ALBERT GATE MYSTERY

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Hussein-ul-Mulk.

—*Frontispiece*

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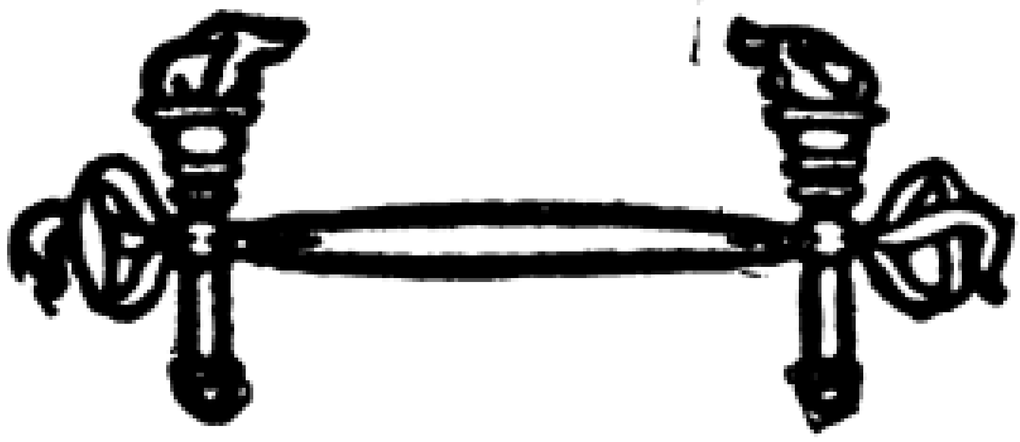
The Albert Gate Mystery

BY

LOUIS TRACY

Author of "Wings of the Morning," "The Stowmarket Mystery," "The Final War," Etc., Etc.



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The Albert Gate Mystery.

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Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	A Mysterious Crime	7
II	Mehemet Ali's Note	18
III	What the Police Saw	29
IV	The Murders	42
V	A Startling Clue	51
VI	A Journey to Paris	69
VII	The House in the Rue Barbette	87
VIII	What Happened in the Rue Barbette	100
IX	A Montmartre Romance	115
X	On Guard	125
XI	A Disconcerted Commissary	140
XII	The Innkeeper	161
XIII	The Release	176
XIV	"Tout va Bien"	198
XV	"Marie"	209
XVI	The Hall Porter's Doubts	223
XVII	The Yacht "Blue Bell"	235

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CHAPTER		PAGE
XVIII	TALBOT'S ADVENTURES	247
XIX	THE RACE	259
XX	CLOSE QUARTERS	269
XXI	THE FIGHT	281
XXII	PIECING THE PUZZLE	292

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CHAPTER I

A MYSTERIOUS CRIME

REGINALD BRETT, barrister-at-law and amateur detective, had seldom been more at peace with the world and his own conscience than when he entered the dining-room of his cosy flat this bright October morning.

Since the famous affair of Lady Delia Lyle's disappearance and death, he not had been busy, and the joy of healthy idleness is only known to the hard worker. Again, while dressing, he had received a letter inviting him to a quiet shoot at a delightful place in the country.

All these things blended with happy inconsequence to render Brett contented in mind and affable in manner.

"It's a fine morning, Smith," he said cheerily, as he settled himself at the table where his "man" was already pouring out the coffee.

"Bee-utiful, sir," said Smith.

"Smith!"

"Yessir."

"Not even the best English autumn weather can stand being called 'bee-utiful.' Don't do it. You will open the flood-gates of Heaven."

Smith laughed decorously. He had not the slight-

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est idea what his master meant, but if it pleased Mr. Brett to be jocose, it was the duty of a servant who knew his place to be responsive.

The barrister fully understood Smith's delicate appreciation—and its limits. He instantly noticed that the morning paper, instead of reposing next to his folded napkin, was placed out of reach on a sideboard, and that the eggs and bacon made their appearance half-a-minute too soon.

As an expert swordsman delights to execute a pass *en tierce* with an umbrella, so did the cleverest analytical detective of the age resolve to amaze his servitor.

"Smith," he said suddenly, composing his features to their most severe cross-examination aspect, "I think the arrangement is an excellent one."

"What arrangement, sir."

"That Mrs. Smith and yourself should have a few days' holiday, while Mrs. Smith's brother takes your place during my forthcoming visit to Lord Northallerton's—why, man, what is the matter? Is it too hot?"—for the cover Smith had lifted off the bacon and eggs clattered violently on the table.

"'Ot, sir. 'Ot isn't the word. You're a fair licker, that's what you are."

Smith invariably dropped his h's when he became excited.

"Smith, I insist that you shall not call me names. Pass the paper."

"But, sir——"

"Pass the paper. Utter another word and I refuse to accept Mrs. Smith's brother as your *locum tenens*."

Smith was silenced by the last terrible epithet. Yet he was so manifestly nervous that Brett re-

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solved to enlighten him before plunging into the day's news.

"For the last time, Smith," he said, "I will explain to you why it is hopeless for you to think of concealing tradesmen's commissions from me."

The shot went home, but the enemy was acquainted with this method of attack, and did not wince.

"You knew that Lord Northallerton had recently invited me to his October pheasant-shooting. During the last few days a youth, who grotesquely reproduces Mrs. Smith's most prominent features, has mysteriously tenanted the kitchen, ill-cleaned my boots, and bungled over the studs in my shirts. This morning a letter came with the crest and the Northallerton postmark. Really, Smith, considering that you have now breathed the same air as myself for eight long years, I did not expect to be called on for an explanation. Besides, you have destroyed a masterpiece."

"Sir——" began Smith.

"Oh, I understand; there is nothing broken but your reputation. Don't you see that the mere placing of the newspaper at a distance, so that you might have a chance to speak before I opened it, was a subtle stroke, worthy of Lecocq. Yet you demand feeble words. What a pity! Know, Smith, that true genius is dumb. Speech may be silvern, but silence is surely golden."

The barrister solemnly unfolded the paper, and Smith faded from the room. On a page usually devoted to important announcements, the following paragraphs stood forth in the boldness of leaded type :—

"MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE IN THE WEST END.

"An affair of some magnitude—perhaps a re-

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markable crime—has taken place in an Albert Gate mansion.

"Owing to the reticence of the authorities, it is at present impossible to arrive at a definite conclusion as to the nature or extent of the incident, but it is quite certain that public interest will be much excited when details are forthcoming. All sorts of rumours attain credence in the locality, the murder of several prominent persons being not the least persistent of these. Without, however, giving currency to idly speculation, several authentic statements may be grouped into a connected form.

"Four weeks ago a party of Turkish gentlemen of high rank in Constantinople, arrived in London and took up their abode in the house in question, after some structural alterations, pointing at great security within and without, had been planned and executed.

"Attending these Turkish gentlemen, or officials, was a numerous suite of Moslem guards and servants, whilst, immediately following their arrival, came from Amsterdam some dozen noted experts in the diamond-cutting industry. These were lodged in a neighbouring private hotel, where they were extremely uncommunicative as to their business in London. They were employed during the day at the Albert Gate house. The presence in the mansion, both day and night, of a strong force of Metropolitan police, tended to excite local curiosity to an intense degree, but no clear conception of the business of the occupants was allowed to reach the public.

"Whatever it was that took place, the full particulars were not only well known to the authorities—the presence of the police hints even at Governmental

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sanction—but matters proceeded on normal lines until yesterday morning.

"Then it became clear that a remarkable development must have occurred during the preceding night, as the whole of the Dutch workmen and the Turkish attendants were taken off in cabs by the police, not to Morton Street Police Station, but to Scotland Yard; this in itself being a most unusual course to adopt. They are unquestionably detained in custody, but they have not yet been charged before a magistrate.

"The police, later in the day, carried off some of these men's personal belongings, from both hotel and mansion.

"A sinister aspect was given to the foregoing mysterious proceedings by the presence at Albert Gate, early in the day, of two police surgeons, who were followed, about twelve o'clock, by Dr. Tennyson Coke, the greatest living authority on toxicology.

"Dr. Coke and the other medical gentlemen subsequently refused to impart the slightest information as to the reasons that led the police to seek their services, and the Scotland Yard authorities are adamant in the matter.

"The representative of a news agency was threatened with arrest for trespass when he endeavoured to gain admission to the Albert Gate house, and it is quite evident that the police are determined to prevent the facts from leaking out at present—if they can by any means accomplish their wishes."

Brett read this interesting statement twice slowly. It fascinated him. Its very vagueness, its admissions of inability to tell what had really happened,

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its adroit use of such phrases as "Turkish gentlemen of high rank," "Noted experts in the diamond-cutting industry," "The greatest living authority on toxicology," betrayed the hand of the disappointed journalistic artist.

"Excellent!" he murmured aloud. "It is the breath of battle to my nostrils. I ought to tip Smith for my breakfast. Had I read this earlier, I would not have eaten a morsel."

He carefully examined the page at the back. It contained matter of no consequence—a London County Council debate—so he took a pair of scissors from his pocket and cut out the complete item, placing the slip as a votive offering in front of a finely-executed bust of Edgar Allen Poe, that stood on a bookcase behind him.

Within three minutes the scissors were again employed. The new cutting ran—

"There is trouble at Yildiz Kiosk. A Reuter's telegram from Constantinople states that a near relative of the Sultan has fled to France. The Porte have asked the French Government to apprehend him, but the French Ambassador has informed Riaz Pasha that this course is impracticable in the absence of any criminal charge."

"These two are one," said the barrister, as he turned towards Poe's bust and laid the slip by the side of its predecessor. This time he had mutilated a critique of an Ibsensite drama.

The rest of the newspaper's contents had no special interest for him, and he soon threw aside the journal in order to rise, light a cigarette, and muster sufficient energy to write a telegram accepting Lord Northallerton's invitation for the following day.

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He was on the point of reaching for a telegraph form when Smith entered with a card. It bore the name and address—

"The Earl of Fairholme, Stanhope Gate."

"Curious," thought Brett. "Where is his lordship?" he said aloud—"at the door, or in the street?"

(His flat was on the second floor.)

"In a keb, sir."

"Bring his lordship up."

A rapid glance at "Debrett" revealed that the Earl of Fairholme was thirty, unmarried, the fourteenth of his line, and the possessor of country seats at Fairholme, Warwickshire, and Glen Spey, Inverness.

The earl entered, an athletic, well-groomed man, one whose lines were usually cast in pleasant places, but who was now in an unwonted state of flurry and annoyance.

Each man was favourably impressed by the other. His lordship produced an introductory card, and Brett was astonished to find that it bore the name of the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

"I have come——" commenced his lordship hesitatingly.

But the barrister broke in. "You have had a bad night, Lord Fairholme. You wish for a long and comfortable chat. Now, won't you start with a whiskey and soda, light a cigar, and draw an easy chair near the fire?"

"'Pon my honour, Mr. Brett, you begin well. You give me confidence. Those are the first cheerful words I have heard during twenty-four hours."

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The earl was easily manœuvred into a strong light. Then he made a fresh start.

"You have doubtless heard of this Albert Gate affair, Mr. Brett?"

"You mean this?" said the other, rising and handing to his visitor the longer paragraph of the two he had selected from the newspaper.

"That is very curious," said the earl, momentarily startled. But he was too preoccupied by his thoughts to pay much heed to the incident. He merely glanced at the cutting and went on:

"Yes, that is it. Well, Edith—Miss Talbot, I mean—vows that she won't marry me until this beastly business is cleared up. Of course, we all know that Jack didn't slope with the diamonds. He's tied up or dead, for sure. But—no matter what may have become of him—why the dickens that should stop Edith from marrying me is more than I can fathom. Just look at some of the women in Society. They don't leave it to their relatives to be mixed up in a scandal, I can tell you. Still, there you are. Edith is jolly clever and awfully determined, so you've got to find him, Mr. Brett. Dead or alive, he must be found, and cleared."

"He shall," said Brett, gazing into the fire.

The quiet, self-reliant voice steadied the young peer. He checked an imminent flow of words, picked up the newspaper slip again, and this time read it.

Then he blushed.

"You must think me very stupid, Mr. Brett, to burst out in such a manner when you probably have never heard of the people I am talking about."

"You will tell me, Lord Fairholme, if you get

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quietly to work and try to speak, so far as you find it possible, in chronological sequence."

His lordship knitted his brows and smoked in silence. At last he found utterance.

"That's a good idea of yours. It makes things easier. Well, first of all, Edith and I became engaged. Edith is the daughter of the late Admiral Talbot. She and Jack, her brother, live with their uncle, General Sir Hubert Fitzjames, at 118, Ulster Gardens. Jack is in the Foreign Office; he is just like Edith, awfully clever and that sort of thing, an assistant secretary I think they call him. Now we're getting on, aren't we?"

"Splendidly."

"That's all right. About a month ago a chap turns up from Constantinople, a kind of special Envoy from the Sultan, and he explains to the Foreign Office that he has in his possession a lot of uncut diamonds of terrific value, including one as big as a duck's egg, to which no figures would give a price. Do you follow me?"

"Each word."

"Good. Well—I can't tell you why, because I don't know, and I could not understand it if I did—there was some political importance attached to these gems, and the Sultan roped our Foreign Office into it. So the Foreign Office placed Jack in charge of the business. He fixed up the Envoy in the house at Albert Gate, got a lot of diamond cutters and machinery for him, gave him into the charge of all the smart policemen in London; and what do you think is the upshot?"

"What?"

"The Envoy, his two secretaries, and a confidential servant were murdered the night before last, the diamonds were stolen, and Jack has vanished—

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absolutely gone clean into space, not a sign of him to be found anywhere. Yesterday Edith sends for me, cries for half-an-hour, tells me I'm the best fellow that ever lived, and then I'm jiggered if she didn't wind up by saying that she couldn't marry me."

The Earl of Fairholme was now worked up to fever heat. He would not calm down for an appreciable period, so Brett resolved to try the effect of curiosity.

He wrote a telegram to Lord Northallerton :—

"Very sorry, but I cannot leave town at present. Please ask me later. Will explain reason for postponement when we meet."

He had touched the dominant note in mankind.

"Surely!" cried the earl, "you have not already decided upon a course of action?"

"Not exactly. I am wiring to postpone a shooting fixture."

"What a beastly shame!" exclaimed the other, in whom the sporting instinct was at once aroused. "I'm awfully sorry my affairs should interfere with your arrangements in this way."

"Not a bit," cried Brett. "I make it a sacred rule of life to put pleasure before business. I mean," he explained, as a look of bewilderment crossed his hearer's face, "that this quest of ours promises to be the most remarkable affair I have ever been engaged in. That pleases me. Pheasant-shooting is a serious business, governed by the calendar and arranged by the head-keeper."

An electric bell summoned Smith. The barrister handed him the telegram and a sovereign.

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"Read that message," he said. "Ponder over it. Send it, and give the change of the sovereign to Mrs. Smith's brother, with my compliments and regrets."

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CHAPTER II

MEHEMET ALI'S NOTE

THEN he turned to Lord Fairholme.

"Just one question," he said, "before I send you off to bed. No, you must not protest. I want you to meet me here this evening at seven, with your brain clear and your nerves restored by a good, sound sleep. We will dine, here or elsewhere, and act subsequently. But at this moment I want to know the name of the person most readily accessible who can tell me all about Mr. Talbot's connection with the Sultan's agent."

"His sister, undoubtedly."

"Where can I find her?"

"At Ulster Gardens. I will drive you there."

The barrister smiled. "You are going to bed, I tell you. Give me a few lines of introduction to Miss Talbot."

The earl's face had brightened at the prospect of meeting his *fiancée* under the favourable conditions of Brett's presence. But he yielded with good grace, and promptly sat down to write a brief note explanatory of the barrister's identity and position in the inquiry.

The two parted at the door, and a hansom rapidly

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brought Brett to the residence of Sir Hubert Fitz-james.

A stately footman took Reggie's card and its accompanying letter, placed them on a salver with a graceful turn of his wrist, which oddly suggested a similar turn in his nose, and said :

" Miss Talbot is not at home, sir."

" Yes, she is," answered Brett, paying the driver of the hansom.

The footman deigned to exhibit astonishment. Here was a gentleman—one obviously accustomed to the manners of Society—who declined to accept the courteous disclaimer of an unexpected visit.

" Miss Tablot is not receiving visitors," he explained.

" Exactly. Take that card and the letter to Miss Talbot and bring me the answer."

Jeames was no match for his antagonist. He silently showed the way into a reception room and disappeared. A minute later he announced, with much deference, that Miss Talbot would see Mr. Brett in the library, and he conducted this mysterious visitor upstairs.

On rejoining Buttons in the hall he solemnly observed :

" That's a swell cop who is with the missus—shining topper, button-hole, buckskin gloves, patent leathers, all complete. Footmen ain't in it with the force, nowadays."

Jeames expanded his magnificent waistcoat with a heavy sigh over this philosophical dictum, the poignancy of which was enhanced by his knowledge that the upper housemaid had taken to conversing with a mounted policeman in the Park during her afternoons off.

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The apartment in which Brett found himself gave ready indications of the character of its tenants. Tod's "Rajasthan" jostled a volume of the Badminton Library on the bookshelves, a copy of the Allahabad *Pioneer* lay beside the *Field* and the *Times* on the table, and many varieties of horns made trophies with quaint weapons on the walls.

A complete edition of Ruskin, and some exquisite prints of Rossetti's best known works, supplied a different set of emblems, whilst the room generally showed signs of daily occupation.

"Anglo-Indian uncle, artistic niece," was the barrister's rapid comment, but further analysis was prevented by the entrance of Miss Edith Talbot.

The surprise of the pair was mutual.

Brett expected to see a young, pretty and clever girl, vain enough to believe she had brains, and sufficiently well endowed with that rare commodity to be able to twist the good-natured Earl of Fairholme round her little finger.

Young, not more than twenty—unquestionably beautiful, with the graceful contour and delicately-balanced features of a portrait by Romney—Edith Talbot bore few of the marks that pass current as the outward and visible signs of a modern woman of Society. That she should be self-possessed and dressed in perfect taste were as obvious adjuncts of her character as that each phase of her clear thought should reflect itself in a singularly mobile face.

To such a woman pretence was impossible, the polite fictions of fashionable life impossible. Brett readily understood why the Earl of Fairholme had fallen in love with this fair creature. He

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had simply bent in worship before a goddess of his own creed.

To the girl, Brett was equally a revelation.

Fairholme's introductory note described the barrister as " the smartest criminal lawyer in London —one whose aid would be invaluable." She expected to meet a sharp-featured, wizened, elderly man, with gold-rimmed eye-glasses, a queer voice and a nasty habit of asking unexpected questions.

In place of this commonplace personality, she encountered a handsome, well-groomed gentleman—one who won confidence by his intellectual face, and retained it by invisibly establishing a social equality. Fortunately, there is yet in Britain an aristocracy wherein good birth is synonymous with good breeding—a freemasonry whose passwords cannot be simulated, nor its membership bought.

Brett read the wonder in the girl's eyes, and hastened to explain.

" The Earl of Fairholme," said Brett, " thought I might be of some service in the matter of your brother's strange disappearance, Miss Talbot. I am not a professional detective, but my friends are good enough to believe that I am very successful in unravelling mysteries that are beyond the ken of Scotland Yard. I have heard something of the facts in this present affair. Will you trust me so far as to tell me all that is known to you personally ? "

" My uncle, General Fitzjames, has just gone to Scotland Yard," she began, timidly.

" Quite so. Perhaps you prefer to await his return ? "

" Oh, no, I do not mean that. But it is so hard

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to know how best to act. Uncle expects the police to accomplish impossibilities. He says that they should long since have found out what has become of Jack. Perhaps they may resent my interference."

"My interference, to be exact," said Reggie, with the pleasant smile that had fascinated so many women. Even Edith Talbot was not wholly proof against its magic.

"I, personally, have little faith in them," she confessed.

"I have none."

"Well, I will do as you advise."

"Then I recommend you to take me into your confidence. I know Scotland Yard and its methods. We do not follow the same path."

"I believe in you and trust you," said the girl.

So ingenuous was the look from the large, deep eyes which accompanied this declaration of confidence, that many men would have pronounced Miss Talbot to be an experienced flirt. Brett knew better. He simply bowed his acknowledgements.

"What is it that you want to know?" she continued. "We ourselves are no better informed than the newspapers as to what has actually happened, save that four men have been killed as the result of a carefully-planned robbery. As for my brother——"

She paused and strove hard to force back her tears.

"Your brother has simply vanished, Miss Talbot. If the criminals did not scruple to leave four dead men behind, they would not draw the line at a fifth. The clear inference is that your brother is alive, but under restraint."

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"I can see that it is possible he was alive until some time after the tragedy at Albert Gate. But —but—what connection can Jack have with the theft of diamonds worth millions? These people used him as their tool in some manner. Why should they spare him when success had crowned their efforts?"

"We are conversing in riddles. Will you explain?"

"You know that my brother is an assistant Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office?"

"Yes."

"Well, early in September, his chief placed him in charge of a special undertaking. The Sultan had decided to have a large number of rough diamonds cut and polished by the best European experts. They were all magnificent gems, exceedingly valuable it seems, being rare both in size and purity; but one of them was larger than any known diamond. Jack told me it was quite as big as a good-sized hen's egg. Both it and the others, he said, had the appearance of lumps of alum; but the experts said that the smaller stones were worth more than a million sterling, whilst the price of the large one could not be fixed. No one but an Emperor or Sultan would buy it. His Excellency Mehemet Ali Pasha was the especial envoy charged with this mission, and he brought credentials to the Foreign Office asking for facilities to be given for its execution. He and the two secretaries who accompanied him have been killed."

"Yes?" said Brett, whose eyes were fixed intently on the hearthrug.

"Jack was given the special duty of looking after Mehemet Ali and his companions during their residence in London. It was his business to afford them

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every assistance in his power, to procure them police protection, obtain for them the best advice attainable in the diamond trade, and generally place at their disposal all the resources which the British Government itself could command if it undertook such a curious task. He had been with them about a month—not hourly engaged, you understand, as once the preliminary arrangements were made, he had little further trouble—but he used to call there every morning and afternoon to see if he could render any assistance. Matters had progressed so favourably until the day before yesterday, that in another month he hoped to see the last of them. He was always saying that he would be glad when the business was ended, as he did not like to be officially connected with the fate of a few little bits of stone that happened to be so immensely valuable."

"Did your brother call there as usual on Monday afternoon?" said Brett.

"Yes; he came straight here from Albert Gate, and had tea with uncle and myself. He sat in the very chair and in the very position you now occupy. I can remember him saying: 'By jove! the hen's egg'—that is what he used to call the big diamond—'is turning out in fine style.' He even discussed the possibility of bringing us to see the collection when it was finished and before it left this country."

"Did your brother say why the diamonds were brought to this country in the first instance?"

"Yes; the Sultan and his advisers seemed to think the work of cutting them could be performed more safely and expeditiously here than anywhere else. Even the Turk has a high regard for the

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manner in which law and order are maintained in Britain. Yet the sequel has shown that the diamonds and their guardians were perhaps in greater danger here than they would have been in Constantinople."

"Was that the only reason?" said Brett, who had apparently made up his mind with reference to the pattern of the carpet, and was now gazing into the bright fire which danced merrily in the grate, for the day though fine was chilly.

The girl wrinkled her brows in thought before she answered: "I think I do remember Jack saying that he believed there was some State business mixed up in the affair, but I am quite sure he did not know the exact facts himself."

"Can you recollect any of the special precautions taken to protect the gems? Your brother may have mentioned some details in conversation, you know."

"Oh, I think I know all about them. In the first instance, the house at Albert Gate had previously been tenanted by a rich banker, and it was well defended by all ordinary means against the attacks of ordinary burglars. But, in addition to this, before the diamonds left the safe at the Bank of England, the building was practically torn to pieces inside by workmen acting under the direction of the Commissioner of Police. It was absolutely impossible for anyone to enter except through the front door, unless they flew out of the second storey window. Servants and workmen, like everybody else, had to use this door alone, as the windows and doors in the basement had all been bricked up. Inside the entrance-hall there were always twelve policemen, and an inspector in charge.

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"Every one who left the house was searched by the inspector on duty, and Jack used to say that he was very glad he invariably insisted upon this examination, although the police were at first disinclined to meet his wishes in the matter, he being, so to speak, their direct superior for the time. Beneath the entrance-hall were rooms occupied by several Turkish and other servants. Mehemet Ali himself, in the presence of his secretaries, used to open the door leading to the suite of apartments in which the diamond cutters worked, and two of the Turkish gentlemen would remain there all day until the men left in the evening. The Envoy and both secretaries used to meet Jack when he visited the place, and for the last three weeks he had nothing to do but see the diamonds, count them, drink an excellent cup of coffee, and smoke a wonderful cigarette, made of some special Turkish tobacco, cultivated and prepared only for the Imperial household."

"Ah!" sighed Brett, with a note of almost unconscious envy in his voice. He knew exactly what that coffee and those cigarettes would be like. "I beg your pardon," he went on, perceiving that Miss Talbot did not understand his exclamation. "Will you tell me as nearly as you can the occurrences of Monday evening?"

"They were simple enough," said the girl. "My brother dined at home. We had one or two guests, and were all in the drawing room about 10 15, when a note came for him from Mehemet Ali. I know exactly what was in it. I looked over his shoulder whilst he read it. The words were: 'I wish to see you to-night on important business. Come, if possible, at once.' I have to tell you that it was in French, but this is an exact translation."

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"Your brother was quite sure that it was from Mehemet Ali himself?" said Brett.

"Quite sure," was the reply. "He knew his handwriting well, having had several communications from him during the progress of the business."

"Did your brother leave the house immediately?" asked Brett.

"That instant. He went downstairs, put on his overcoat and hat, and got into a cab with the messenger who brought the note."

"Do you know who this messenger was?"

"One of the policemen on duty in the house itself."

A slight pause ensued, and Brett was about to take his departure, having no further questions to ask at the moment, when some one was heard hastily ascending the stairs, talking to a companion as he advanced.

"This is my uncle," exclaimed Miss Talbot, rising to go to the door. Before she could reach it an elderly gentleman entered, bearing upon him all those distinguishing tokens that stamp a man as a retired major-general.

He exclaimed impetuously—

"I have brought a gentleman from Scotland Yard, my dear," Then he caught sight of Brett. "Who is this?"

Edith was about to explain, when another man entered—a strongly-built, bullet-headed man, with keen eyes and firm mouth, and a curious suggestion in his appearance of having combined pugilism with process-serving as a professional means of existence. His face extended into a smile when his eyes fell upon the barrister.

"Ah, Mr. Brett," he cried. "Now we have something to do that is up to your mark. You are

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on the spot first, as usual, but this time I can honestly say that I am glad to see you."

Sir Hubert Fitzjames glanced in astonishment from his niece to the barrister. He could find nothing better to say than—

"This, my dear, is Mr. Winter, of Scotland Yard."

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CHAPTER III

WHAT THE POLICE SAW

BRETT promptly cleared the situation by explaining to Sir Hubert, in a few words, the reason for his unexpected presence, and when the Major-General learnt the name of the distinguished personage who had sent Lord Fairholme to the barrister he expressed a ready acquiescence in the desire to utilise his services. Nor was the effect of such a notable introduction lost on Mr. Winter, whose earlier knowledge of the barrister's remarkable achievements in unravelling the tangled skein of criminal investigation was now supplemented be a certain amount of awe for a man who commanded the confidence of His Majesty's Government.

"Well," said Sir Hubert Fitzjames, with the brisk animation of one accustomed to utter commands that must be instantly obeyed, "we will now proceed to business."

For the moment no one spoke. The Scotland Yard detective evidently wished his distinguished colleague to take the lead. No sooner did Brett perceive this than he rose, bowed politely to Miss Talbot and her uncle, and said—

"The first thing to do is to trace the whereabouts

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of Mr. Talbot, and this should be a comparatively easy task. The other features of this strange occurrence impress me as highly complex, but it is far too early a stage in the investigation to permit any definite opinion being expressed at this moment."

Every one seemed to be surprised by Brett's attitude.

"Where are you going to, sir?" asked Mr. Winter.

"That depends largely upon you," was the smiling reply. "If you come with me we will go direct to Albert Gate, but if you decide to prosecute further inquiries here, I will await your arrival at my flat."

"That is as much as saying that there are no facts worth inquiring into to be learnt here?"

"Exactly so. Miss Talbot has told me all that is material to our purpose. Her brother was unexpectedly sent for after dinner on Monday night, and left the house hurriedly, without affording any clue to his subsequent proceedings beyond that contained in a brief note sent to him by Mehemet Ali Pasha. Indeed, it was impossible for him to afford any explanation, as he himself was quite unprepared for the summons. Meanwhile, every moment lost in the endeavour to follow up his movements is precious time wasted."

The barrister's manner, no less than his words, impressed Mr. Winter so greatly that he too rose from the seat which he had occupied, with the intention of conducting a long and careful examination of each member of the household.

"Then I will come with you at once," he said.

"Oh," cried the Major-General, "I understood you to say as we came here that there were many questions which required immediate inquiry in this

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house, on the principle that the movements of the missing man should be minutely traced from the very commencement."

Mr. Winter looked somewhat confused, but Edith Talbot broke in—

"I think, uncle dear, it would be well to defer to Mr. Brett's judgment."

"Do you really believe," she said, turning to the barrister, "that you will soon be able to find my brother?"

"I am quite sure of it," he replied, and the conviction in his tone astonished the professional detective, whilst it carried a message of hope to the others. Even Sir Hubert, for some reason which he could not explain, suddenly experienced a strong sense of confidence in this reserved, distinguished-looking man. He stepped forward eagerly and held out his hand, saying—

"Then we will not detain you, Mr. Brett. Act as you think fit in all things, but do let us have all possible information at the earliest moment. The suspense and uncertainty of the present position of affairs are terribly trying to my niece and myself." The old soldier spoke with dignity and composure, but his lips quivered, and the anguish in his eyes was pitiful.

Brett and Mr. Winter quitted the house; they hailed a hansom, and drove rapidly towards Albert Gate.

"Do you know," said the man from Scotland Yard, breaking in on his companion's reverie, "you surprised me by what you said just now, Mr. Brett?"

"I thought you were too old a hand to be surprised at anything," was the reply.

"Oh, come now, you know well enough what I

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mean. You said you thought it would be a comparatively simple matter to find Mr. Talbot, whilst the other features of the crime are very complex. Now the affair, thus far, impresses me as being the exact opposite to that statement. The crime is simple enough. A clever gang of thieves get into the place by working some particularly cool and daring confidence game. They don't hesitate at murder to cover up their tracks, and they make away with the plunder under the very noses of the police. All this may be smart and up-to-date in its methods, but it is not unusual. The difficult question to my mind is, what have they done with Mr. Talbot, and how did they succeed in fooling him so completely as to make him what one might almost call a party to the transaction ? "

The barrister pulled out a cigar-case.

" Try one of these, Winter," he said. " You will find them soothing."

" I never smoke whilst on business," was the testy reply.

" I invariably do," He proceeded to light a cigar, which he smoked with zest.

" I do not know how it is," went on Mr. Winter, " but whenever I happen to meet you, Mr. Brett, in the course of an inquiry, I always start by being very angry with you."

" Why ? " There was an amused twinkle in Brett's eyes, which might have warned the other of a possible pitfall.

" Because you treat me as if I were a precocious youth. You listen to my theories with a sort of pitying indulgence, yet I have the reputation of being one of the best men in Scotland Yard, or I should not have been put on this job. And I am older than you, too."

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"I may surely pity you," said Brett, "even if I don't indulge you too much."

"There you go again," snapped the detective. "Now, what is there silly about my theory of the crime, I should like to know."

"You shall know, and before you are much older. Bear with me for a little while, I beg of you. You may be right, and I may be quite wrong, but I think there is much beneath the surface in the investigations we are now pursuing. My advice to you is to drop all preconceived theories, to note every circumstance, however remote it may appear in its bearing upon events, and in any case not to act precipitately. Whatever you do, don't arrest anybody."

"But," said the other, somewhat mollified by Brett's earnestness, "half a dozen people may be arrested at any moment."

"Pray tell me how?"

"Descriptions of the stolen diamonds and of the suspected persons are in every police office in Great Britain and in most Continental centres by this time. Passengers by all steamers are most carefully scrutinised. Every pawnbroker and diamond merchant in the country is on the look-out, and, generally speaking, it will be odd if somebody does not drop into the net before many hours have passed."

"It will, indeed," murmured Brett; "and no doubt the somebody in question will experience a certain amount of inconvenience before he proves to you that he had nothing whatever to do with the matter. Now, don't answer me, Winter, but ponder seriously over this question: Do you really think that the intelligence which planned and successfully carried through an operation of such

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magnitude will be trapped by plain-clothes constables watching the gangways of steamships, or by any pawnbroker who has ever lent half the value of a pledge ? "

Almost impatiently the barrister waved the subject out of the hansom, and the detective had sense enough to leave him alone during the few remaining minutes before the vehicle pulled up near the Albert Gate mansion.

Brett stopped the driver some little distance short of the house itself, as he did not wish to attract the attention of a knot of curious sightseers in the street. He asked Winter to precede him and make known the fact that he was coming, so that there would be no delay at the door. This the detective readily agreed to, and Brett rapidly took in the main external features of the house which had become the scene of such a remarkable tragedy.

It was a palatial structure, built on the sombre lines of the Early Victorian period. Miss Talbot's brief description of the measures taken to protect its occupants from interference was fully borne out by its aspect. There was no access to the basement ; the main entrance was situated at the side ; all the ground-floor and first-storey windows facing into the street were fitted with immovable wooden venetians. Presumably those on the Park side were similarly secured, whilst the back wall abutted on to that of another mansion, equally large and strongly built, tenanted by a well-known peer.

Truly, it required a genius almost unrivalled in the annals of crime to murder four people and steal diamonds worth millions in such a place whilst guarded by twelve London policemen and under the special protection of the Home Office.

The appearance of Winter at the door caused

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the gaping idlers in the street to endeavour to draw nearer to the mysterious portals. Thereupon three policemen on duty outside hustled the mob back, and Brett took advantage of the confusion thus created to slip to the doorway almost unperceived. One of the police constables turned round to make a grab at him, but a signal from a *confrère* inside prevented this, and Brett quickly found himself within a spacious entrance hall with the door closed and bolted behind him.

Winter was talking to two uniformed inspectors, to whom he had explained the barrister's mission and credentials.

"We have here, Mr. Brett," he said, "Inspector Walters, who was on duty until ten o'clock on Monday night, and Inspector Sharpe, who relieved him. They will both tell you exactly what took place."

"Thank you," said the barrister, "but it will expedite matters if you gentlemen will first accompany me over the scene of the crime. I will then be able to understand more accurately what happened. Suppose we start here. I presume that this is where the police guard was stationed?"

Inspector Walters assumed the *rôle* of guide.

"I was in charge of the first guard established a month ago," he said, "and the arrangements I then made have been adhered to without deviation night and day ever since."

From the outer door a short passage of a few feet led up half-a-dozen steps into a large reception room, the entrance to which was closed by a light double door, half glass. On both sides of the first short passage were two small apartments, such as are often used in London mansions for the purposes of cloak-rooms. The doors from these rooms opened

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into the inner hall. A large dining-room was situated on the left or Park side, and on the right was a breakfast or morning-room. At the back of the reception hall a handsome staircase led from left to right to the upper floors, whilst a doorway beneath the staircase gave access to the kitchens and basement offices.

"Here," said the inspector, pointing to the foot of the staircase, "two police-constables were constantly stationed. Another stood there," indicating the passage to the kitchen, "and a fourth at the glass door. As the outer basement entrance was not only securely fastened by bolts and bars, but actually bricked up inside, it was absolutely impossible for any person to enter or leave the house save by the front door, nor could any one go from the kitchen to the upper part of the house without passing under the observation of all four constables. I arranged my guards in military fashion, having three men for each post, with one hour on duty and two hours off, but the same men were never on guard together at definite hours, as they were relieved at varying times. You will understand that I considered it a very responsible task to safeguard these premises, and thought it best to render it impossible for any section of the force under my command to take part in a conspiracy, although such a thing was in itself most improbable."

They then ascended the staircase and found themselves on the first floor.

There were six spacious apartments on this storey, and all of them had originally opened on to the landing. The special precautions taken to guard the diamonds of the Turkish mission had altered all that. Five doorways had been bricked up, the result being that admission to the whole set of rooms

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could only be obtained through the first door that faced the top of the staircase.

This apartment was luxuriously furnished, and Inspector Walters explained that the Turkish Envoy and his suite passed the working hours of each day there after they had personally thrown open the other apartments to the diamond polishers and unlocked the safes in which the gems were stored, when work ceased on the previous day.

"His Excellency," said the inspector, "kept the keys of this room and the others, together with those of the safes, in his own possession night and day. He slept upstairs, and so did the other two gentlemen. No one was allowed to come to this floor except the confidential servant, named Hussein, who used to bring coffee, cigars, and newspapers or other things the gentlemen might require, together with their lunch in the middle of the day. The workmen brought their lunch with them, so that they came in and out once a day only."

"Where did this confidential servant sleep?" said Brett.

"I believe he used to lie curled up on the rug outside his Excellency's door."

"And the other servants?"

"They all slept in the basement."

"What were they, Turks or Christians?"

"Well, sir," said the inspector with a smile, "two of them were Turks in costume, whilst three were Christians in appearance. That is the best I can say for the Christians, as they were Frenchmen, though certainly the cook was a first-rate *chef*. Of course, we all got our meals here whilst on duty."

"Did his Excellency and the other members of the mission eat food prepared in the ordinary way?"

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"Oh, yes; they appreciated French dishes as keenly as anybody might do."

"It was in this room, then," continued Brett, "that the murders took place?"

"Yes; I suppose that must be so," said the inspector. "But my friend here," pointing to Inspector Sharpe, "can tell that part of the story better than I can."

They passed into the inner rooms, which were quite silent and deserted, and presented a strange appearance considering the character of the house and its locality. Although the ceilings were decorated with beautiful paintings and fringed with superbly emblazoned mouldings, although the walls were papered with material that cost as much per yard as good silk, each apartment was occupied with workmen's benches, and curious devices for cutting and polishing diamonds.

In the first room were two small safes, one of which was intended to receive the gems under treatment at the close of each day's work; the other held certain valuable materials required in the diamond cutter's operations. Three of the rooms were on the Park side, and it was here that the small colony of skilled artisans had been installed.

The other two rooms were not tenanted, nor had any communicating doors been broken through the walls in order to gain access to them.

The windows of the three apartments occupied by the workmen were not only guarded by strong iron bars, but possessed the additional security of external wire blinds of exceedingly small mesh. Each window admitted plenty of light, and could be raised to allow a free circulation of air, but it was seemingly quite impossible for any active communication to take place with the outside. The

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three rooms looked out over a small enclosed lawn, which was separated from the park by a brick wall surmounted by iron railings. All the fireplaces had been closed with bricks and mortar.

"You will see, sir," said the inspector, when he had called Brett's attention to these details, "that mysterious though the murders were, they were as nothing compared with the disappearance of the diamonds. Every person who came downstairs was most carefully and methodically searched each time he passed the constable on duty at the bottom. It may be admitted that a few small stones could be so secreted as to escape observation, but some of these stones were so large that such a notion is not to be thought of, whilst the size of the great diamond which Mr. Talbot christened the 'Hen's Egg' rendered its transference past the searchers beneath absolutely impossible. There was no humbug about the search, you will understand, Mr. Brett. People had to take their boots off, open their mouths, and hand over their hats, coats, sticks, or umbrellas for inspection. Every part of their clothing was scrutinised, and the contents of their pockets, money, watches, keys, and the rest, thoroughly examined. These were our orders, and they were strictly obeyed, Mr. Talbot himself being the first to insist that the regulation should be carried out rigidly, so far as he was concerned. Why, one day a Cabinet Minister came here to see the diamonds. He was elderly and stout, and did not at all like having to take off his boots, I can assure you, as he nearly got apoplexy whilst lacing them up again."

During the inspector's running comments Brett had carefully scrutinised each of the windows. He at once came to the conclusion, by a simple analysis of the possibilities, that by no other means than

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through the barrier of iron wire had the diamonds passed out of the house; but the most thorough examination failed to reveal any loophole by which this achievement had been accomplished. He opened each of the windows, tested every iron bar, and saw that the fastenings of the external blind were undisturbed, whilst the fine wire mesh showed no irregularities in its hexagonal pattern wherein any defect would at once be visible.

"We have done all that long since, sir," said the second police officer, smiling at the obviousness of an amateur's method of inspection, for it happened that he had never met the barrister before, though he had often heard of him.

"You have?" said Brett, with the slightest tinge of sarcasm in his voice. "Did you do this?" and he commenced to thump with a clenched fist upon every portion of the external screen that he could reach.

"No, we did not," said the policeman, "and I don't see that it is going to accomplish anything except hurt your hand."

"That may be so," murmured Brett; "but the diamonds went this way and none other."

He tested every portion of one window screen in this manner without effect. Then he approached the second window, and, beginning at the left-hand top corner, did the same thing. Suddenly an exclamation came from the three interested watchers. In the centre of the lower part of the screen Brett's hand made a visible impression upon the iron wire. Using no more force than had been applied to other portions, the blow served to tear a section of the blind about eight inches across. Instantly the barrister ceased operations, and, producing a pocket-microscope, minutely examined the rent.

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"I expected as much," he said, taking hold of the torn part of the screen and giving it a vigorous pull, with the result that a small piece, measuring about eight inches by six, came bodily out. "This has been cut away, as you will see, by some instrument which did not even bend the wire. It was subsequently replaced, whilst the fractured parts were sufficiently cemented by some composition to retain this section in its place, and practically defy observation. There was nothing for it but force to reveal it thus early. No doubt in time the composition would have dried, or been washed away, and then this bit of the screen would have fallen out by the action of wind and weather. Here, at any rate, is a hole in your defensive armour." He held out the *pièce de conviction* to the discomfited Sharpe, who surveyed it in silence.

It was no part of Brett's business in life, however, to snatch plaudits from astounded policemen.

"This is a mere nothing," he continued. "Of course, there must have been some such means of getting the diamonds off the premises. Let us return to the ante-room and there you can tell me the exact history of events on Monday evening."

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CHAPTER IV

THE MURDERS

IN less confident tones Inspector Walters resumed his narrative—

"On Monday evening, sir," he said, "about eight o'clock, his Excellency and the two secretaries were dining downstairs, and matters had, thus far, gone on with the same routine as was observed every preceding day. The workmen quitted work at six o'clock. The three gentlemen went out for a drive as soon as everything was locked up, and came in again at a quarter to eight. They did not change their clothes for dinner, so there was no occasion to search them, as no one had gone upstairs since they had descended soon after six. They had barely started dinner when some one called at the front door, and I was sent for. The door bell, I may explain, was always answered by one of the house servants, and he, if necessary, admitted any person who came, closing the door; but the visitor had to be examined by the policeman stationed in the passage before he was permitted to come any further. On this occasion I went out and found three gentlemen standing there. They were Turks, as could be easily seen by their attire, and appeared to be persons of some consequence."

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"What do you mean by the words 'their attire'?" interrupted Brett. "Were they dressed in European clothes or in regular Turkish garments?"

"Oh," said the inspector, "I only meant that they wore fezzes; otherwise they were quite accurately dressed in frock coats and the rest, but they were unmistakably Turks by their appearance. Two of them could speak no English, and the third, who acted as the leader of the party, first of all addressed me in French. Finding I did not understand him, he used very broken, but fairly intelligible, English. What he wanted was to be taken at once to his Excellency, Mehemet Ali Pasha. I said that his Excellency was dining and that perhaps he had better call in the morning, but he replied that his business was very urgent, and he could not wait. He made me understand that if I sent in the cards of himself and his companions they would certainly be admitted at once. I did not see any harm in this, so I took the three cards and gave them to Hussein, who was crossing the hall at the moment."

"As the cards were printed in Turkish characters you could not, of course, tell what the names were," said Brett.

A look of blank astonishment crossed the inspector's face as he replied: "That is a good guess, but it is so. The hieroglyphics on the piece of pasteboard were worse than Greek. However, Hussein glanced at them. He appeared to be surprised; he went into the dining-room, returning with the message that the gentlemen were to be admitted. Of course I had nothing else to do but to let them in, which I did, accompanying them myself to the door of the dining-room, and making

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sure, before the door was closed, that their presence was expected."

"How did you do that?" said Brett.

"Well, although they spoke in what I suppose was Turkish, it is not very difficult to distinguish by a man's tones whether his reception of unexpected visitors is cordial or not, and there could be no doubt that the visiting cards had conveyed such names to his Excellency as warranted the introduction of the party into the house. The six gentlemen remained in the dining-room until 9.17 (I have the time noted here in my pocket-book). They then came out and went upstairs in a body to the ante-room, where they all sat down, as I could tell by the movement of chairs overhead, and in a few minutes Hussein was rung for to bring cigarettes and coffee. This was at 9.21. Hussein was searched as he came downstairs after receiving the order, and again at 9.30 when he returned after executing it. I was relieved at ten o'clock, and beyond describing the three gentlemen, I know nothing more about the business."

"They were well dressed?" inquired Brett; "they impressed you as Turkish gentlemen by their features, and they wore fezzes?"

"Yes," said the policeman, with a smile; "but there was a little more than that."

"It is of no importance," said Brett.

"But really it must be," urged the inspector. "One of them, the man who spoke to me, had a bad sword-cut across his right cheek, whilst another squinted horribly; besides, they were all elderly men."

"Pardon me, inspector," said Brett, "but you admit, no doubt, that this is a very remarkable crime I am investigating."

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"I should just think it is, sir," was the answer.

"Well, now, does it not strike you that the perpetrators thereof, who were not afraid to be scrutinized by yourself and by several other policemen, and to be searched and further scrutinized by a different set of officers when they came out again, would be very unlikely persons to bear about them such distinguishing characteristics as would lead to their arrest by the first youthful police-constable who encountered them? I do not want to be rude, or to indicate any lack of discretion on your part, but, from my point of view, I would vastly prefer not to be furnished with any description of these three persons, nor would I care to have seen them as they entered or left the house."

"Well, that is very curious," said Inspector Walters, dropping his hands on his knees in sheer amazement at such an extraordinary statement from a man whose clearness and accuracy of perception had been so fully justified by the incident of the window-blind.

"And now, Mr. Sharpe," said Brett, turning to the other officer, "what did you observe?"

"I came on duty at ten o'clock, sir; posted my guards, and received from Inspector Walters an exact account of what had taken place before my arrival. Inspector Walters had hardly quitted the house, when one of the junior members of the mission came downstairs with a note which he asked me to send at once by a constable to Mr. Talbot."

"You are quite sure he was one of the members of the mission?" said Brett.

"Perfectly certain. I have seen him every previous night for nearly a month, as the gentleman often went out late to the Turkish Embassy,

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and elsewhere. I sent the note, as requested, and Mr. Talbot came back with the constable in about twenty minutes. Mr. Talbot went upstairs accompanied by Hussein; Hussein came down, was searched, went down to the kitchen, brought up more coffee, and never appeared again. The next time I saw him was about noon yesterday, when we broke open the door, and found his dead body. At 11.25, Mr. Talbot, accompanied by the one whom Inspector Walters has described as the spokesman of the strangers, came down the stairs. Mr. Talbot looked somewhat puzzled, but not specially worried, and submitted himself to the searching operation as usual. The other man seemed to be surprised by this proceeding, but offered no objection when his turn came, and said something laughingly in French to Mr. Talbot, when he had to take his boots off. The two gentlemen went outside and called a cab. Mr. Talbot got in, and the constable at the door heard the foreigner tell the driver to go to the Carlton Hotel. He repeated the address twice, so as to make sure the man would make no mistake.

"Then they drove off, and there was no further incident to report until five minutes past twelve, when the other two foreigners came downstairs. Then we had a bit of a job. They knew no English, and one of our men, who could speak French, found that they did not understand that language. However, at last in dumb show we got them to perceive that everybody who came downstairs had to be searched. They submitted at once, and I took special care that the investigation was complete. There was nothing upon them to arouse the slightest suspicion, no weapons of any sort beyond a small pocket-knife carried by one man,

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and not much in the way of either papers or money. Before going out one of them produced a small card on which was written, 'Carlton Hotel.'

"I took it that this was their residence, so I instructed a constable to see them into a cab and tell the driver where to take them. I also showed them how much money to give the cabman. None of the gentlemen upstairs put in an appearance, nor did I hear them retire to rest. To make quite sure that all was right, I and a sergeant who looked in a little later, went upstairs and tried the door of the ante-room. This was locked and everything was quiet within, so we returned to the hall, and the night was passed in the usual manner. Hussein always made his appearance about eight o'clock in the morning, when he came down to procure coffee for his Excellency and the others. As he did not show up I wondered what had become of him. When nine o'clock came, I determined to investigate matters. By that time the diamond cutters had put in an appearance, and were gathered in the hall, undergoing a slight search preparatory to their day's work."

"How many of these men were there?" broke in Brett.

"Fourteen exactly. They were mostly Dutchmen, with, I think three Belgians. Taking a constable with me, I went upstairs, and ascended to the second storey, where I knew his Excellency's suite was situated, and where I expected to find Hussein asleep on a mat in front of the bedroom door. The mat was there, but no Hussein. Then I went higher up to the rooms occupied by the two assistants. I knocked, but received no answer. One door was locked; the other was open, so I went in, but the room was empty, and the bed had

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not been slept upon. This seemed so strange that I knocked loudly at the other door, with no result. I returned to his Excellency's floor and hammered at the door, which was locked, sufficiently to wake the soundest sleeper that ever lived. This again was useless, so I returned downstairs and sent off two messengers post haste—one to Mr. Talbot, and the other to the Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard. The man who went to Mr. Talbot's house returned first, bringing the startling information that Mr. Talbot had not been home all night, and that his uncle and sister were anxious to know where he was, as they had received no message from him since he quitted the house the previous night at 10.15. The Commissioner of Police came himself a little later. By that time Inspector Walters had reached here for his turn of day duty, and after a hasty consultation we decided to break in all the doors that were locked, commencing with that of the second assistant. His room was empty, and so was his Excellency's, neither apartment having been occupied during the night. We then returned to the first floor and forced the door of the ante-room, which, we discovered, was only secured by a spring latch, the lower lock not having been used. As soon as we entered the room, we found the four dead men. Hussein, the servant, was nearest the door and was lying in a crumpled-up position. He had been stabbed twice through the back and once through the spinal column at the base of the neck. His Excellency and the two assistants were seated in chairs, but had been stabbed through the heart. The instrument used must have been a long thin dagger or stiletto. There was no sign of it anywhere in the room, and most certainly none of the men who came out the

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previous night had such a weapon concealed upon him.

"Doctors were at once sent for, and the first medical gentlemen to arrive said that each of the four had been dead for many hours, but they also imagined that the coffee, the remains of which we found in some cups on the table, had been drugged. So, before disturbing the room and its contents in any way, the Commissioner sent for Dr. Tennyson Coke. After careful investigation Dr. Coke came to the same conclusion as the other gentlemen. He believes that his Excellency and his two assistants were first stupefied by the drug and then murdered as they sat in their chairs, whilst the appearance of Hussein and the nature of his wounds seemed to indicate that he had been unexpectedly attacked and killed before he could struggle effectually or even call for assistance.

"Of course, the diamonds had vanished, whilst in the safes or on the tables we found the keys which had evidently been taken from his Excellency's pockets. We were all puzzled to account for the disappearance of the diamonds and the dagger, but you have clearly shown the means whereby they were conveyed off the premises. Dr. Coke took away the coffee for analysis. The four bodies were carried to the mortuary in Chapel Place, and the fourteen workmen were conveyed to Scotland Yard, not because we have any charge against them, but the Commissioner thought it best to keep them under surveillance until the Turkish Embassy had settled what was to be done with them, in the matter of paying such wages as were due and sending them back to Amsterdam. The men themselves, I may add, were quite satisfied with our action in the

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matter. That is really all I have to tell you."

"It is quite clear, then," said Brett, "that two men succeeded in murdering four and in getting away with their plunder and arms without creating the slightest noise or exciting any suspicion in your mind."

"That is so," admitted Inspector Sharpe ruefully.

"Then," said Brett, "there is nothing else to be done here. Will you come with me, Mr. Winter?"

"Where to, sir?" inquired the detective.

"To find Mr. Talbot, of course."

"Easier said than done," remarked Inspector Walters, as the door closed behind the visitors.

Inspector Sharpe was less sceptical.

"He's a very smart chap is Brett," he said. "Neither you nor I thought of punching that wire screen, did we?"

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CHAPTER V

A STARTLING CLUE

ONCE clear of the Albert Gate mansion, the barrister was bound to confess to a sense of indefiniteness, a feeling of uncertainty which seldom characterised either his thoughts or his actions. He admitted as much to his companion, for Brett was a man who would not consent to pose under any circumstances.

"It is quite true," he explained, "that our first duty must be to find Mr. Talbot, and it is still more certain that we will be able to accomplish that part of our task; but there are elements in this inquiry which baffle me at present."

"And what are they, sir?" said the detective.

"I fail to see why Mr. Talbot was dragged into the matter at all. On the straightforward assumption that Turks were engaged in the pleasant occupation of taking other Turks' lives—an assumption to which, by the way, I attach no great amount of credence—why did they not allow Mr. Talbot to go quietly to his own home? It was not that they feared more speedy discovery of their crime. The hour was then late; it was tolerably certain that he would make no move which might prove injurious to them until next morning, and then the whole affair was bound to

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be discovered by the police in the ordinary course of events."

"I don't quite follow you, sir," said Winter, with a puzzled tone in his voice. They had, for the sake of quietude, turned into the Park, and were now walking towards Hyde Park Corner. "What do you mean by saying that Mr. Talbot would make no move in the matter until next morning?"

"Oh, I forgot," said Brett. "Of course, you don't know why the diamonds were stolen?"

"For the same reason that all other diamonds are stolen, I suppose."

"Oh, dear no," laughed the barrister. "This is a political crime."

"Political!" said the amazed policeman.

"Well, we won't quarrel about words, and as there are perhaps no politics in Turkey, we will call it dynastic or any other loud-voiced adjective which serves to take it out of the category of simple felony. Why? I cannot at this moment tell you, but you may be perfectly certain that the disappearance of those diamonds from the custody of Mehemet Ali Pasha will not cause the Sultan to sleep any more soundly."

"What beats me, Mr. Brett," said the detective, viciously prodding the gravel path with his stick, "is how you ferret out these queer facts—fancies some people would call them, as I used to do until I knew you better."

"In this case it is simple enough. By mere chance I happened to read this morning that there had been some little domestic squabble in royal circles at Constantinople. I don't know whether you are acquainted with Turkish history, Mr. Winter, but it is a well-recognised principle that any Sultan is liable to die of diseases which are weird and pain-

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fully sudden ; for instance, the last one is popularly supposed to have plunged a long sharp scissors into his jugular vein ; others drank coffee that disagreed with them, or smoked cigarettes too highly perfumed. In any case, the invariable result of these eccentricities has been that a fresh Sultan occupied the throne. Now, don't forget that I am simply theorising, for I know no more of this business than you do at this moment, but I still think that you will find some connection between my theory and that which has actually occurred. At any rate, I have said sufficient to prove to you the importance of not being too ready to make arrests."

"I quite see that," was the thoughtful rejoinder. "But you must not forget, sir, that we in Scotland Yard are bound by rules of procedure. Perhaps you will not mind my suggesting that a word from you to the Foreign Office might induce the authorities to communicate officially with the Home Department, and then instructions could be issued to the police which would leave the matter a little more open than we are able to regard it under the existing conditions."

"I will see to that," said the barrister. "When does the inquest take place ? "

"This evening at six."

"It will be adjourned, of course ? "

"Oh, yes ; no evidence will be given beyond that necessary for purposes of identification, and this can be supplied by the police themselves and an official from the Turkish Embassy."

"Very well. You will mention to no one the theory I have just explained to you ? "

"Not if you wish it, sir."

"I do wish it at present. Which way are you going ? "

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"Straight to the Yard."

"In that case I will accompany you a portion of the distance."

They had now reached Hyde Park Corner, and, hailing a hansom, Brett told the driver to stop outside the Carlton Hotel. The man whipped up his horse and drove in the direction of Constitution Hill, evidently intending to avoid the congested traffic of Piccadilly and take the longer, but more pleasant, route through the Green Park and the Mall.

"By the way," said Brett, "did the driver of the hansom which conveyed Mr. Talbot and his companion from Albert Gate on Monday night tell you which road he followed?"

"Yes," said the detective, "he went this way."

Brett rubbed his hands, with a queer expression of thoughtful pleasure on his keen face.

"Ah," he said, "I like that. It is well to be on the scent."

He did not explain to his professional *confrère* that it was a positive stimulant to his abounding energy and highly-strung nerves to find that he was actually following the path taken by the criminal whom he was pursuing. The mere fact lent reality to the chase. For a mile, at any rate, there could be no mistake, though he might expect a check at the Carlton. Arrived there, Brett alighted.

"Are you going to make any inquiries in the hotel, sir?" said Mr. Winter.

"Why should I?" said Brett. "You have already ascertained from the management that no person even remotely resembling any of the parties concerned is staying at the hotel."

"Yes, confound it, I know I did," cried the other, "but I never told you so."

"That is all right," laughed Brett. "Come and

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see me at my chambers this evening when the inquest is finished. Perhaps by that time we may be able to determine our plan of action."

Once left to himself, Brett did not enter the hotel. Indeed, he hardly glanced at that palatial structure, having evidently dismissed it from his mind as being in no way connected with the tragedy he was investigating. He made it an invariable rule in conducting inquiries of this nature to adopt the French method of "reconstituting" the incidents of a crime, so far as such a course was possible in the absence of the persons concerned. He reasoned that a very plausible explanation of the unexpected appearance of the three strangers in the Albert Gate mansion on Monday night had been given to Jack Talbot. This young gentleman, it might be taken for granted, had not been selected by the Foreign Office to carry to a successful issue such an important and delicate matter as that entrusted to him, without some good grounds for the faith in his qualities exhibited by his superiors. Brett thought he could understand the brother's character and attributes from his favourable analysis of the sister, and it was quite reasonable, therefore, to believe that Talbot was a man not likely to be easily duped. The principals in this crime were evidently well aware of the trust reposed in the Assistant Under-Secretary, and they, again, would not underrate his intelligence. Hence there was a good cause for Talbot to accept the explanations, whatever they were, given him during the conclave in the dining-room; the effect of which, in Inspector Sharpe's words, had been to "puzzle" the young Englishman. Further, there must have been a very potent inducement held out before Talbot would consent to drive off with a stranger at such a late hour, and when the cab was

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dismissed at the Carlton, the excuse given would certainly be quite feasible.

"It must surely be this," communed Brett. "The man explained that he was a stranger in London, that he lived quite close to the Carlton Hotel, and that he found it convenient not only for the purpose of giving directions that would be understood, but also for paying fares, to direct the drivers of hired vehicles to go there and not to his own exact address, which he had found by experience many of them did not recognize, whilst his knowledge of the language was not ample enough to enable him to describe the locality more precisely. It follows, then, in unerring sequence that Talbot was conveyed to some place within a very short distance of the spot where I now stand."

He looked along Pall Mall, up the Haymarket, and through Cockspur Street, and he noted with some degree of curiosity that there were very few residential buildings in the neighbourhood. Clubs, theatres, big commercial establishments and insurance offices occupied the bulk of the available space. It was a part of his theory that none of the other great hotels in this district could harbour the criminals, otherwise there would have been no excuse to stop the hansom outside the Carlton.

Brett did not take long to make up his mind once he had decided upon a definite course. He stood at the corner barely three minutes, and then walked off through Pall Mall and down the steps near the Duke of York's Column into the Horse Guards' Parade, intending to walk quietly to his Victoria Street flat. A call at the Foreign Office procured him an official authorization from the Under-Secretary to inquire into the circumstances of Talbot's disappearance

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and a promise that the Home Office should be communicated with.

He desired to review the whole of the circumstances attending this strange mystery of modern life, and the result of his reflections quickly became apparent when he reached his residence, for in the first instance he despatched a telegram, and then made several notes in his private diary.

The telegram, in due course, produced an elderly pensioned police inspector, a quiet reserved man, whom the barrister had often employed. He explained briefly the circumstances attending Mr. Talbot's disappearance, and added—

"I want you to find out the names, and if possible the business—together with any other information you may happen to come across—of every person who lives within a distance, roughly speaking, of two hundred yards from the Carlton Hotel. The Post Office Directory and your own observation will narrow down the inquiry considerably. It is the unrecorded balance of inhabitants with whom I am particularly anxious to become more definitely acquainted." The man saluted and withdrew.

Brett imagined that he would now be left in undisputed enjoyment of a few hours' rest before the Earl of Fairholme kept the appointment fixed for seven o'clock. But in this he was mistaken.

Smith brought in some tea, which was refreshing after his walk, for the engrossing nature of the morning's occupation caused him to forget his lunch. A cigar and evening paper next claimed his attention, but he had barely settled down to the perusal of a garbled account of events at Albert Gate when his man again entered, announcing in mysterious tones the presence of Mr. Winter. Smith's attitude towards the myrmidons of Scotland Yard who occasion-

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ally visited the barrister on business, was peculiar. He regarded them with suspicion, tempered by wholesome awe, and he now made known the arrival of the detective in such a manner as caused his master to laugh at him.

"Show him in, Smith," he said cheerily; "he has not come to arrest me this time."

Winter entered, and a glance at his face brought Brett quickly to his feet.

"What is the matter?" he cried when the door had closed behind the servant. "You have received important news?"

"I should think I have," replied the detective, dropping into a seat. "I was just writing a report in the Yard when I was sent for by the Chief, and you could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard the reason. I suppose I am acting rightly in coming at once to tell you, although in my flurry at the time I quite forgot to ask the Chief's permission, but as you are mixed up in the case at the request of the Foreign Office, I thought you ought to learn what had happened."

"Well, what is it?" cried Brett, impatient of the other's careful provisos.

"Simply this," said the detective. "Mr. Jack Talbot bolted from London on Tuesday in company with a lady. They crossed over from Dover to Calais by the midday boat, and went direct to Paris. Mr. Talbot calmly booked rooms for himself and the girl in the Grand Hotel, had the nerve to write 'Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, 118, Ulster Gardens, London, W.,' in the register, and both of them disappeared forthwith. But we will soon lay hands on the gentleman, no fear. I have somehow suspected, Mr. Brett, that your notion of a political crime was all poppy-cock. It is a good big brazen-faced steal."

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"Is it?" said Brett, his face glistening with excitement at the intelligence so suddenly conveyed to him. "Would you mind explaining to me how this precious information reached you?"

"There is no use, sir, in fighting against facts," said the detective, with dogged insistence. "This time you are dead wrong. Mr. Talbot was recognized at Calais by a Foreign Office messenger returning from France. Seeing him with a lady, and knowing that he was not married, the messenger —Captain Gaultier by name—did not speak to him, especially as Mr. Talbot seemed rather to avoid recognition. Captain Gaultier thought nothing of the matter until this morning, when he visited the Foreign Office on duty and heard something of the affair. He then saw the Under-Secretary, the same gentleman who sent the Earl of Fairholme to you, and told him what had happened. The Under-Secretary could hardly refuse to believe such a credible witness, so telegrams were despatched to the Embassy in Paris and the police at Dover. From Dover came the information that exactly such a couple as described by Captain Gaultier had crossed to France on Tuesday morning; and a few hours later a wire from Paris announced the discovery of the registered names at the Grand Hotel. The Paris telegram went on to say that the gentleman had told the manager his luggage was following from the Gare du Nord, and that his wife and himself were going out for half an hour, but would return in time to dress for dinner. When his traps arrived they were to be taken to his room. No luggage ever came, nor was either of the pair seen again; but we will lay hands on them, never fear."

Brett took a hasty stride or two up and down the room.

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"So you think," he burst forth at last, "that Mr. Talbot has not only taken part in some vulgar intrigue with a woman, but that he has also bolted with the Sultan's diamonds, sacrificing his whole career to a momentary impulse and imperilling his neck for the sake of a few gems, which he cannot even convert into money?"

"Why not? It is not the first time in the history of the world that a man has made a fool of himself over a woman, or even committed a murder in order to steal diamonds."

"My dear Winter, do be reasonable. Where is the market for diamonds such as these are supposed to be? You know, even better than I do, that the slightest attempt to dispose of them at any figure remotely approaching their value will lead to the immediate detection and arrest of the person rash enough to make the experiment. Don't you see, man, that the Foreign Office and its messenger, its Under-Secretary, your Commissioner, and the Embassy officials in Paris have been completely and abjectly fooled—fooled, too, in a particularly silly fashion by the needless registration of names at the hotel?"

"No, I do not see it. One cannot go against facts, but this time the evidence looks so strong that I shall be mightily mistaken if Mr. Talbot does not swing for his share in the matter. Anyhow, I have done my duty in letting you know what has happened, so I must be off."

"To arrest somebody, of course?" cried Brett, with an irritating laugh; but Mr. Winter was already hurrying down the stairs.

The momentary feeling of annoyance soon passed, to be succeeded by profound pity for the household at 118, Ulster Gardens. He well knew that once

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the police became convinced that a particular individual was responsible for the commission of a crime it required the eloquence of several counsel and the combined intelligence of a judge and jury at the Old Bailey to force them to change their opinion. Brett had never, to his knowledge, seen Talbot, yet he felt that this bright, alert and trustworthy young official was innocent of the slightest voluntary complicity in a crime which must shock London when its extent became known.

The testimony of the Foreign Office messenger was, of course, staggering at first sight, especially when backed up by the hurried investigations made at Dover and Paris. But there must be an explanation of Talbot's supposed journey, and, even assuming the most unfavourable view of his actions, why on earth should he so ostentatiously parade himself and his companion at the bureau of the Grand Hotel? There could be but one answer to this question. He acted in this manner in order to make certain that his presence in Paris should be known to the police at the first instant they endeavoured to trace him. Then, who could the woman be? The last thing that a clever criminal flying from outraged law would dream of doing would be to encumber himself with a young and probably good-looking companion of the opposite sex.

The more Brett thought out the complexities of the affair, the more excited he became, and the longer and more rapid were his strides up and down the length of his spacious sitting-room. This was his only outward sign of agitation. When thinking deeply on any all-absorbing topic, he could not remain still. He felt obliged to cast away physical as well as mental restriction on the play of his imagination, and he would at times pace back and

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forth during unrecorded hours in the solitude of his apartments, finally awakening to a sense of his surroundings by reason of sheer exhaustion.

He was not destined to reach this ultimate stage on the present occasion. With a preliminary cough—for the discreet Smith was well versed in his master's peculiarities—his servant announced the appearance of the Earl of Fairholme.

Brett looked at his watch, and was caught in the act by his visitor. "Yes, I know we fixed on seven o'clock," cried the impetuous young peer, "but I was simply dying to hear the result of your inquiries thus far, and I ventured to call an hour earlier."

The barrister explained that he sought to learn the time as a matter of mere curiosity. "Indeed," he added, "your appearance at this juncture is particularly welcome. I want to ask you many things concerning Mr. Talbot."

"Fire away," said Fairholme. "I'm no good at spinning a yarn, but I can answer questions like a prize boy in a Sunday-school."

"Well, in the first instance, have you known him many years?"

"We were at school together at Harrow. Then I entered the Army whilst he had a University career. My trustees made me give up the Service when I succeeded to the estates, and about the same time Jack entered the Foreign Office. That is three years ago. We have seen each other constantly since, and, of course, when I became engaged to his sister our friendship became, if anything, stronger."

"Nothing could be more admirably expressed. Do you know anything about his private affairs?"

"Financially, do you mean?"

"Well, yes, to begin with."

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"He got a salary, I suppose, from Government, but he has a private income of some thousands a year."

"Then he is not likely to be embarrassed for money?"

"Most unlikely. He is a particularly steady chap—full of eagerness to follow a diplomatic career and that sort of thing. Why, he would sooner read a blue-book than the *Pink 'Un!*"

"If you were told that he had bolted with a nondescript young woman, what would you say?"

"Say!" vociferated Fairholme, springing up from the seat into which he had subsided, "I would tell the man who said so that he was a d——d liar!"

"Exactly. Of course you would! Yet here are all kinds of people—Foreign Office officials, policemen, and hangers-on of the British Embassy in Paris—ready to swear, perhaps to prove, if necessary, that Talbot and some smartly-dressed female went to Paris quite openly by the day service yesterday, and even took care to announce ostentatiously their arrival in the French capital."

For a moment the two men faced each other silently, the one amused by the news he was imparting, the other staggered by its seeming absurdity. Then Fairholme flung himself back into his chair.

"Look here, Mr. Brett," he went on, "if Jack himself stood there and told me that what you have said is true I would hardly believe it." A note of agony came into his voice, as he added: "Do you know what this means to his sister? My God, man, it will kill her!"

"It will do nothing of the sort," cried Brett. "Surely you understand Miss Talbot better. She

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will be the first to proclaim to the world what you and I believe, namely, that her brother is innocent, no matter how black appearances may be. I have no knowledge of him save what I have learned within the last few hours, yet I stake my reputation on the certainty that he is in no way connected with this terrible occurrence save by compulsion."

"It gives one renewed courage to hear you speak so confidently," said the earl, his face lighting with enthusiasm as he looked eagerly at the other, whose earnestness had, for an instant, lifted the veil from features usually calm and impassive, betraying the strength of character and masterful purpose that lay beneath the outward mask.

"Is there anything else I can tell you?" asked Fairholme.

"You are quite sure that his was a nature that could not stoop to a vulgar intrigue?" said Brett. "Remember that in this relation the finest natures are prone to err. From long experience, I have learnt to place such slips in quite another category than mere lapses of criminality."

"Of course any man who knows the world must appreciate your reasons fully, but from what I know of Jack I am persuaded the thing is quite impossible. Even if it were otherwise, he would never be so mad as to go off when he knew that something very unusual and important was about to occur with reference to a special mission for the successful conclusion of which he had been specially selected by the Foreign Office."

"Ah, there you touch on the strange happenings of coincidence. Circumstantial evidence convicts many offenders, but it has hanged many an innocent man before to-day. I could tell you a very remarkable case in point. Once——"

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But Smith appeared to announce dinner, and Brett not only insisted that his new acquaintance should dine heartily, but also contrived to divert him from present anxieties by drawing upon the rich storehouse of his varied experiences.

The meal, therefore, passed pleasantly enough. Both men arranged to visit Sir Hubert Fitzjames during the evening and decide on a definite course of action which would receive the approval of the authorities. Armed with a mandate from the Foreign Office, Brett could enter upon his task without fear of interference from officialdom. Nothing further could be done that night, as the private inquiry agent could not possibly complete any portion of his house-to-house scrutiny in the vicinity of the Carlton until the following morning at the earliest.

They smoked and chatted quietly until 7.30 p.m., when Inspector Winter again put in an appearance, to announce that the coroner's jury had brought in a verdict of "Wilful murder by some two or more persons unknown."

The detective was somewhat quieter in manner now that the sensational turn of events in Paris had assimilated with the other remarkable features of the crime. Moreover, the presence of a peer of the realm had a subduing influence upon him, and he had the good taste not to insist too strenuously that Lord Fairholme's prospective brother-in-law was not only an accessory to a foul murder, but also a fugitive thief.

One new fact was established by the post-mortem examination of the victims. Considerable violence had been used to overcome the struggles of the servant, Hussein. His neck was almost dislocated, and there was a large bruise on his back which

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might have been caused by the knee of an assailant endeavouring to garrotte him.

They were discussing this discovery and its possible significance when Smith entered, bearing a lady's visiting-card, which he silently handed to his master.

Brett read the name inscribed thereon. He merely said, "Show the lady in." Then he turned to the Earl of Fairholme, electrifying the latter by the words: "Miss Edith Talbot is here."

An instant later Miss Talbot came into the room. The three men knew that she brought momentous, perchance direful, intelligence. She was deathly pale. Her eyes were unnaturally brilliant, her mouth set in tense resolution.

"Mr. Brett," she said, after a single glance at her lover, "we have received a letter from my brother."

"A letter from Jack!" cried Fairholme.

"Well, I never did!" ejaculated Mr. Winter.

But Brett only said—

"Have you brought it with you, Miss Talbot?"

"Yes; it is here. My uncle, who was too ill to accompany me, thought you ought to see it at once," and she handed a torn envelope to him.

He glanced at the post-mark.

"It was posted in Paris last evening," he said, his cool utterance sending a thrill through the listeners. "Is the address written by him?" he added.

"Oh, yes. It is undoubtedly from Jack."

Here was a woman moulded on the same inscrutable lines as the man whom she faced. Seldom, indeed, would either of these betray the feelings which agitated them. Then he took out the folded letter. It contained but three lines, and was undated.

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"My dear Uncle and Sister," it ran. "I am in a position of some difficulty, but am quite safe personally.—Ever yours, JACK."

Mr. Winter was the first to recover his equanimity. He could not control the note of triumph in his voice.

"What do you think of it now, Mr. Brett?"

The barrister ignored him, save for a glance which seemed to express philosophical doubt as to whether Mr. Winter's head contained brains or sawdust.

"You are quite positive that both letter and envelope are in your brother's handwriting?" he said.

"Absolutely positive."

"There can be no doubt about it," chimed in Fairholme, to whom, in response to a gesture, Brett had passed the damning document.

"Then this letter simplifies matters considerably," said Brett.

Miss Talbot looked at him unflinchingly as she uttered the next question:

"Do you mean that it serves to clear my brother from any suspicion?"

"Most certainly."

"I thank you for your words from the bottom of my heart. Somehow, I knew you would say that. Will you please come and help to explain matters to my uncle? Harry, you will come too, will you not?"

The sweet gentle voice, with its sad mingling of hope and despair, sounded so pathetic that the impetuous peer had some difficulty in restraining a wild impulse to clasp her to his heart then and there.

Even Mr. Winter was moved not to proclaim his disbelief.

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"I will see you in the morning, sir," he muttered.

Brett nodded, and the detective went out, saying to himself as he reached the street—

"Nerve! Of course he has nerve. It's in the family. Just look at that girl! Still, it did require some grit to sign his name in the hotel register and then calmly sit down to write a letter telling his people not to worry about him. I've known a few rum cases in my time, but this one——"

The remainder of Mr. Winter's soliloquy was lost in the spasmodic excitement of boarding a passing omnibus, for this latest item of news must be conveyed tc the Yard with ali speed.

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CHAPTER VI

A JOURNEY TO PARIS

THE sight of Talbot's letter seemed to fire Brett's imagination. He radiated electric energy. Both Lord Fairholme and Miss Talbot felt that in his presence all doubts vanished. They realized, without knowing why, that this man of power, this human dynamo, would quickly dispel the clouds which now rendered the outlook so forbidding. For the moment, heedless of their presence, he began to pace the room in the strenuous concentration of his thoughts. Once he halted in front of the small bust of Edgar Allan Poe, whose pedestal still imprisoned the two cuttings of a newspaper which formed the barrister's first links with the tragedy. His ideas suddenly reverted to the paragraph describing the efforts of the Porte to obtain from the French Government the extradition of a fugitive relative of the Sultan. At that instant, too, a tiny clock on the mantelpiece chimed forth the hour of eight.

"That settles it," said Brett aloud. "Smith," he vociferated.

And Smith appeared.

"Pack up sufficient belongings for a short trip to the Continent. Don't forget a rug and a great-"

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coat. Have the portmanteau on a cab at the door within three minutes."

"I am sorry, Miss Talbot," he continued, with his charming smile and a manner as free from perplexity as if he was announcing a formal visit to his grandmother. "I have just decided to go to Paris at once. The train leaves Victoria at 8.15. Lord Fairholme will take you home, and you will both, I am sure, be able to convince Sir Hubert that to yield too greatly to anxiety just now is to suffer needless pain."

"You are going to Paris, Mr. Brett!" cried Edith. "Why?"

"In obedience to an impulse. I always yield to impulses. They impress me as constituting Nature's telegraphs. I have a favourite theory that we all contain a neatly devised adaptation of Marconi's wireless system, and the time may come when the secret will be scientifically laid bare. Then, don't you see, it will be possible for a man in London to ring up a sympathetic soul in San Francisco. At present the code is not understood. It is not even properly named, so people are apt to distrust impulses."

He rattled on so pleasantly that Edith, absorbed by the agony of her brother's disappearance and possible disgrace, could not conceal an expression of blank amazement at his levity.

Brett instantly became apologetic.

"Pray forgive my apparent flippancy, Miss Talbot," he said. "I am really in earnest. I believe that a flying visit to Paris just now must unquestionably advance us an important stage in this inquiry. Let me explain exactly what I mean. Here is a letter from your brother, in handwriting which you and others best qualified to judge

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