busy. All right, Lettie—I'm coming on at once. Shan't be long."

But when he had left the telephone he made no haste. He lingered by his desk; he was slow in turning out the gas; slow in quitting and locking up his office; he went slowly away through the town. Nothing could have been further from his wishes than a desire to entertain company that night—and especially a stranger. His footsteps dragged as he passed through the market-place and turned into the outskirts beyond.

Some years previously to this, when they had both married and made money, the two partners had built

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new houses for themselves. Outside Highmarket, on its western boundary, rose a long, low hill called Highmarket Shawl; the slope which overhung the town was thickly covered with fir and pine, amidst which great masses of limestone crag jutted out here and there. At the foot of this hill, certain plots of building land had been sold, and Mallalieu had bought one and Cotherstone another, and on these they had erected two solid stone houses, fitted up with all the latest improvements known to the building trade. Each was proud of his house; each delighted in welcoming friends and acquaintances there—this was the first night Cotherstone could remember on which it was hateful to him to cross his own threshold. The lighted windows, the smell of good things cooked for supper, brought him no sense of satisfaction; he had to make a distinct effort to enter and to present a face of welcome to his two guests, who were already there, awaiting him.

"Couldn't get in earlier," he said, replying to Lettie's half-anxious, half-playful scoldings. "There was some awkward business turned up this evening—and as it is, I shall have to run away for an hour after supper—can't be helped. How do you do, sir?" he went on, giving his hand to the stranger. "Glad to see you in these parts—you'll find this a cold climate after London, I'm afraid."

He took a careful look at Bent's friend as they all sat down to supper—out of sheer habit of inspecting any man who was new to him. And after a glance or two he said to himself that this young limb of the law was a sharp chap—a keen-eyed, alert, no-

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ticeable fellow, whose every action and tone denoted great mental activity. He was sharper than Bent, said Cotherstone, and in his opinion, that was saying a good deal. Bent's ability was on the surface; he was an excellent specimen of the business man of action, who had ideas out of the common but was not so much given to deep and quiet thinking as to prompt doing of things quickly decided on. He glanced from one to the other, mentally comparing them. Bent was a tall, handsome man, blonde, blue-eyed, ready of word and laugh; Brereton, a medium-sized, compact fellow, dark of hair and eye, with an olive complexion that almost suggested foreign origin: the sort, decided Cotherstone, that thought a lot and said little. And forcing himself to talk he tried to draw the stranger out, watching him, too, to see if he admired Lettie. For it was one of Cotherstone's greatest joys in life to bring folk to his house and watch the effect which his pretty daughter had on them, and he was rewarded now in seeing that the young man from London evidently applauded his friend's choice and paid polite tribute to Lettie's charm.

"And what might you have been doing with Mr. Brereton since he got down yesterday?" asked Cotherstone. "Showing him round, of course?"

"I've been tormenting him chiefly with family history," answered Bent, with a laughing glance at his sweetheart. "You didn't know I was raking up everything I could get hold of about my forbears, did you? Oh, I've been busy at that innocent amusement for a month past—old Kitely put me up to it."

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Cotherstone could barely repress an inclination to start in his chair; he himself was not sure that he did not show undue surprise.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Kitely My tenant? What does he know about your family? A stranger!"

"Much more than I do," replied Bent. "The old chap's nothing to do, you know, and since he took up his abode here he's been spending all his time digging up local records—he's a good bit of an antiquary, and that sort of thing. The Town Clerk tells me Kitely's been through nearly all the old town documents—chests full of them! And Kitely told me one day that if I liked he'd trace our pedigree back to I don't know when, and as he seemed keen, I told him to go ahead. He's found out a lot of interesting things in the borough records that I never heard of."

Cotherstone had kept his eyes on his plate while Bent was talking; he spoke now without looking up.

"Oh?" he said, trying to speak unconcernedly. "Ah!—then you'll have been seeing a good deal of Kitely lately?"

"Not so much," replied Bent. "He's brought me the result of his work now and then—things he's copied out of old registers, and so on."

"And what good might it all amount to?" asked Cotherstone, more for the sake of talking than for any interest he felt. "Will it come to aught?"

"Bent wants to trace his family history back to the Conquest," observed Brereton, slyly. "He thinks the original Bent came over with the Conqueror.

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But his old man hasn't got beyond the Tudor period yet.''

"Never mind!" said Bent. "There were Bents in Highmarket in Henry the Seventh's time, anyhow. And if one has a pedigree, why not have it properly searched out? He's a keen old hand at that sort of thing, Kitely. The Town Clerk says he can read some of our borough charters of six hundred years ago as if they were newspaper articles.''

Cotherstone made no remark on that. He was thinking. So Kitely was in close communication with Bent, was he?—constantly seeing him, being employed by him? Well, that cut two ways. It showed that up to now he had taken no advantage of his secret knowledge and might therefore be considered as likely to play straight if he were squared by the two partners. But it also proved that Bent would probably believe anything that Kitely might tell him. Certainly Kitely must be dealt with at once. He knew too much, and was obviously too clever, to be allowed to go about unfettered. Cost what it might, he must be attached to the Mallalieu-Cotherstone interest. And what Cotherstone was concentrating on just then, as he ate and drank, was—how to make that attachment in such a fashion that Kitely would have no option but to keep silence. If only he and Mallalieu could get a hold on Kitely, such as that which he had on them——

"Well," he said as supper came to an end, "I'm sorry, but I'm forced to leave you gentlemen for an hour, at any rate—can't be helped. Lettie, you must try to amuse 'em until I come back. Sing Mr. Brere-

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ton some of your new songs. Bent—you know where the whisky and the cigars are—help yourselves—make yourselves at home."

"You won't be more than an hour, father?" asked Lettie.

"An hour'll finish what I've got to do," replied Cotherstone, "maybe less—I'll be as quick as I can, anyway, my lass."

He hurried off without further ceremony; a moment later and he had exchanged the warmth and brightness of his comfortable dining-room for the chill night and the darkness. And as he turned out of his garden he was thinking still further and harder. So Windle Bent was one of those chaps who have what folk call family pride, was he? Actually proud of the fact that he had a pedigree, and could say who his grandfather and grandmother were?—things on which most people were as hazy as they were indifferent. In that case, if he was really family-proud, all the more reason why Kitely should be made to keep his tongue still. For if Windle Bent was going on the game of making out that he was a man of family, he certainly would not relish the prospect of uniting his ancient blood with that of a man who had seen the inside of a prison. Kitely!—promptly and definitely—and for *good!*—that was the ticket.

Cotherstone went off into the shadows of the night—and a good hour had passed when he returned to his house. It was then ten o'clock; he afterwards remembered that he glanced at the old grandfather clock in his hall when he let himself in. All was very quiet in there; he opened the drawing-room door to

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find the two young men and Lettie sitting over a bright fire, and Brereton evidently telling the other two some story, which he was just bringing to a conclusion.

"... for it's a fact, in criminal practice," Brereton was saying, "that there are no end of undiscovered crimes—there are any amount of guilty men going about free as the air, and——"

"Hope you've been enjoying yourselves," said Cotherstone, going forward to the group. "I've been as quick as I could."

"Mr. Brereton has been telling us most interesting stories about criminals," said Lettie. "Facts—much stranger than fiction!"

"Then I'm sure it's time he'd something to refresh himself with," said Cotherstone hospitably. "Come away, gentlemen, and we'll see if we can't find a drop to drink and a cigar to smoke."

He led the way to the dining-room and busied himself in bringing out some boxes of cigars from a cupboard while Lettie produced decanters and glasses from the sideboard.

"So you're interested in criminal matters, sir?" observed Cotherstone as he offered Brereton a cigar. "Going in for that line, eh?"

"What practice I've had has been in that line," answered Brereton, with a quiet laugh. "One sort of gets pitchforked into these things, you know, so——"

"What's that?" exclaimed Lettie, who was just then handing the young barrister a tumbler of whisky and soda which Bent had mixed for him. "Some-

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body running hurriedly up the drive—as if something had happened! Surely you're not going to be fetched out again, father?"

A loud ringing of the bell prefaced the entrance of some visitor, whose voice was heard in eager conversation with a parlourmaid in the hall.

"That's your neighbour—Mr. Garthwaite," said Bent.

Cotherstone set down the cigars and opened the dining-room door. A youngish, fresh-coloured man, who looked upset and startled, came out of the hall, glancing round him inquiringly.

"Sorry to intrude, Mr. Cotherstone," he said. "I say!—that old gentleman you let the cottage to—Kitely, you know."

"What of him?" demanded Cotherstone sharply.

"He's lying there in the coppice above your house—I stumbled over him coming through there just now," replied Garthwaite. "He—don't be frightened, Miss Cotherstone—he's—well, there's no doubt of it—he's dead! And——"

"And—what?" asked Cotherstone. "What, man? Out with it!"

"And I should say, murdered!" said Garthwaite. "I—yes, I just saw enough to say that. Murdered—without a doubt!"

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CHAPTER IV

THE PINE WOOD

Brereton, standing back in the room, the cigar which Cotherstone had just given him unlighted in one hand, the glass which Lettie had presented to him in the other, was keenly watching the man who had just spoken and the man to whom he spoke. But all his attention was quickly concentrated on Cotherstone. For despite a strong effort to control himself, Cotherstone swayed a little, and instinctively put out a hand and clutched Bent's arm. He paled, too—the sudden spasm of pallor was almost instantly succeeded by a quick flush of colour. He made another effort—and tried to laugh.

"Nonsense, man!" he said thickly and hoarsely. "Murder? Who should want to kill an old chap like that? It's—here, give me a drink, one of you—that's—a bit startling!"

Bent seized a tumbler which he himself had just mixed, and Cotherstone gulped off half its contents. He looked round apologetically.

"I—I think I'm not as strong as I was," he muttered. "Overwork, likely—I've been a bit shaky of late. A shock like that——"

"I'm sorry," said Garthwaite, who looked sur-

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prised at the effect of his news. "I ought to have known better. But you see, yours is the nearest house——"

"Quite right, my lad, quite right," exclaimed Cotherstone. "You did the right thing. Here!—we'd better go up. Have you called the police?"

"I sent the man from the cottage at the foot of your garden," answered Garthwaite. "He was just locking up as I passed, so I told him, and sent him off."

"We'll go," said Cotherstone. He looked round at his guests. "You'll come?" he asked.

"Don't you go, father," urged Lettie, "if you're not feeling well."

"I'm all right," insisted Cotherstone. "A mere bit of weakness—that's all. Now that I know what's to be faced—" he twisted suddenly on Garthwaite—"what makes you think it's murder?" he demanded. "Murder! That's a big word."

Garthwaite glanced at Lettie, who was whispering to Bent, and shook his head.

"Tell you when we get outside," he said. "I don't want to frighten your daughter."

"Come on, then," said Cotherstone. He hurried into the hall and snatched up an overcoat. "Fetch me that lantern out of the kitchen," he called to the parlourmaid. "Light it! Don't you be afraid, Lettie," he went on, turning to his daughter. "There's naught to be afraid of—now. You gentlemen coming with us?"

Bent and Brereton had already got into their coats: when the maid came with the lantern, all four men

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went out. And as soon as they were in the garden Cotherstone turned on Garthwaite.

"How do you know he's murdered?" he asked. "How could you tell?"

"I'll tell you all about it, now we're outside," answered Garthwaite. "I'd been over to Spennigarth, to see Hollings. I came back over the Shawl, and made a short cut through the wood. And I struck my foot against something—something soft, you know—I don't like thinking of that! And so I struck a match, and looked, and saw this old fellow—don't like thinking of that, either. He was laid there, a few yards out of the path that runs across the Shawl at that point. I saw he was dead—and as for his being murdered, well, all I can say is, he's been strangled! That's flat."

"Strangled!" exclaimed Bent.

"Aye, without doubt," replied Garthwaite. "There's a bit of rope round his neck that tight that I couldn't put my little finger between it and him! But you'll see for yourselves—it's not far up the Shawl. You never heard anything, Mr. Cotherstone?

"No, we heard naught," answered Cotherstone. "If it's as you say, there'd be naught to hear."

He had led them out of his grounds by a side-gate, and they were now in the thick of the firs and pines which grew along the steep, somewhat rugged slope of the Shawl. He put the lantern into Garthwaite's hand.

"Here—you show the way," he said. "I don't know where it is, of course."

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"You were going straight to it," remarked Garthwaite. He turned to Brereton, who was walking at his side. "You're a lawyer, aren't you?" he asked. "I heard that Mr. Bent had a lawyer friend stopping with him just now—we hear all the bits of news in a little place like Highmarket. Well—you'll understand, likely—it hadn't been long done!"

"You noticed that?" said Brereton.

"I touched him," replied Garthwaite. "His hand and cheek were—just warm. He couldn't have been dead so very long—as I judged matters. And—here he is!"

He twisted sharply round the corner of one of the great masses of limestone which cropped out amongst the trees, and turned the light of the lantern on the dead man.

"There!" he said in a hushed voice. "There!"

The four men came to a halt, each gazing steadily at the sight they had come to see. It needed no more than a glance to assure each that he was looking on death: there was that in Kitely's attitude which forbade any other possibility.

"He's just as I found him," whispered Garthwaite. "I came round this rock from there, d'ye see, and my foot knocked against his shoulder. But, you know, he's been dragged here! Look at that!"

Brereton, after a glance at the body, had looked round at its surroundings. The wood thereabouts was carpeted—thickly carpeted—with pine needles; they lay several inches thick beneath the trunks of the trees; they stretched right up to the edge of the rock. And now, as Garthwaite turned the lan-

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tern, they saw that on this soft carpet there was a great slur—the murderer had evidently dragged his victim some yards across the pine needles before depositing him behind the rock. And at the end of this mark there were plain traces of a struggle—the soft, easily yielding stuff was disturbed, kicked about, upheaved, but as Brereton at once recognized, it was impossible to trace footprints in it.

"That's where it must have been," said Garthwaite. "You see there's a bit of a path there. The old man must have been walking along that path, and whoever did it must have sprung out on him there—where all those marks are—and when he'd strangled him dragged him here. That's how I figure it, Mr. Cotherstone."

Lights were coming up through the wood beneath them, glancing from point to point amongst the trees. Then followed a murmur of voices, and three or four men came into view—policemen, carrying their lamps, the man whom Garthwaite had sent into the town, and a medical man who acted as police surgeon.

"Here!" said Bent, as the newcomers advanced and halted irresolutely. "This way, doctor—there's work for you here—of a sort, anyway. Of course, he's dead?"

The doctor had gone forward as soon as he caught sight of the body, and he dropped on his knees at its side while the others gathered round. In the added light everybody now saw things more clearly. Kitely lay in a heap—just as a man would lie who had been unceremoniously thrown down. But Brereton's sharp eyes saw at once that after he had been

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flung at the foot of the mass of rock some hand had disarranged his clothing. His overcoat and under coat had been torn open, hastily, if not with absolute violence; the lining of one trousers pocket was pulled out; there were evidences that his waistcoat had been unbuttoned and its inside searched: everything seemed to indicate that the murderer had also been a robber.

"He's not been dead very long," said the doctor, looking up. "Certainly not more than three-quarters of an hour. Strangled? Yes!—and by somebody who has more than ordinary knowledge of how quickly a man may be killed in that way! Look how this cord is tied—no amateur did that."

He turned back the neckcloth from the dead man's throat, and showed the others how the cord had been slipped round the neck in a running-knot and fastened tightly with a cunning twist.

"Whoever did this had done the same thing before—probably more than once," he continued. "No man with that cord round his neck, tightly knotted like that, would have a chance—however free his hands might be. He'd be dead before he could struggle. Does no one know anything about this? No more than that?" he went on, when he had heard what Garthwaite could tell. "Well, this is murder, anyway! Are there no signs of anything about here?"

"Don't you think his clothing looks as if he had been robbed?" said Brereton, pointing to the obvious signs. "That should be noted before he's moved."

"I've noted that, sir," said the police-sergeant, who had bent over the body while the doctor was

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examining it. "There's one of his pockets turned inside out, and all his clothing's been torn open. Robbery, of course—that's what it's been—murder for the sake of robbery!"

One of the policemen, having satisfied his curiosity stepped back and began to search the surroundings with the aid of his lamp. He suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Here's something!" he said, stooping to the foot of a pine-tree and picking up a dark object. "An old pocket-book—nothing in it, though."

"That was his," remarked Cotherstone. "I've seen it before. He used to carry it in an inner pocket. Empty, do you say?—no papers?"

"Not a scrap of anything," answered the policeman, handing the book over to his sergeant, and proceeding to search further. "We'd best to see if there's any footprints about."

"You'd better examine that path, then," said Garthwaite. "You'll find no prints on all this pine-needle stuff—naught to go by, anyway—it's too thick and soft. But he must have come along that path, one way or another—I've met him walking in here of an evening, more than once."

The doctor, who had exchanged a word or two with the sergeant, turned to Cotherstone.

"Wasn't he a tenant of yours?" he asked. "Had the cottage at the top of the Shawl here. Well, we'd better have the body removed there, and some one should go up and warn his family."

"There's no family," answered Cotherstone. "He'd naught but a housekeeper—Miss Pett. She's

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an elderly woman—and not likely to be startled, from what I've seen of her."

"I'll go," said Bent. "I know the housekeeper." He touched Brereton's elbow, and led him away amongst the trees and up the wood. "This is a strange affair!" he continued when they were clear of the others. "Did you hear what Dr. Rockcliffe said?—that whoever had done it was familiar with that sort of thing!"

"I saw for myself," replied Brereton. "I noticed that cord, and the knot on it, at once. A man whose neck was tied up like that could be thrown down, thrown anywhere, left to stand up, if you like, and he'd be literally helpless, even if, as the doctor said, he had the use of his hands. He'd be unconscious almost at once—dead very soon afterwards. Murder? —I should think so!—and a particularly brutal and determined one. Bent!—whoever killed that poor old fellow was a man of great strength and of—knowledge! Knowledge, mind you!—he knew the trick. You haven't any doubtful character in Highmarket who has ever lived in India, have you?"

"India! Why India?" asked Bent.

"Because I should say that the man who did that job has learned some of the Indian tricks with cords and knots," answered Brereton. "That murder's suggestive of Thuggeeism in some respects. That the cottage?" he went on, pointing to a dim light ahead of him. "This housekeeper, now?—is she the sort who'll take it quietly?"

"She's as queer a character as the old fellow himself was," replied Bent, as they cleared the wood and

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entered a hedge-enclosed garden at the end of which stood an old-fashioned cottage. "I've talked to her now and then when calling here—I should say she's a woman of nerve."

Brereton looked narrowly at Miss Pett when she opened the door. She carried a tallow candle in one hand and held it high above her head to throw a light on the callers; its dim rays fell more on herself than on them. A tall, gaunt, elderly woman, almost flesh-less of face, and with a skin the colour of old parch-ment, out of which shone a pair of bright black eyes; the oddity of her appearance was heightened by her head-dress—a glaring red and yellow handkerchief tightly folded in such a fashion as to cover any vestige of hair. Her arms, bare to the elbow, and her hands were as gaunt as her face, but Brereton was quick to recognize the suggestion of physical strength in the muscles and sinews under the parchment-like skin. A strange, odd-looking woman altogether, he thought, and not improved by the fact that she appeared to have lost all her teeth, and that a long, sharp nose and prominent chin almost met before her sunken lips.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Bent?" she said, before either of the young men could speak. "Mr. Kitely's gone out for his regular bedtime constitution—he will have that, wet or fine, every night. But he's much longer than usual, and——"

She stopped suddenly, seeing some news in Bent's face, and her own contracted to a questioning look.

"Is there aught amiss?" she asked. "Has some-thing happened him? Aught that's serious? You needn't be afraid to speak, Mr. Bent—there's naught

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can upset or frighten me, let me tell you—I'm past all that!"

"I'm afraid Mr. Kitely's past everything, too, then," said Bent. He looked steadily at her for a moment, and seeing that she understood, went on. "They're bringing him up, Miss Pett—you'd better make ready. You won't be alarmed—I don't think there's any doubt that he's been murdered."

The woman gazed silently at her visitors; then, nodding her turbaned head, she drew back into the cottage.

"It's what I expected," she muttered. "I warned him—more than once. Well—let them bring him, then."

She vanished into a side-room, and Bent and Brereton went down the garden and met the others, carrying the dead man. Cotherstone followed behind the police, and as he approached Bent he pulled him by the sleeve and drew him aside.

"There's a clue!" he whispered. "A clue, d'ye hear—a strong clue!"

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CHAPTER V

THE CORD

Ever since they had left the house at the foot of the pine wood, Brereton had been conscious of a curious psychological atmosphere, centring in Cotherstone. It had grown stronger as events had developed; it was still stronger now as they stood outside the dead man's cottage, the light from the open door and the white-curtained window falling on Cotherstone's excited face. Cotherstone, it seemed to Brereton, was unduly eager about something—he might almost be said to be elated. All of his behaviour was odd. He had certainly been shocked when Garthwaite burst in with the news—but this shock did not seem to be of the ordinary sort. He had looked like fainting—but when he recovered himself his whole attitude (so, at any rate, it had seemed to Brereton) had been that of a man who has just undergone a great relief. To put the whole thing into a narrow compass, it seemed as if Cotherstone appeared to be positively pleased to hear—and to find beyond doubt—that Kitely was dead. And now, as he stood glancing from one young man to the other, his eyes glittered as if he were absolutely enjoying the affair: he reminded Brereton of that type of theatre-goer who

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will insist on pointing out stage effects as they occur before his eyes, forcing his own appreciation of them upon fellow-watchers whose eyes are as keen as his own.

"A strong clue!" repeated Cotherstone, and said it yet again. "A good 'un! And if it's right, it'll clear matters up."

"What is it?" asked Bent. He, too, seemed to be conscious that there was something odd about his prospective father-in-law, and he was gazing speculatively at him as if in wonder. "What sort of a clue?"

"It's a wonder it didn't strike me—and you, too—at first," said Cotherstone, with a queer sound that was half a chuckle. "But as long as it's struck somebody, eh? One's as good as another. You can't think of what it is, now?"

"I don't know what you're thinking about," replied Bent, half impatiently.

Cotherstone gave vent to an unmistakable chuckle at that, and he motioned them to follow him into the cottage.

"Come and see for yourselves, then," he said. "You'll spot it. But, anyway—Mr. Brereton, being a stranger, can't be expected to."

The three men walked into the living-room of the cottage—a good-sized, open-raftered, old-fashioned place, wherein burnt a bright fire, at either side of which stood two comfortable armchairs. Before one of these chairs, their toes pointing upwards against the fender, were a pair of slippers; on a table close by stood an old lead tobacco-box, flanked by a church-warden pipe, a spirit decanter, a glass, and a plate

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on which were set out sugar and lemon—these Brereton took to be indicative that Kitely, his evening constitutional over, was in the habit of taking a quiet pipe and a glass of something warm before going to bed. And looking round still further he became aware of an open door—the door into which Miss Pett had withdrawn—and of a bed within on which Kitely now lay, with Dr. Rockcliffe and the police-sergeant bending over him. The other policemen stood by the table in the living-room, and one of them—the man who had picked up the pocket-book—whispered audibly to Cotherstone as he and his companions entered.

"The doctor's taking it off him," he said, with a meaning nod of his head. "I'll lay aught it's as I say, Mr. Cotherstone."

"Looks like it," agreed Cotherstone, rubbing his hands. "It certainly looks like it, George. Sharp of you to notice it, though."

Brereton took this conversation to refer to the mysterious clue, and his suspicion was confirmed a moment later. The doctor and the sergeant came into the living-room, the doctor carrying something in his hand which he laid down on the centre table in full view of all of them. And Brereton saw then that he had removed from the dead man's neck the length of grey cord with which he had been strangled.

There was something exceedingly sinister in the mere placing of that cord before the eyes of these living men. It had wrought the death of another man, who, an hour before, had been as full of vigorous life as themselves; some man, equally vigorous, had used it as the instrument of a foul murder. In-

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significant in itself, a mere piece of strongly spun and twisted hemp, it was yet singularly suggestive—one man, at any rate, amongst those who stood looking at it, was reminded by it that the murderer who had used it must even now have the fear of another and a stronger cord before him.

"Find who that cord belongs to, and you may get at something," suddenly observed the doctor, glancing at the policemen. "You say it's a butcher's cord?"

The man who had just whispered to Cotherstone nodded.

"It's a pig-killer's cord, sir," he answered. "It's what a pig-killer fastens the pig down with—on the cratch."

"A cratch?—what's that?" asked Brereton, who had gone close to the table to examine the cord, and had seen that, though slender, it was exceedingly strong, and of closely wrought fibre. "Is it a sort of hurdle?"

"That's it, sir," assented the policeman. "It is a sort of hurdle—on four legs. They lay the pig on it, don't you see, and tie it down with a cord of this sort—this cord's been used for that—it's greasy with long use."

"And it has been cut off a longer piece, of course," said the doctor. "These cords are of considerable length, aren't they?"

"Good length, sir—there's a regular coil, like," said the man. He, too, bent down and looked at the length before him. "This has been cut off what you might call recent," he went on, pointing to one end.

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"And cut off with a sharp knife, too."

The police sergeant glanced at the doctor as if asking advice on the subject of putting his thoughts into words.

"Well?" said the doctor, with a nod of assent. "Of course, you've got something in your mind, sergeant?"

"Well, there is a man who kills pigs, and has such cords as that, lives close by, doctor," he answered. "You know who I mean—the man they call Gentleman Jack."

"You mean Harborough," said the doctor. "Well—you'd better ask him if he knows anything. Somebody might have stolen one of his cords. But there are other pig-killers in the town, of course."

"Not on this side the town, there aren't," remarked another policeman.

"What is plain," continued the doctor, looking at Cotherstone and the others, "is that Kitely was strangled by this rope, and that everything on him of any value was taken. You'd better find out what he had, or was likely to have, on him, sergeant. Ask the housekeeper."

Miss Pett came from the inner room, where she had already begun her preparations for laying out the body. She was as calm as when Bent first told her of what had occurred, and she stood at the end of the table, the cord between her and her questioners, and showed no emotion, no surprise at what had occurred.

"Can you tell aught about this, ma'am?" asked the sergeant. "You see your master's met his death

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at somebody's hands, and there's no doubt he's been robbed, too. Do you happen to know what he had on him?''

The housekeeper, who had her arms full of linen, set her burden down on a clothes-horse in front of the fire before she replied. She seemed to be thinking deeply, and when she turned round again, it was to shake her queerly ornamented head.

''Well, I couldn't say exactly,'' she answered. ''But I shouldn't wonder if it was a good deal—for such as him, you know. He did carry money on him—he was never short of money ever since I knew him, and sometimes he'd a fair amount in his pockets—I know, of course, because he'd pull it out, loose gold, and silver, and copper, and I've seen him take bank-notes out of his pocket-book. But he'd be very like to have a good deal more than usual on him tonight.''

''Why?'' asked the sergeant.

''Because he'd been to the bank this morning to draw his pension money,'' replied Miss Pett. ''I don't know how much that would be, any more than I know where it came from. He was a close man—he'd never tell anybody more than he liked, and he never told me aught about that. But I do know it was what you'd call a fair amount—for a man that lives in a cottage. He went to the bank this noon—he always went once a quarter—and he said this afternoon that he'd go and pay his rent to Mr. Cotherstone there—''

''As he did,'' muttered Cotherstone, ''yes—he did that.''

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"Well, he'd have all the rest of his money on him," continued the housekeeper. "And he'd have what he had before, because he'd other money coming in than that pension. And I tell you he was the sort of man that carried his money about him—he was foolish that way. And then he'd a very valuable watch and chain—he told me they were a presentation, and cost nearly a hundred pounds. And of course, he'd a pocket-book full of papers."

"This pocket-book?" asked the sergeant.

"Aye, that's it, right enough," assented Miss Pett. "But he always had it bursting with bits of letters and papers. You don't mean to say you found it empty? You did?—very well then, I'm no fool, and I say that if he's been murdered, there's been some reason for it altogether apart from robbing him of what money and things he had on him! Whoever's taken his papers wanted 'em bad!"

"About his habits, now?" said the sergeant, ignoring Miss Pett's suggestion. "Did he go walking on the Shawl every night?"

"Regular as clock-work," answered the housekeeper. "He used to read and write a deal at night—then he'd side away all his books and papers, get his supper, and go out for an hour, walking round and about. Then he'd come in, put on his slippers—there they are, set down to warm for him—smoke one pipe, drink one glass of toddy—there's the stuff for it—and go to bed. He was the regularest man I ever knew, in all he did."

"Was he out longer than usual tonight?" asked Bent, who saw that the sergeant had no more to

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ask. "You seemed to suggest that, when we came."

"Well, he was a bit longer," admitted Miss Pett. "Of course, he varied. But an hour was about his time. Up and down and about the hill-side he'd go—in and out of the coppices. I've warned him more than once."

"But why?" asked Brereton, whose curiosity was impelling him to take a part in this drama. "What reason had you for warning him?"

Miss Pett turned and looked scrutinizingly at her last questioner. She took a calm and close observation of him and her curious face relaxed into something like a smile.

"I can tell what you are, mister," she said. "A law gentleman! I've seen your sort many a time. And you're a sharp 'un, too! Well — you're young, but you're old enough to have heard a thing or two. Did you never hear that women have got what men haven't—instinct?"

"Do you really tell me that the only reason you had for warning him against going out late at night was—instinct?" asked Brereton. "Come, now!"

"Mostly instinct, anyhow," she answered. "Women have a sort of feeling about things that men haven't—leastways, no men that I've ever met had it. But of course, I'd more than that. Mr. Kitely, now, he was a townsman—a London man. I'm a countrywoman. He didn't understand—you couldn't get him to understand—that it's not safe to go walking in lonely places in country districts like this late at night. When I'd got to know his habits, I expostulated with him more than once. I

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pointed out to him that in spots like this, where there's naught nearer than them houses at the foot of the hill one way, and Harborough's cottage another way, and both of 'em a good quarter of a mile off, and where there's all these coverts and coppices and rocks, it was not safe for an elderly man who sported a fine gold watch and chain to go wandering about in the darkness. There's always plenty of bad characters in country places who'd knock the King himself on the head for the sake of as much as Mr. Kitely had on him, even if it was no more than the chain which every Tom and Dick could see! And it's turned out just as I prophesied. He's come to it!"

"But you said just now that he must have been murdered for something else than his valuables," said Brereton.

"I said that if his papers were gone, somebody must have wanted them bad," retorted Miss Pett. "Anyway, what's happened is just what I felt might happen, and there he is—dead. And I should be obliged to some of you if you'd send up a woman or two to help me lay him out, for I can't be expected to do everything by myself, nor to stop in this cottage alone, neither!"

Leaving the doctor and a couple of policemen to arrange matters with the housekeeper, the sergeant went outside, followed by the others. He turned to Cotherstone.

"I'm going down to Harborough's cottage, at the other end of the Shawl," he said. "I don't expect to learn aught much there—yet—but I can see if he's

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at home, anyway. If any of you gentlemen like to come down——''

Bent laid a hand on Cotherstone's arm and turned him in the direction of his house.

"Brereton and I'll go with the sergeant," he said. "You must go home—Lettie'll be anxious about things. Go down with him, Mr. Garthwaite—you'll both hear more later."

To Brereton's great surprise, Cotherstone made no objection to this summary dismissal. He and Garthwaite went off in one direction; the others, led by the observant policeman who had found the empty pocket-book and recognized the peculiar properties of the cord, turned away in another.

"Where's this we're going now?" asked Brereton as he and Bent followed their leaders through the trees and down the slopes of the Shawl.

"To John Harborough's cottage—at the other end of the hill," answered Bent. "He's the man they spoke of in there. He's a queer character—a professional pig-killer, who has other trades as well. He does a bit of rat-catching, and a bit of mole-catching—and a good deal of poaching. In fact, he's an odd person altogether, not only in character but in appearance. And the curious thing is that he's got an exceedingly good-looking and accomplished daughter, a really superior girl who's been well educated and earns her living as a governess in the town. Queer pair they make if you ever see them together!"

"Does she live with him?" asked Brereton.

"Oh yes, she lives with him!" replied Bent. "And I believe that they're very devoted to each

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other, though everybody marvels that such a man should have such a daughter. There's a mystery about that man—odd character that he is, he's been well bred, and the folk hereabouts call him Gentleman Jack.''

''Won't all this give the girl a fright?'' suggested Brereton. ''Wouldn't it be better if somebody went quietly to the man's cottage?''

But when they came to Harborough's cottage, at the far end of the Shawl, it was all in darkness.

''Still, they aren't gone to bed,'' suddenly observed the policeman who had a faculty for seeing things. ''There's a good fire burning in the kitchen grate, and they wouldn't leave that. Must be out, both of 'em.''

''Go in and knock quietly,'' counselled the sergeant.

He followed the policeman up the flagged walk to the cottage door, and the other two presently went after them. In the starlight Brereton looked round at these new surroundings—an old, thatched cottage, set in a garden amongst trees and shrubs, with a lean-to shed at one end of it, and over everything an atmosphere of silence.

The silence was suddenly broken. A quick, light step sounded on the flagged path behind them, and the policemen turned their lamps in its direction. And Brereton, looking sharply round, became aware of the presence of a girl, who looked at these visitors wonderingly out of a pair of beautiful grey eyes.

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CHAPTER VI

THE MAYOR

Here, then, thought Brereton, was Gentleman Jack's daughter—the girl of whom Bent had just been telling him. He looked at her narrowly as she stood confronting the strange group. A self-possessed young woman, he said to himself—beyond a little heightening of colour, a little questioning look about eyes and lips she showed no trace of undue surprise or fear. Decidedly a good-looking young woman, too, and not at all the sort of daughter that a man of queer character would be supposed to have—refined features, an air of breeding, a suggestion of culture. And he noticed that as he and Bent raised their hats, the two policemen touched their helmets—they were evidently well acquainted with the girl, and eyed her with some misgiving as well as respect.

"Beg pardon, miss," said the sergeant, who was obviously anything but pleased with his task. "But it's like this, d'you see?—your father, now, does he happen to be at home?"

"What is it you want?" she asked. And beginning a glance of inquiry at the sergeant she finished it at Bent. "Has something happened, Mr. Bent?" she went on. "If you want my father, and he's not

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in, then I don't know where he is—he went out early in the evening, and he hadn't returned when I left the house an hour ago."

"I daresay it's nothing," replied Bent. "But the fact is that something has happened. Your neighbour at the other end of the wood—old Mr. Kitely, you know—he's been found dead."

Brereton, closely watching the girl, saw that this conveyed nothing to her, beyond the mere announcement. She moved towards the door of the cottage, taking a key from her muff.

"Yes?" she said. "And—I suppose you want my father to help? He may be in—he may have gone to bed."

She unlocked the door, walked into the open living-room, and turning up a lamp which stood on the table, glanced around her.

"No," she continued. "He's not come in—so——"

"Better tell her, Mr. Bent," whispered the sergeant. "No use keeping it back, sir—she'll have to know."

"The fact is," said Bent, "Mr. Kitely—we're afraid—has been murdered."

The girl turned sharply at that; her eyes dilated, and a brighter tinge of colour came into her cheeks.

"Murdered!" she exclaimed. "Shot?"

Her eyes went past Bent to a corner of the room, and Brereton, following them, saw that there stood a gun, placed amongst a pile of fishing-rods and

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similar sporting implements. Her glance rested on it for only the fraction of a second; then it went back to Bent's face.

"I'd better tell you everything," said Bent quietly. "Mr. Kitely has been strangled. And the piece of cord with which it was done is—so the police here say—just such a piece as might have been cut off one of the cords which your father uses in his trade, you know."

"We aren't suggesting aught, you know, Miss Avice," remarked the sergeant. "Don't go for to think that—at present. But, you see, Harborough, he might have one o' those cords hanging about somewhere, and—do you understand?"

The girl had become very quiet, looking steadily from one man to the other. Once more her eyes settled on Bent.

"Do you know why Kitely was killed?" she asked suddenly. "Have you seen any reason for it?"

"He had been robbed, after his death," answered Bent. "That seems absolutely certain."

"Whatever you may say, you've got some suspicion about my father," she remarked after a pause. "Well—all I can say is, my father has no need to rob anybody—far from it, if you want the truth. But what do you want?" she continued, a little impatiently. "My father isn't in, and I don't know where he is—often he is out all night."

"If we could just look round his shed, now?" said the sergeant. "Just to see if aught's missing, like, you know. You see, miss——"

"You can look round the shed—and round any-

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where else," said Avice. "Though what good that will do—well, you know where the shed is."

She turned away and began taking off her hat and coat, and the four men went out into the garden and turned to the lean-to shed at the end of the cottage. A tiled verandah ran along the front of cottage and shed, and the door of the shed was at its further end. But as the sergeant was about to open it, the policeman of the observant nature made his third discovery. He had been flashing the light of his bull's-eye lamp over his surroundings, and he now turned it on a coil of rope which hung from a nail in the boarded wall of the shed, between the door and the window.

"There you are, gentlemen!" he said, lifting the lamp in one hand and pointing triumphantly to a definite point of the coiled cord with the index finger of the other. "There! Cut clean, too—just like the bit up yonder!"

Brereton pressed forward and looked narrowly at what the man was indicating. There was no doubt that a length of cord had been freshly cut off the coil, and cut, too, with an unusually sharp, keen-bladed knife; the edges of the severance were clean and distinct, the separated strands were fresh and unsoiled. It was obvious that a piece of that cord had been cut from the rest within a very short time, and the sergeant shook his head gravely as he took the coil down from its nail.

"I don't think there's any need to look round much further, Mr. Bent," he said. "Of course, I shall take this away with me, and compare it with the shorter piece. But we'll just peep into this shed,

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so as to make his daughter believe that was what we wanted: I don't want to frighten her more than we have done. Naught there, you see," he went on, opening the shed door and revealing a whitewashed interior furnished with fittings and articles of its owner's trade. "Well, we'll away—with what we've got."

He went back to the door of the cottage and putting his head inside called gently to its occupant.

"Well?" demanded Avice.

"All right, miss—we're going," said the sergeant. "But if your father comes in, just ask him to step down to the police-station, d'you see?—I should like to have a word or two with him."

The girl made no answer to this gentle request, and when the sergeant had joined the others, she shut the door of the cottage, and Brereton heard it locked and bolted.

"That's about the strangest thing of all!" he said as he and Bent left the policemen and turned down a by-lane which led towards the town. "I haven't a doubt that the piece of cord with which Kitely was strangled was cut off that coil! Now what does it mean? Of course, to me it's the very surest proof that this man Harborough had nothing to do with the murder."

"Why?" asked Bent.

"Why? My dear fellow!" exclaimed Brereton. "Do you really think that any man who was in possession of his senses would do such a thing? Take a piece of cord from a coil—leave the coil where anybody could find it—strangle a man with the severed

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piece and leave it round the victim's neck? Absurd! No—a thousand times no!"

"Well—and what then?" asked Bent.

"Ah! Somebody cut that piece off—for the use it was put to," answered Brereton. "But—who?"

Bent made no reply for a while. Then, as they reached the outskirts of the town, he clapped a hand on his companion's arm.

"You're forgetting something—in spite of your legal mind," he said. "The murderer may have been interrupted before he could remove it. And in that case——"

He stopped suddenly as a gate opened in the wall of a garden which they were just passing, and a tall man emerged. In the light of the adjacent lamp Bent recognized Mallalieu. Mallalieu, too, recognized him, and stopped.

"Oh, that you, Mr. Mayor!" exclaimed Bent. "I was just wondering whether to drop in on you as I passed. Have you heard what's happened tonight?"

"Heard naught," replied Mallalieu. "I've just been having a hand at whist with Councillor Northrop and his wife and daughter. What has happened, then?"

They were all three walking towards the town by that time, and Bent slipped between Brereton and Mallalieu and took the Mayor's arm.

"Murder's happened," he said. "That's the plain truth of it. You know old Kitely—your partner's tenant? Well, somebody's killed him."

The effect of this announcement on Mallalieu was extraordinary. Bent felt the arm into which he had

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just slipped his own literally quiver with a spasmodic response to the astonished brain; the pipe which Mallalieu was smoking fell from his lips; out of his lips came something very like a cry of dismay.

"God bless me!" he exclaimed. "You don't say so?"

"It's a fact," said Bent. He stopped and picked up the fallen pipe. "Sorry I let it out so clumsily—I didn't think it would affect you like that. But there it is—Kitely's been murdered. Strangled!"

"Strangled!" echoed Mallalieu. "Dear—dear—dear! When was this, now?"

"Within the hour," replied Bent. "Mr. Brereton here—a friend of mine from London—and I were spending the evening at your partner's, when that neighbour of his, Garthwaite, came running in to tell Mr. Cotherstone that Kitely was lying dead on the Shawl. Of course we all went up."

"Then—you've seen him?" demanded Mallalieu. "There's no doubt about it?"

"Doubt!" exclaimed Bent. "I should think there is no doubt! As determined a murder as ever I heard of. No—there's no doubt."

Mallalieu paused—at the gate of his own house.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said. "Come in just a minute, anyway. I—egad it's struck me all of a heap, has that news! Murder?—there hasn't been such a thing in these parts ever since I came here, near thirty years ago. Come in and tell me a bit more about it."

He led the way up a gravelled drive, admitted himself and his visitors to the house with a latchkey, and

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turned into a parlour where a fire burned and a small supper-tray was set out on a table beneath a lamp.

"All my folks'll have gone to bed," he said. "They go and leave me a bite of something, you see—I'm often out late. Will you gentlemen have a sandwich—or a dry biscuit? Well, you'll have a drink, then. And so," he went on, as he produced glasses from the sideboard, "and so you were spending the evening with Cotherstone, what?"

"Well, I can't say that we exactly spent all the evening with him," answered Bent, "because he had to go out for a good part of it, on business. But we were with him—we were at his house—when the news came."

"Aye, he had to go out, had he?" asked Mallalieu, as if from mere curiosity. "What time would that be, like? I knew he'd business tonight—business of ours."

"Nine to ten, roughly speaking," replied Bent. "He'd just got in when Garthwaite came with the news."

"It 'ud shock him, of course," suggested Mallalieu. "His own tenant!"

"Yes—it was a shock," agreed Bent. He took the glass which his host handed to him and sat down. "We'd better tell you all about it," he said. "It's a queer affair—Mr. Brereton here, who's a barrister, thinks it's a very queer affair."

Mallalieu nodded and sat down, too, glass in hand. He listened attentively—and Brereton watched him while he listened. A sleek, sly, observant, watchful man, this, said Brereton to himself—the sort that

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