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The RIDDLE of the PURPLE EMPEROR

THOMAS W. and MARY E. HANSHEW

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OTHER BOOKS
BY THOMAS W. HANSHEW

❦ ❦ ❦

Cleek's Government Cases
Cleek, the Man of the Forty Faces
Cleek of Scotland Yard
The Riddle of the Night

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"For even as the light streamed out and flung that circle into that impinging mist, there moved across it the figure of a woman"

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THE RIDDLE OF THE PURPLE EMPEROR

By

Thomas W. and Mary E. Hanshew

ILLUSTRATED BY
WALTER DE MARIS

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1919

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"For even as the light streamed out and flung that circle into that impinging mist, there moved across it the figure of a woman"
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"Sir Edgar, startled by the sudden turn of events, was only just in time to see the figure of the woman he loved struggling in the arms of a servant" 88

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CHARACTERS

HAMILTON CLEEK, the Man of Forty Faces, and once known to the police as "The Vanishing Cracksman."

SUPERINTENDENT NARKOM, of Scotland Yard.

LENNARD, his chauffeur.

HAMMOND, PETRIE } Detective Sergeants.

CONSTABLE ROBERTS, Police Officer at Hampton Village.

DOLLOPS, Cleek's trusted friend and protégé.

LADY MARGARET CHEYNE, the only and orphan daughter of

LORD CHEYNE, whose title became extinct on his death, some years previous, but by his will he has left her all the family jewels, including the ill-fated

PURPLE EMPEROR, a big violet-coloured diamond looted from an Indian temple, and set as a pendant. She comes of age at 18, until when she is left in the charge of his eccentric sister,

THE HONOURABLE MISS CHEYNE, a recluse, living in a lonely house, Cheyne Court, on the banks of

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the Thames. She has kept her niece at the convent of Notre Dame in Paris, since her childhood. Disappointed in love herself, Miss Cheyne has decided that her niece shall be a spinster also, but Lady Margaret has contrived to meet and fall in love with

SIR EDGAR BRENTON, the son of the man who jilted the Honourable Miss Cheyne, and whose chance visit to Paris with his mother, a year earlier, led to his acquaintanceship with Lady Margaret, and with whom he is deeply in love. Unfortunately he is also loved by

JENNIFER WYNNE, the orphan daughter of a doctor who lived in Hampton previous to the present one. She earns a living by teaching, and lives with her brother,

BOBBY WYNNE, a young spendthrift and gambler, in the power of

JAMES BLAKE, the head of the Pentacle Club.

DOCTOR VERRALL, the village doctor, loves Miss Wynne.

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The Riddle of the Purple Emperor

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES A NEW FRIEND

IT WAS nearly half-past five on a wild March afternoon, in those happy years before the great war, and Charing Cross Station, struggling in the throes of that desperate agitation which betokens the arrival of a boat-train from the continent, was full to overflowing with a chattering, gesticulating crowd of travellers, all anxious to secure first place in the graces of that ever-useful personage, the porter.

It was the busiest hour of the day, and everyone seemed to be making the most of it. What wonder, then, that tempers were grazed, nerves jangled, and peaceable individuals were transformed into monsters with bellicose intentions!

In the yard outside the station a medley of motors chug-chugged unceasingly, crushed in upon each other like closely packed sardines, and presented

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to the casual individual a maze of intricacies and noise from which he could evolve no beginning and no end.

One car, however, somewhat conspicuous as to colour, stood out amongst the drab hues of the others, like a poppy in a cornfield. It was the red limousine of Mr. Maverick Narkom, Superintendent of Scotland Yard and the car in which that gentleman was wont to take his numerous voyages abroad.

But, at the moment, Mr. Narkom was not occupying its roomy interior. It was a youth who sat at the steering-wheel and he was staring with anxious eyes out of his drab, cockney countenance, glancing from side to side at the hurrying throng which streamed from the station as though he were expecting every minute to see the King himself stride from it.

But it was no King he waited for—rather, indeed, a Queen—the Queen of his beloved master's heart, and as he sat there staring about him, he became concious of a queer, gnawing pain somewhere in the region of his stomach. The knowledge of the very excellent tea he had missed, by reason of this endless waiting, swept over him in an overwhelming tide.

"Lor' Lumme," ejaculated he as the time sped on and she for whom he watched came not. "If she don't come by the next train I shall be redooced

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to eating of me bloomin' 'at to save me life! I'll be a living skeleton, I will, with not even as much to chew at as a winkle or a charcoal biscuit. But the guv'nor, bless 'is 'eart, ain't even 'ad as much as that! He'll be just fit to bust 'isself in a minute—an' speakin' of hangels, 'ere he is!

Here "he" certainly was, the only being in the world who counted to Dollops, and he looked both tired and depressed.

Under ordinary circumstances one might as well have expected to meet an uncaged lion in the streets of London, as to come across Hamilton Cleek wandering up and down in so exposed a place as Charing Cross Station at any hour of the day, much less when the Paris boat-train was expected. This train might debouch any number of Maurevanians or French apachés, all pledged to kill the "Rat of a Cracksman," the "Man of Forty Faces" who had long ago left their haunts and company for the sake of one fair woman whose eyes had pierced the depths of his degradation, bidding him aspire to better things.

And it was for her, his queen among women, that Cleek waited now. That morning's post had brought a brief scrap of a letter telling him that she was returning to-day from a long visit to the Baron de Carjorac and his daughter in Paris. Only a short, friendly note it had been, but sufficient to cause

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mine," she said in her fresh young voice, "Lieutenant Deland, dear."

No need to tell Cleek that there was some special reason for this meeting and introduction, for he knew only too well how quick Ailsa Lorne was to lend a helping hand to any one in trouble, and he registered a silent vow to do all he could, should occasion demand, for this tired-looking child.

Then Ailsa spoke again, looking significantly at Cleek.

"We have both been victims of a terrible crossing, and Lady Margaret has found no one to meet her. She has come from the convent of Notre Dame in Paris, and has to go all the way to Hampton now."

"Hampton?" Cleek echoed, raising his eyebrows involuntarily, for he knew Ailsa would go direct to the riverside cottage in that place which she had made her home.

"Yes, I tell her we are to be near neighbors. So, dear," she turned again to her companion, who was staring round the station in evident search of some friendly face, "supposing you let Lieutenant Deland drive us both together? He will drop me at my home, and put you down at Cheyne Court."

The girl's eyes lit up with something akin to real pleasure.

"Oh, indeed I will, if you—he—will not mind.

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I am so worried. I felt sure Auntie would have come to meet me. It is all so strange——" Her voice died away as if she were too tired to resist, and the eyes of Cleek and Ailsa met in significant understanding.

"The limousine is outside," he murmured in a low voice, "and I will run you down myself if that will suit you."

"Indeed it will," said Ailsa, gratefully, "and I shall just tuck that poor child into the car, then come and sit in front with you so that we can talk."

A sudden light came into Cleek's eyes, a sudden smile curved the corners of his mouth at this proof of Ailsa's trust in him, and he led the way out of the station.

Outside, Dollops was speedily dismissed to get a long-wished-for meal. Realizing that his beloved master was happy in his self-appointed task, he relinquished his place at the wheel, and was speedily lost to sight in the ever-moving kaleidoscope of the Strand.

Meanwhile, Ailsa, having snugly tucked in her travelling companion on the seat of the limousine, and seen that she was half asleep, betook herself to the front seat beside Cleek. And they started on the road which was to carry him once more nearer crime and disaster than any man would care to go.

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"That poor child!" she said, when the car was humming softly along, and whisking them out of London. "I watched her have such a pitiful parting with the nuns at Calais, and afterward, when she was so ill and lonely on board. I tried to cheer her up. It seems that she has been at Notre Dame Convent in Paris all her life, except for one stray holiday with a friend, and now she comes of age next week, and has got to live with a sour old aunt, an eccentric being who I think must be jealous of the child's youth and beauty. She will be shut up in Cheyne Court. It's a dreadful spot, too. I know it well. I have often passed it. I don't wonder she is dreading it. All the jewels in the world are not worth imprisonment in such a dreary dungeon as Cheyne Court must be!"

Cleek twitched up an enquiring eyebrow.

"Jewels?" he questioned, musingly. "Hm! Wait one moment. Lady Margaret Cheyne did you say? Let me see. I don't profess to be a walking Debrett, but I fancy the name recalls some strange memory. Lord Cheyne now—didn't he marry Miss Peggy Wynne, known over London as 'the beautiful Irish girl'? Yes, and she died, too, at the child's birth I remember. Hm! a heavy inheritance that, a thousand pities she wasn't a boy——What's that, dear? Why? Why, the title dies out with her,

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and she comes into all the family jewels. I don't wonder you think one can pay too high a price for jewels, priceless though they be, for if my memory serves me rightly, these include that ill-fated stone, the Purple Emperor——" His voice trailed into silence, he sat a moment staring ahead, and Ailsa forbore to question him.

Then he threw back his shoulders as if thrusting away the sorrow of the world, and with a tilt of the head, turned again to Ailsa.

"Ah, well, it's so far back that perhaps the fates will be kind," he said, musingly. "Perhaps you'd like to hear something of the story. We'll drive slower then. 'The Purple Emperor,' or to give its right name, the 'Eye of Shiva,' is, as you can guess, an Indian stone, and was looted from a temple at Benares in the days of the ill-fated Indian Mutiny. It was brought to England by a member of the Cheyne family—'Mad Cheyne' I think they called him—and there is a special police chronicle of the crimes committed by, and at the instigation of, the priests of the temple in their efforts to get it back into their possession again. I expect they have given it up now, for last thing I heard of that historic stone was that it was embedded in a concrete safe in the Bank of England."

Ailsa's face had become very pale while he

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was speaking, and as he paused she gave a little shiver.

"Poor child!" she murmured. "I don't believe the priests have forgotten. At least, two Hindoos were on board the boat, and both tried to scrape acquaintance with her. And I never knew! I never thought. As a matter of fact, I am not sure that one did not achieve his object, for at night while I was resting one of them approached her and won her confidence by telling her that he knew her father, an old friend——"

"An old *trick* rather," interposed Cleek quietly, "and one that has opened the door to wiser heads than that tired child's. If the wind sits in that quarter she will have a hard struggle, and will be well advised to leave the 'Purple Emperor' in its stony bed. Still, I suppose her aunt will see to that, as well as look after her better than she has done to-day."

"Oh, I expect so," replied Ailsa in her soft voice, as the car whizzed its way out into the open country.

"She seems to be very eccentric from what I have heard of her from Lady Brenton, a near neighbour of us both. Strangely enough, there is a little romance here, for Lady Brenton's husband was once engaged to Miss Cheyne, and I believe jilted her for his wife, so that a feud exists between the two families. But I believe it will be another case

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of Romeo and Juliet, for Lady Margaret is deeply in love with Sir Edgar, the only son of the squire, and there is no doubt that they will get married soon and then——"

"They will live happily ever afterward," flung back Cleek, laughing softly. "Ah, youth, youth!" His words died away on his lips, and a look of indescribable pain, amounting almost to despair, crossed his features, and for a time only the soft whirr of the car was heard as it plowed along the deserted country lane.

For some time a silence held, a silence which was poignant with memories. The country cottage was nearly in sight when Ailsa spoke again.

"I think I will wake her up now, so that I may be assured she knows where to find me in case she is lonely," she said softly, and smiled up into his face. "I have taken a great fancy to that child, dear, and perhaps I may be able to help her."

For answer Cleek slowed down the car that she could climb into the back.

Lady Margaret was still sound asleep, so sound that not even the opening and closing of the door disturbed her slumbers, and as Ailsa looked down on the delicate, upturned face, she gave a little sigh of regret at having to arouse her.

Very gently she placed her arm round the sleeping

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figure and raised her in the seat. The girl gave a little cry of distress.

"It is all right, dear," said Ailsa, tenderly, "you are quite safe but nearly home. I thought I had better rouse you."

"Oh, I remember now." Lady Margaret shook herself, to bring her scattered wits together. "For a minute I couldn't think. But I feel much better, dear Miss Lorne. Oh! It is good of you to have taken so much trouble. I am so glad we are going to be neighbours."

"Friends, too, I hope," said Ailsa with a little smile. "Would you like me to come all the way home with you, or do you think you will be all right by yourself."

"Oh, quite all right, dear Miss Lorne," replied the girl with a forlorn little smile that went straight to Ailsa's heart. "We certainly shall be friends, and I am sure Auntie will be grateful to you, too, but she has always been undemonstrative, and I would not think of letting you go out of your way, if you are sure your friend, I forget now——"

"Lieutenant Deland," said Ailsa, promptly, "a very good friend to me, and you may safely entrust yourself to his care, dear. I do not want Miss Cheyne to think us intrusive, so if you are sure you are quite restored by the little sleep just drive on

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and when you get home, do not trouble to thank Lieutenant Deland at all unless you like. And I will call and see Miss Cheyne to-morrow and explain how ill and tired you were. Good-bye, my child, and a good night's rest to you."

The girl returned her kiss willingly, and as the car slowed down outside the gates of the little river-side cottage, Ailsa opened the door and alighted.

"I have roused her now," she said gently to Cleek, sitting sphinx-like at the steering wheel, "and I think she will be all right. I would gladly drive all the way home with her, but I know Miss Cheyne is an eccentric being who loathes strangers at the best of times, and as she has probably seen me walking with Lady Brenton, she would most likely resent my interference. So you see, dear, I must leave the unpleasant task of facing the old lady and explaining matters to you."

Cleek smiled down at her tenderly. "I would face greater dangers than that, Ailsa," he said in a low, tender tone. "You know I am only happy in helping you, and those you are helping. I cannot see why Miss Cheyne should prove disagreeable, indeed she ought to be very grateful to you for rescuing her niece from the dangers that a big city might offer to a young, innocent child."

Ailsa shuddered.

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"Yes. I myself don't mind what she says, so long as I know Sir Edgar's *fiancée* is safe. I daresay Lady Brenton will contrive to waylay her to-morrow, and then——"

"Journeys end in lovers' meetings, eh?" concluded Cleek, with a little laugh of pure happiness.

"Well, I mustn't complain. I, too, look forward to a to-morrow. Good-night, my Ailsa."

She looked into his face with tender eyes. Their hands met and clasped in the silence that speaks more than words. Then she turned upon her heel and sped away into the shadows, while Cleek took the steering wheel once more. He sent the car rocketing onward toward the house which was to witness a tragedy, a tragedy that was about to set the world agape, and spin a riddle that even Cleek himself would find almost impossible to solve.

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CHAPTER II

THE HOME-COMING

A SLIGHT mist had fallen, and fields and lanes were gradually enveloping themselves in a gray shroud which rose in thick vapour from the river. Also it was getting dark, yet to Cleek, whose whole heart and soul were bound up in the neighbourhood that formed the temporary home of Ailsa Lorne, the one woman in the world for him, the way was as clear as though he held a map in his hand, and a torch whereby to see it with.

He knew that the dark, tree-lined lane ran on for some thousand yards, with but two curves, until it reached the neighbouring parish where it divided in a fork. Here one road led to the gateways of Cheyne Court and to the river-bank. The other proceeded to the rear of the village of Hampton. On the other side, draggled trees and matted gorse bushes were scattered over a piece of land which was used largely for the encampment of tribes of wandering gipsies, travelling booths, and circuses. It was as well the chosen pitch of the annual fair, an occa-

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sion that brought the rag-tail and riff-raff of London to over-flow the tiny hamlet, and give the inhabitants food for gossip for the remainder of the year.

Past these the limousine whizzed on like a thing possessed, taking the last mile between the forked lane to the house at such a speed that it would have overtaken or passed any other vehicle that might have been coming to the hall. But the lane was deserted and they passed down it alone. Another quarter of an hour took them past a big house standing half hidden in its own grounds. This was, as Cleek knew, the home of Lady Brenton, whom Ailsa had mentioned but a short time ago as being a neighbour of both Miss Cheyne and herself.

Some five hundred feet more, and they came to a pair of very dilapidated iron gates, standing wide open, and covered with a heavy coating of orange rust. Creepers twisted and twined themselves about the rotting rungs, clothing them with a sombre dignity that shrouded much of their evident neglect.

Cleek drove up the grass-grown strip of pebbles that was the pathway into a tangled avenue of overhanging trees that looked grim and forbidding. It was no wonder that few travellers passing that way guessed the existence of a house behind them.

As for that house itself, to Cleek's eyes it showed

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neither light nor signs of habitation. No smoke issued from its chimney-pots, nor was there a sound. To all intents and purposes, it might have been an empty building, and Cleek, who had hopped off the driver's seat, dived hastily for his powerful electric torch, preparatory to making a closer investigation.

The mist which had been gradually rising now seemed to wrap them in an impenetrable veil. The moon's light had vanished and for a moment only the drip-drip of some distant water broke on his ears as he stood alert, watchful, and keen. And even as he stood came a sound that froze his heart's blood, a sound terrifying in the broad open glory of daylight, but here, in the dark and chill, muffled by distance, yet none the less unmistakable, a very terror indeed. And that sound was the sharp crack of a revolver!

For a moment, as its full significance was borne in on his mind, Cleek stood rigid. Then as the door of the car flew open he turned to meet Lady Margaret in the very act of jumping out.

His first thought was as to whether she, too, had heard the ill-omened sound, but it was evident that she had not realized, or perhaps even noticed it. A frown furrowed her clear, child's brow and she clapped her hands together with a little gesture of impatience.

"Oh, can't you make any one hear, Mr. Deland?"

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she cried despairingly. "Please do make them hurry. I am so tired."

Cleek started forward, and dashing up the two or three stone steps, sent peal after peal of the jangling, old-fashioned bell reverberating through the house. There came no answer.

He bent down and peered through the letter-box, at the same time striking a match and letting its feeble light struggle through the aperture. All within was dark, and yet Cleek's tense nerves gave a little quivery jump. For a sound, slight though it was, came to his trained ears. It was the sound of a padded footstep, and to his nostrils was borne a strange, sweet scent, familiar yet tantalizingly unknown.

Again and again he rang the bell, and the echoes, pealing through the silent house, came back to him maddeningly. At last Lady Margaret, who had come up to him, laid a hand upon his shoulder and peered for a moment up into his face.

"I know how to get in," she said. "Let us try that window. It is the dining room, and should be quite easy to manage. Please try and force it for me, will you?"

Speaking, she ran lightly along the stone terrace and pulled feebly at the window, which was evidently locked. Cleek, following closely on her heels, felt a

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thrill of something akin to fear because of what that single shot might mean.

"Come," he said, suddenly switching round upon his heel. "Let's give the task up for to-night, Lady Margaret. There is nothing to be gained here, and Miss Lorne will be able to put you up comfortably until morning comes. Let's get away from here, I beg."

She looked at him in wide-eyed surprise at the suggestion.

"No, no, please. I would rather stay now I am here. Besides, it is my home, and Aunt Marion will be expecting me."

A few swift touches of his knife, and the antiquated lock gave way. With a little sigh of relief she scrambled through the window and entered the room with the air of one who has arrived home at last, and stood a moment looking quickly about her. Cleek followed closely upon her heels, his heart pumping furiously and his blood "up" for anything that might ensue.

The interior of the room was very dark, but apparently the girl knew her way, for she plunged forward unhesitatingly, only turning to speak to Cleek who hesitated in the background.

"Strike a match, please, Mr. Deland," she commanded with a little imperious gesture. "There's

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a lamp over here." Cleek, following the direction of her hand, speedily espied one which was standing upon an adjacent table.

With its friendly aid he was able to note the worn and threadbare appearance of everything, blurred and shadowy though it was. The only striking object was placed in the centre of a small stand and it was the picture of the girl he had helped to bring to her natural home. He turned instinctively as though to compare the likeness and saw that she had thrown aside her hat and coat and sunk down in the old leather chair, her blue eyes looking piteously at him as he came toward her.

"That's right," he said with a quick smile. "If you will rest here, Lady Margaret, I will go on a voyage of discovery, and see what has become of the servants. Your aunt has probably gone to meet you. I shall not be long and I will light this other lamp for you so that you won't be quite so shadowy. There, that's better. Don't be afraid, Lady Margaret." With a friendly little nod of encouragement he disappeared through the door and came out into a network of passages which were all wainscoted, while the floors were covered with dust, as if they had been unswept for months. From room to room he went. Each one was more lonely, dark, and deserted than the last, yet over all there hung an indefinable dread

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that made Cleek, hardy of courage as he was, wish that his faithful henchman Dollops, or his friend and ally Superintendent Narkom, were within reach. The last room of all at the end of a passage proved to be a small ballroom, a low-ceilinged spot littered with dust, its corners thick with cobwebs. An odd chair or so stood against the wall, leaving the wax-polished parquetted floor strangely bare. But it was not this that struck Cleek. It was a sight in the far corner that caused him to stop suddenly and suck in his breath, while the torch in his firm fingers trembled as though for a moment the grip was relaxed.

For there, lying crumpled up in a lax, horrible heap, lay the figure of a woman! Cleek's torch shed a disk of light upon the upturned face and he sucked in his breath again, for the features were distorted and appalling, and death marked them with his unmistakable trace.

For an instant Cleek hesitated, and his mind went back to that pistol shot such a short time ago. This poor huddled Thing with its staring eyes and gaping, twisted mouth was the answer to it. He walked rapidly toward the body and saw that it was of an old woman of about seventy but who had evidently kept up the fiction of youth as long as she could, for her cheeks were heavy with rouge, her

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hair was obviously dyed to a bright golden colour and her rich silk dress in the most juvenile of fashions. As he noted the flashing rings on her fingers and the priceless lace at her wrists, Cleek began to understand a few things, and among them the reason why Lady Margaret had arrived in England to find no one waiting to welcome her at the station.

For here, without a doubt, was the Honourable Miss Cheyne. Who had murdered her, and for what reason, remained to be discovered. Robbery was out of the question, for many hundreds of pounds worth of jewellery was there on her hands in the shape of rings and bracelets. Revenge? For what? By whom?

Silently Cleek stood looking down on the body, his chin held between his thumb and forefinger, his brows furrowed. Here was a riddle indeed. For one moment he stood stock-still, then with a sudden bound leaped over to the window, which stood bare and curtainless, looked out on to the grounds, and stood listening. For a sound, slight but none the less distinct, the tiny cracking of a twig, had arrested his attention. What he saw made his heart and pulses hammer furiously. For a moment the impenetrable curtain of mist had lifted and the struggling moonbeams flung a shadowy path of light across the lawn over which moved the figure of a

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woman clad in white, clinging robes, her head swathed in a white turban. A woman, at such a time, in this place! The thing was so startling that Cleek's brain reeled. Involuntarily he made a movement as if to follow her, but even as he did so the figure turned, and Cleek's amazement deepened still further as he caught a glimpse of a dark face and what might have been a dark beard. The curtain of mist had descended again, and the scene was blotted out before its full significance had been realized.

A woman and at such an hour in such a place! At any other time, under any other circumstances, Cleek might have thought it one of the maids speeding away to a meeting with some yokel lover, but under these circumstances, when there was no evidence of a servant's care in the place, such an hypothesis was out of the question. Yet he was loath to believe a woman's hand could have committed such ruthless murder. He switched round now in sudden fear. At any moment Lady Margaret might be tired of waiting and follow on his track. At all costs she must be prevented from doing that, for the shock would surely prove beyond her strength.

He crossed the room, and groped his way into the passage again. There was no key in the door, so it was impossible to lock away the secret of the ball-

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room, but he piled up two or three chairs in order to minimize the risk.

Hurriedly he traversed the corridors which lay between the back of the house and the dining room where he had left Lady Margaret. Pushing open the door cautiously, he entered. To his unspeakable relief the girl had curled herself up in the big arm-chair and gone to sleep. A swift glance showed him that it would be useless to awaken her; she was plainly exhausted by the events of the day, and she would sleep like this for hours. Though greatly disliking the idea, Cleek could think of nothing better than to make for the village, arouse the police, and take Lady Margaret down to Miss Lorne's cottage.

Treading as lightly as a cat, Cleek tiptoed back into the hall, locked the door softly behind him, and sped away.

He meant to pass Ailsa's cottage without breaking the journey, for he dreaded telling her to what a tragedy they had brought their young charge, but at the little gate a slender figure awaited him. Cleek halted almost mechanically.

"I didn't mean to wait up a minute, for I am so tired myself," said Ailsa, "but you see, I wanted to learn whether the old lady was very angry."

She looked up into Cleek's sombre face, and was struck by its pallor. "Why, is there anything

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wrong?" she said quickly. "You look pale, dear, and upset. Tell me."

"Yes, very wrong indeed, Ailsa mine," responded Cleek grimly. "Miss Cheyne has been murdered, and I am driving down to rouse the police."

A cry of horror broke from Ailsa's parted lips. She caught Cleek's arm in her two hands, and her eyes sought his face. "Lady Margaret—is she in the limousine with you?" she asked anxiously.

Cleek twitched back his shoulders and shook his head.

"No, dear. She is sound asleep in the dining room; locked in. I did not want to rouse her until I had got the police in charge. When I have I will bring her back to you."

"Let me come with you," said Ailsa swiftly.

But this Cleek would not allow, for the tongues of village gossips are bitter things to fight.

"No, dear, I cannot permit that," he responded, looking down into her soft, misty eyes. "You understand, of course. And the child is perfectly safe, and will not wake for some time. Time enough for your charitable instincts to awaken when I bring her back to you. Now I must go."

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CHAPTER III

IN THE DARK

CLEEK drove the car out into the lane with an impetus and speed that would have broken the heart of any police official.

"She is bound to sleep," muttered Cleek, as he bent his hand on the steering wheel, for his heart was sick at the thought of Lady Margaret. "She won't waken yet; not if I know anything of tired human nature. And I could—could *not* take Ailsa there!"

He found the village police-station, which was quite a simple matter. To convince Constable Roberts of the gravity of the situation was another thing altogether, and Cleek's story of the empty house and the murdered woman was viewed with gravest suspicion.

"Lor bless yer, sir, but 'er ladyship was down 'ere only this afternoon," said that gentleman with an air of dull finality, which made Cleek, his nerves on edge, long to shake some of the stupid self-satisfaction from his ponderous body.

"Quite possible, my friend," he said sharply,

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"but that doesn't prevent her from having been murdered in the meantime, and by a woman at that, does it? And I want you to come *at once*."

At any moment Lady Margaret might wake and find herself a prisoner. Then the fat would be in the fire with a vengeance. There was not a moment to be lost. Not a single moment, and apparently this fool of a policeman who didn't know his profession and what it entailed any more than the veriest schoolboy——

"A woman, Lord's sake, what makes you say that, sir?" gasped the constable, breaking in on his train of thought. "How does yer know?"

"Because I saw her," responded Cleek, irritably. "And if seeing isn't believing then my name's not—Lieutenant Deland."

He did not add, however, that there was something about the clinging white figure that he had seen that had given him a sudden feeling that it might be a *man*—or had that beard been simply a trick of his imagination? It was hard to tell.

"She wore a white, clinging robe, at least it looked like that, and a kind of turban. I had only a glimpse, but it was not the figure of a servant, of that I am sure," he went on after a pause. The constable stood gaping at him in open-mouthed amazement.

"Yes, you may well be sure of that," said he finally

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with a little grin. "There's precious few servants up in that house, I can tell you. Why, it would break the old lady's heart to think there was someone in that house eating anything without paying for it first."

"Hmm. Close as that, eh? And do you mean to tell me that that Miss Cheyne lived in that deserted barn without another soul to keep her company?"

The constable nodded his head with evident relish. Giving information was a great deal more in his line than receiving it.

"I do that!" he said confidentially. "She used to have old Timms and his wife, sort of combination gardener and 'ousekeeper as you might put it, but when they dies of rheumatism last year, one followin' on t'other, she just 'ad one of the village women occasionally. No, it certainly wouldn't be any servant.

"Talking of turbans, though, it might be one of them Indian chaps wots just come lately in the neighbourhood," the constable continued with a sudden spark of actual intelligence—the first, by the way, he had shown. "Can't abide niggers, myself, but there's no accounting for tastes, and——"

"What's that? Do you mean to tell me there are Hindoos here?" Cleek's voice trailed away into sillence, for fresh in his memory was the recollection

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of the scent he had noticed when he first entered the house. He remembered what it was now. It was jasmine, of course, and jasmine was the favourite scent of the Calcutta bazaars. So that was it, was it? A shrouded woman, eh? A shrouded fiddlesticks! If the Hindoos were in the neighbourhood they were there for no good purpose.

But the constable was getting garrulous.

"Lor' bless yer 'eart, sir, the place reeks of them niggers!" said he with a little self-conscious laugh. "Come from Mr. Gunga Dall's place 'tother side of the village, they do. Not but what he isn't a pleasant sort of gent, only as I says——"

"Yes, yes," said Cleek, "we'll hear all about that later. We can talk as we go, constable, so long as we do go. I want you to see the murdered woman and identify her, and if it *is* Miss Cheyne——"

"You'll never make me believe anybody's killed Miss Cheyne not so long as I'm a-livin'," threw in the constable with a shake of his head. "Why, there ain't a valyble left in the place. But I'll come, o' course, sir. A matter o' dooty. So if you'll give me time to put on my coat and tell the missus to keep my bit of supper warm I'll come along and hinvestigate."

Cleek made no further comment. He merely went back to the waiting limousine and took his seat

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in it, full of a nervous impatience. Again and yet again his mind went back to that shadowy figure that had crossed the lawn, and to the sweet, insidious scent of jasmine that had assailed his nostrils. Hindoos were certainly at the bottom of this murder; and he had left that helpless young girl at their mercy! What a fool he had been! They would come back, that was certain, to finish their hellish work of revenge—a revenge that had taken two hundred years to consummate.

It was little wonder that his impatience had grown almost unbearable when Constable Roberts booted, belted, and helmetted in all the majesty of the law issued from his house and clambered into the car beside him. The constable's air was more civil and obsequious as he took in the luxury of his surroundings, and as they whisked onward into the darkness he gave forth all the knowledge he possessed of the Cheyne family for Cleek's especial benefit.

"A bit touched, if yer asks me, sir," said Mr. Roberts as he puffed away contentedly at the cigar Cleek had offered him. "Never the same, so I've heard tell, since she was jilted thirty years ago by old Squire Brenton—Sir Edgar's father, that is—fine proper man he were, too, and when he found Miss Marion had a temper of her own, he up and cleared out. Next thing any one knows he comes back with

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his wife, a pretty slip of a thing, and our Sir Edgar a crowing baby. Miss Marion shut herself up then, and wouldn't 'ave a servant in the place except old Timms and his wife, as I said just now. There's no one to go near her, and I don't think Mr. Gunga Dall would visit her again in a hurry after the way she treated him. Nice old scene he had with 'er."

"Hello, what's that?" said Cleek, suddenly. "A 'scene'? How and where?—or perhaps you don't know?"

"As it happens, I do," said Constable Roberts, pompously. "My young Jim, the little varmint, chose that day to play truant, and at the identical moment that the old girl—lady, I mean, beggin' yer pardon, sir—pitched him into the water——"

"*Into the water?*" echoed Cleek incredulously. "A lady pitched a gentleman into the water, Constable——"

"Well, she did, anyway, and Jim said the way the gent cussed was a reg'lar lesson to 'im."

"Fluent English, eh?" said Cleek.

"Re-markable sir, for a pore benighted 'eathen. It's wonderful, that's wot I calls it, but it all came of 'im a wanting to go a fishing——"

"Fishing—a Hindoo go fishing?" Cleek's brows came together in a heavy frown and his eyes narrowed down to pin points at this remarkable statement.

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"Yes, sir, you know the grounds of Cheyne Court slope right down to the river, and there is a fine bit of water there. According to my Jim, he went to ask the old lady's permission first, but getting no answer to all his knocks at the front door, he takes kind of French leave, as yer might say, and goes down to the spot, and starts in to fish. Well, sir, as I takes it, the old lady saw 'im from a hupper window and down she comes and abuses 'im like a pickpocket. Gunga he tried to pacify her, but she up and pushed him in, and as I said before, Jim's been a 'oly terror at language ever since! Not but it's any wonder, sir, cold water's not up to much at the best of times, and when you're an Indian and chucked in, so to speak, it's enough to make anybody's gorge rise. But I don't say but what the gent isn't as nice a man as you'd want to meet in a day's walk."

Cleek made no reply, but his brows twitched now and again and his mouth tightened, as he faced this startling problem. Here was a motive for revenge sure enough and something more, too. Why on earth would a Hindoo, presumably a Brahmin of high caste, to whom the taking of life in any form, however lowly, is an unforgivable sin, why would he pretend to want to fish, unless it were to spy on the land, and he be on the track of that ill-fated jewel the "Purple Emperor"? That the Indians would go so far as to

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kill Miss Cheyne Cleek did not believe, and yet—his mind harked back to that dark, bearded face in its white shroud.

"Hm," he said, casually. "Fine, bearded man I suppose?" They were fast approaching the gates of Cheyne Court once more as he spoke, and the constable swung round in his seat and looked at him.

"What, Gunga Dall, sir?" said he, a note of surprise in his tones. "Not 'e sir, not a blessed 'air on his face. Comes down often to the village for a drink, too, reg'lar pleasant gent as wouldn't 'urt a fly. No, sir, 'e wouldn't do a baby no 'arm Mr. Gunga Dall wouldn't, an' if you're a thinking that 'e's 'ad any part in it——Oh, no, sir! I'd stake my life on it I would. Nearly there, ain't we? I pity that pore young thing fast asleep in the house with the corpse. Bit of a risk to leave 'er, sir, wasn't it?"

"I couldn't help myself," flung back Cleek irritably, for had not the same thought been torturing him ever since he had sped down the drive? "I should have had to tell her if I woke her up, poor child, and she was too dead-beat to stir for the next couple of hours."

"Not too dead-beat not to get a light, anyway," said Inspector Roberts, pointing in the direction of the house, and as Cleek raised his eyes from the steering wheel he saw a sight that caused the machine

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to swerve wildly in consequence. For the dark deserted house over which he had wandered barely half an hour before, leaving it tenanted by a sleeping girl and the body of the only relative she had possessed in the world, was now gaily lit from top to bottom and from behind the blinds of one of the rooms could be seen the be-capped head of a maid.

"The devils have come back!" Cleek cried as he put on greater speed than ever. "There's not a moment to be lost. Lord send she's safe. Hurry, man, for God's sake, hurry! "

But there was no need to tell Constable Roberts to "hurry," for fully alive now to the urgency of the case he was already panting his way up the front steps.

"Locked," snapped Cleek as his fingers felt for the handle. "Get back to the rear. You go to the right. I'll try the ball room window."

Switching on his heel, he was gone before the ponderous body of Constable Roberts had recovered its breath. It was pitch dark now, and once out of range of the brilliant motor-lamps, the house was shrouded in a mantle of blackness. But Cleek had his electric torch and as he sped swiftly on his course he swung its light against shrubs and windows.

Turning the corner of the wall, he came within sight of the ball room window once more and reached

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it in the twinkling of an eyelash. To his dismay he found it not only locked, but what was even more terrifying by reason of its significance, shuttered and barred from within!

Cleek gave vent to a little cry indicative of mild despair and brought out his torch, letting its tiny searchlight fall upon the smooth lawn in front of him. It could do little more than throw a weak circle of light a few feet into the depths of the trees leaving all beyond and upon either side doubly dark in contrast. But for this Cleek cared nothing, for even as the light streamed out and flung that circle into the impinging mist, there moved across it the figure of a woman with a scarf of gold lace thrown over her head, from beneath which fell a shower of dark, unbound hair. It effectively concealed her face, and almost covered her shoulders wrapped in scarlet satin.

Satin in March! And a woman! She was the second woman he had seen cross the lawn that night, the one an hour or so ago, in white, and now this one in scarlet. The thing was so uncanny, so totally unexpected, that Cleek's brain positively reeled. In a flash she was gone.

He turned to follow in pursuit, but as he switched on his heel, it was to come face to face with the panting, breathless figure of Mr. Roberts.

"Ev—every door—fastened, sir," he said, his

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breath coming in great gasps. "What on earth's the matter, I dunno. But that's the gospel truth, and I'll swear to it!"

"Nothing else to do but to attack the front then," said Cleek. "Come on, Constable. No time to be wasted."

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CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE OF SHADOWS

CONSTABLE ROBERTS did "come on" and at a speed highly commendable, considering his portly build. Cleek, passing the long French windows through which he had obtained entry but an hour before, stopped to ascertain that they, too, were now bolted and barred.

Snapping on their electric torches they tore up the short flight of steps leading to the front door.

"Someone has made good use of their time," Cleek whispered, as he thought how easily he had entered with Lady Margaret such a short while before. "There's no use trying to force this door and the windows are now shuttered and barred. The only thing to do is to try knocking them up."

A second later Mr. Roberts sent a valiant peal resounding through the house and both men listened tensely for any response. One, two, perhaps five minutes passed; the echoes of their blows had died away into silence, and the flash of their torches showed to each of them only the other's strained

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expectant face. Neither eye nor ear could detect any signs of movement within.

"How we're to get in beats me," said Constable Roberts with a frown puckering his bushy brows. "We'll have to break in, in the name of the law."

And as though that very name had in itself something of the supernatural, there came a sound, a rustle, a step within the house, and the nerves of both men were near to snapping point. They stood a moment listening, while the harsh grating of bolts being withdrawn into their sockets came to their ears, and in another second the great door swung slowly back upon its hinges. The mellow radiance of lamps streamed out and flung a circle of light round them. As it did so a little gasp of astonishment came from both men, for in the doorway, gazing out on them in dignified reproof, stood an immaculate butler. Their hearts seemed for a moment to cease beating and they stared in dumb amazement.

It was Cleek who recovered his wits first. He turned to the butler with a perfectly impassive face.

"We want to see Lady Margaret Cheyne at once," he rapped out sharply. "At once please!"

The butler moved a little aside, as if the visit were the most ordinary one in the world.

"Her ladyship has retired for the night, sir," was

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the surprising answer. "I will see if the mistress—Miss Cheyne—will see you."

"Miss Cheyne!" said Cleek, sharply.

"Heavens! man, but she is dead," shouted the outraged constable before Cleek could stop him. "This gentleman came to fetch me to view the body. In the name of the law, I am going to search the place."

Staggered by the announcement, with staring eyes and dough-white countenance the man fell back a pace, and seizing the opportunity thus offered, Cleek stepped into the hall, closely followed by Roberts.

"This is preposterous!" ejaculated the butler, at last, as if only just realizing the gravity of the situation; then, raising his voice, he echoed the last words, "Miss Cheyne dead!"

And then—a good many strange things had happened in the course of this night, but to Cleek it seemed as if the very earth had stopped in its course, the door of the room which he knew to be the dining room opened with a little angry jerk, and in the doorway stood a figure that caused Cleek's heart to leap in his mouth. It was no less than that of the woman who had lain dead at his feet but a short time ago. It was Miss Cheyne herself!

"Miss Cheyne dead! What does this impertinence mean?" she demanded in a hard, shrill voice

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at the sound of which the constable's ruddy face became purple with anger. He whipped off his helmet and he pulled savagely at his forelock.

"Beg yer pardon, Miss Cheyne, yer ladyship," he stuttered "for disturbing you—but this—this—individual—," he almost choked over his words—"came and fetched me away from the nicest bit of supper I ever wants to see, to tell me you was a-lying murdered, begging yer pardon, and that Lady Margaret, whom he'd driven over in his car, was asleep alone in the empty house. More fool me to believe him, yer ladyship, but you'd 'ave done the same yourself in my place——"

"But I tell you——" began Cleek.

The Honourable Miss Cheyne wheeled round on him, her eyes sparkling with anger.

"So," she ejaculated, one hand pressed to her side, and Cleek found himself unconsciously recognizing the rings which had flashed in the lamplight on the fingers of the murdered woman. "So you are the impertinent stranger who inflicted himself on an ignorant, helpless girl, and caused me to miss my niece at the station. I drive back with the servants I had ordered from London to find my niece sleeping in a chair. I have packed her off to bed. And as for you, sir, you are an impostor and a thief for aught I know——"

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This last assertion Cleek took no notice of, but advancing toward her he said firmly:

"I want to see Lady Margaret——"

"Indeed," was the sarcastic reply. "I am not aware that it is customary for strangers to intrude themselves upon people, even if they have been of some service. As far as you are concerned, sir, my niece's reputation has had every prospect of being blighted by your misconceived and misdirected attentions."

"I have no wish to intrude or to make much of the trifling aid I was able to give your niece, Madam," responded Cleek seriously. "My name is Deland, and you can make what enquiries you like from my friend Mr. Maverick Narkom, Superintendent of Scotland Yard as to—er—my general character if you are at all doubtful about it."

A still angrier gleam shone in Miss Cheyne's eyes, and even as the words left his mouth, Cleek, with that queer sixth sense of intution, felt that he had said the wrong thing. If there were anything wrong, then the very name of the law would set them on their guard.

Miss Cheyne, however, seemed disposed to push her momentary advantage to its utmost.

"I don't care for fifty Superintendents," she declared, angrily, looking back into Cleek's face with

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flaming eyes. "You have no right to force your way into my house on any pretext whatsoever. Indeed, I am not sure that I can't have the law on you for breaking in my windows this evening. It will cost me a pretty penny. But I should like you to understand that I won't have my niece disturbed by anybody, so if you can't explain your visit to me, I'll say good-night and good riddance. As for you, Policeman, you ought to be ashamed of yourself to come here and rouse me on such a nonsensical errand."

She cut short Mr. Roberts's excuses and practically drove the two men back until they found themselves once more on the steps. Then the door slammed in their faces.

Constable Roberts turned swiftly upon his companion, and commenced a pent-up tirade against him for having fetched him out on this wild-goose chase.

Cleek stood still, pinching his chin with a thumb and forefinger, his eyes narrowed down to slits. Review the facts however calmly, he could still find no fitting solution. Sure he was that a dead woman had stared at him from the floor of that house, but he was also just as sure that the same woman had driven him out from it. And what of Lady Margaret herself? He had not a shadow of right to insist on

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seeing her. She was in the hands of her natural guardian, and yet, and yet——! The shadow of doubt hung over him.

He stopped short suddenly and sniffed in the air, much to the open-mouthed astonishment of Constable Roberts, whose grumbling remonstrances died away.

"Good Lord man, sir, I mean," he exclaimed, agitatedly, "but what's in the wind now?"

"Scent and sense, my good fellow," said Cleek. "There is a distinct odour of jasmine in the air and an artificial scent, *Huile de jasmin* at that. It is a woman's scent, too, and some woman has been here to-night. She's been on these very stone steps."

"Well, what if she has? That don't excuse you a-saying that Miss Cheyne is dead, when she's no more dead than you or me——" retorted the constable, heatedly. "I shall be the laughing-stock of the country, fetched out like a fool——"

Hardly listening to the stream of grumbling expostulation issuing from the mouth of Constable Roberts, Cleek bent down and sniffed again vigorously. He tested each step till he reached the gravelled path. All at once he gave vent to a sharp cry of triumph for there, indented in the path before him and revealed by the light of his torch, was the mark of a slender shoe—a woman's shoe unmistakably.

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In a second they had passed the lodge gates and were out in the narrow lane, which was black as a beggar's pocket, and as empty. A placid moon shone over silent fields, and only the soft whirr of the motor broke the silence as they sped along.

Nevertheless Cleek, as ever, was on the look-out. The sixth sense of impending danger which was in him strangely developed hung over him.

Suddenly, with a little cry of surprise and a grinding of brakes, he pulled the car up with such a jerk that Roberts, who had subsided into a somnolent silence, was nearly thrown off the seat at his side.

"A dollar for a ducat but I'm right!" he exclaimed sharply. "There's someone on that side of the hedge."

Without stopping a second he leaped down, cleared the low hedge as lightly as any schoolboy, and pounced on a crouching, running, panting figure.

"One minute, sir," he began. Then his fingers almost lost their hold, as the face of a man in deadly terror gazed up at him, and from him to the majesty of the law as embodied in the person of Constable Roberts. That worthy, having descended from the car, was now looking over the hedge.

"Lawks, sir, if it bain't Sir Edgar himself!" he ejaculated, and the sound of the evidently familiar

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voice seemed to pull the distraught young man together.

"Hello, Roberts," he said with a brave attempt at the debonair nonchalance which was his usual manner, an attempt that did not blind Cleek to the fact that his lips were trembling and beads of perspiration standing on his pale forehead.

"What are you doing gadding around at this time of night?"

"Me, sir?" replied Roberts, bitterly. "I've bin fetched out to see murdered women and——"

"Not—not Miss Cheyne!" gasped the young man.

A queer little smile looped up one corner of Cleek's mouth.

"Hello, hello!" he said, mentally, "someone else knows of it, eh?" Here was somebody who, to his way of thinking, jumped to right conclusions too quickly. Why should Sir Edgar Brenton, as he knew this man to be, know that it should be Miss Cheyne, unless—and here Cleek's mind raced on wings of doubt again—unless he himself had killed Miss Cheyne? And if so, who was this woman——?

As if from some distance he could hear Roberts's grumbling bellow:

"Miss Cheyne? Lor', don't you go for to say you've got that bee in your bonnet, too, Sir Edgar. It is quite enough with this gent, Lieutenant Deland,

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a-coming and fetching me away from my bit of supper. What my missis will say remains to be 'eard, as they says. 'Deed, no, Miss Cheyne's as live as you, and in a thunderin' bad temper——"

"Thank the Lord!" ejaculated the young squire in a low, fervent undertone.

"An' what made *you* think, if I might be so bold, Sir Edgar, that it was Miss Cheyne?" asked the constable curiously, voicing Cleek's unspoken thought.

That gentleman cleared his throat before answering.

"It was just a chance hit, Roberts," said he, but his voice held an odd little crabbed note in it. "You see, you were coming straight from Cheyne Court, so it couldn't have been any one else."

"No, sir, come to think, it couldn't be," assented Roberts, and Cleek, who had stepped back into the shadow of the hedge, twitched up his eyebrows as he sensed the relief that stole over Sir Edgar's face.

"A nice fright you gave me, too," continued the young man, speaking more easily. "I'm supposed to be at a political dinner-fight in London, you know, Roberts. Only just got back, in fact, and I didn't feel up to it, so when I heard that precious motor of yours I was afraid it might be some dashed good-

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natured friend, don't you know, and so I cut across the hedge."

"Quite right, too," assented Constable Roberts approvingly, in whose eyes Sir Edgar could do no wrong. Then to Cleek, "Well, sir, I think we'll be moving, if you don't mind."

"Indeed I don't," Cleek replied, and then he addressed Sir Edgar. "Sorry I startled you, sir—took you for a poacher, don't you know. Perhaps you'll let me drive you through the village if you are going this way." He smiled with a well-feigned air of stupidity, put up his eyeglass into his eye, and lurched up against the young man as he spoke.

"Pleased," mumbled Sir Edgar, and got into the limousine.

Another two or three minutes' run brought them into the village, and here Sir Edgar insisted on alighting, and continuing his journey on foot.

Cleek watched him go with brows on which deep furrows were marked.

"Wonder what made the young gentleman lie so futilely?" he said at length as his shadow gradually merged in with the darkness ahead.

"Lie?" echoed the astonished constable, as he fumbled with the latch of his garden gate.

"Yes, lie, my friend," flung back Cleek, his foot on the step of the car. "He was running *to* the

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station not *from* it; his clothes smelt strongly of the scent which pervaded the house this afternoon, namely jasmine; and thirdly, there was a revolver in his pocket. A revolver is a thing no gentleman takes to a dinner with him, even a political one."

And, leaving Mr. Roberts to digest this piece of mental food with his long-delayed supper, the car whizzed away in the moonlight. Cleek's first duty was to Ailsa, and he found her waiting for him pale and expectant at the little gate.

"Oh," she cried, as the motor panted its way into silence. "I thought you were never coming back. Where is she, dear? Where is that helpless child?"

She hurried out, but Cleek flung up an arresting hand.

"I am either going mad, Ailsa, or else there is a greater mystery here than I can fathom," he said quickly. "Miss Cheyne herself was there to receive us and——"

"*Miss Cheyne!*" echoed Ailsa, her eyes dilating, and apparently she was almost as shocked at this news of her evident existence as she had been a short while back by her demise. "But you said——" her voice trailed away into silence, and Cleek took the words out of her mouth.

"She was dead! Yes, I certainly thought so, and I cannot understand it. Nevertheless, Miss Cheyne

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is there all right, Constable Roberts will vouch for that; and Lady Margaret is presumably tucked up safe and sound in her bed, but it is incomprehensible to me. Here's the story if you care to hear it."

He gave a rough outline of his various discoveries and at the end of it Ailsa nodded her head gravely.

"I cannot understand it, either," she said. "I suppose nothing can be done, but I will go up to Cheyne Court early in the morning and see the child for myself."

Cleek smiled his approval.

"I wish you would," he said. "I must run up and see Mr. Narkom, and to-morrow perhaps—well, who knows——"

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CHAPTER V

IT HAD just gone nine o'clock on that same eventful evening when the limousine slowed down before Scotland Yard, and the car was handed over to its natural owners. Superintendent Narkom, Cleek learned to his extreme relief, was engaged on a special case involving his working at the Yard to a late hour. In the fraction of a second Cleek was ascending the stone staircase and traversing the corridor, at the end of which lay the private room of his friend and ally. He still felt that all was not as it should be at Cheyne Court, and even though he was unable to do anything at the moment, yet he felt he must pour the story of his adventure into the trained and sympathetic ears of the man with whom he had worked so long and so faithfully. It could not have been more than a minute, but the time seemed endless till he at length, after a preliminary tap, threw open the door of the room and saw the figure of Mr. Narkom ensconced in his armchair, his brows knitted, and his hands clenched

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over a sheet of paper lying on the desk before him. He looked up irritably at the evidently unwelcome intrusion.

"Now, what the——" he began. Then as he caught sight of the intruder, he leaped from his seat and fairly hurled himself on Cleek.

"Cleek!" he shouted. "Cleek, the very man I was praying for! Come along in and lock the door behind you so we can't be disturbed."

Cleek obeyed, smiling a little. He was always willing and eager to give his help to the Yard, and the very fact that Mr. Maverick Narkom so plainly depended on him lent still further zest to his willingness.

"Hello," he said lightly, "you look fairly dazed, Mr. Narkom. What's in the wind? It's a case, of course. And a jewel case at that," he added.

"Cinnamon! Cleek," stuttered the Superintendent, falling limply into his lately vacated chair. "How the dickens did you know, or are you——"

"In league with the Evil One himself, eh?" finished Cleek, the queer, one-sided smile travelling over his face. "No, it's quite simple, my dear fellow. At your side you have a book, 'Famous Stones and Their History.' In front of you is a lapidary's glass. Clearly you have been examining stones of some kind, real or artificial, see?"

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"Yes, I do see," muttered Mr. Narkom. "And you're right Cleek, devilish right. It *is* a jewel theft. As a matter of fact, it's a series of thefts, all by the same gang, and Heaven alone knows how, or from where they operate."

"Oho!" said Cleek, with a strong rising inflection. "A gang, eh? Now I wonder if I know. There's the French gang, headed by our old friend Margot; the Viennese gang, by Mr. Von Henri, and the Lambeth Walk gang that have called themselves the Pentacle Club——"

"That's the set. But how you knew beats me! Petrie and Hammond will have it they are at the bottom of these cases. There have been one after the other, jewels stolen from travellers at railway stations, jewels from shops, jewels at balls. There is a constant inrush of fresh cases, and I am almost beside myself with anxiety. In two instances, in fact, murder has been done, and the body found marked with a kind of six-pointed star."

Cleek's voice went up, and his brows came down. "Star, you say," he ejaculated rapidly. "*Star?* As you know, my friend, the Pentacle is a star formed by two equilateral triangles intersecting so as to form a six-pointed star. Properly it should be a five-pointed object, from the Greek pente, five, like a pentagram, or pentagon, but as applied to a

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magical figure it is probably a corruption of *pendre*, to hang, and that is a very appropriate sign for our friends to have chosen. This gang, too, if I remember rightly, used to be led by a man known as Snaky Jim, though I believe James Blake was his real name. At any rate, that was the name under which he served time. All this is by the way, so now you give me such facts as you have to hand, and you may be sure you can rely upon my doing my best to help you."

"Well, it will certainly be a hanging matter this time if we catch the culprit, for when it comes to committing murder in broad daylight within an ace of Bond Street Police Station itself, it is a bit too thick. Why any one should have murdered a harmless old theatrical wardrobe keeper in Drury Lane anyway, just beats me."

"What's that?" said Cleek. "Do you mean to tell me that a person attached to the theatre has been killed? Or—no—no, let me see, a seller of second-hand clothes is a wardrobe keeper, is he not?"

"Yes," responded Mr. Narkom, "it was my mistake, though in this case it was a woman. As I said before, what they wanted to kill the old dame for is past comprehension. There wasn't an article worth ten shillings in the place and yet they took the trouble, to say nothing of the risk, of carrying

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off all the old wigs and gowns that the shop contained. It was a regular clean sweep I'm told."

Cleek sat up suddenly. "What's that? Murdered an old woman for the sake of a few 'old clo'? Why, Mr. Narkom, the thieves must have been mad. When did this peculiar outrage take place; at what time; and when? But perhaps you don't know."

"As it happens, I do," said Mr. Narkom, answering the latter part of his ally's question, "for I happened to be visiting Bond Street when the policeman on point duty brought the case in. The woman, Madame Elise she called herself, though in reality she was as Irish as a Dublin-born woman can be and spoke with a brogue that you could cut with a knife, had lived in this little court in the lane, and carried on business for nearly ten years. She was known, I believe, to be a tough customer as we understand the term, but no crook. No 'Fence' business; just the buying and selling of old clothes, and mostly theatrical ones. Well, according to the old crony who lodged with her, she hadn't a friend or relative in the world, and such money as she made went to keep a cot at St. Thomas's Hospital in memory of her son who died as a baby. Poor old soul.

"Well, according to Mrs. Malone, who goes out for the day, Madame, as they call her, had an appointment with some man who wanted to fit up a

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small touring company and needed clothes. He particularly mentioned a 'makeup' for an old woman."

Cleek twitched up his eyebrows. "How did Mrs. Malone know that?" he asked.

"She says Mrs. McBride, to give Madame her real name, told her so, and at the same time, said she didn't expect the deal to come off, for she wasn't going to lower her price, not if she died for it——"

"H'm," said Cleek, rubbing his chin softly with his forefinger, "and she did 'die for it,' poor soul. That looks suspicious. Did she already suspect her customer of sinister designs?"

"Goodness knows! All we know is that a man was seen to go in——"

"By whom?" interposed Cleek swiftly.

"Several people, but the one most likely to be certain is the crippled paper-boy who has a stand opposite the shop. He says a man went in, stayed ever so long, and came out finally with a big bag. He then strode off up in the direction of Wellington Street."

"H'm, like looking for a needle in a haystack to find *him*," threw in Cleek with a little gesture of despair. "And when was the murder discovered, may I ask?"

"Not until a couple of hours later, I believe, when Mrs. Malone returned and came screeching out of the

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house with the news that Madame was murdered, having been stabbed to the heart with a dagger. That's all I know up to the present. But that's the case in a nutshell, Cleek."

"H'm, and a pretty tough nut to crack," threw in Cleek with a little laugh. "If it is not too late I wouldn't mind viewing the body to-night, if you don't mind. Unless——"

"Only too thankful," responded Mr. Narkom, jumping to his feet with alacrity. "For what with these jewel thefts and now this murder, I am almost beside myself with worry. Going to make any 'alterations' in your appearance?"

"Yes. Give me a moment and I'll be ready."

"Thanks, Cleek. I knew I could rely upon you! I don't believe you need bother about a disguise, though. It's as dark as pitch and there's nobody now to see whether Cleek of Scotland Yard is still in the land of the living or not."

The curious one-sided smile so characteristic of the man looped up the corner of Cleek's mouth; his features seemed to writhe; and a strange, indescribable change came over them as he made use of his peculiar birth-gift. An instant later the only likeness which remained of the dapper Lieutenant who had entered the room was his clothing, for the bovine, stupid face above the Lieutenant's collar was the face of George

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Headland who stood blinking and grinning into the Superintendent's amazed and delighted countenance.

"I do not think it will matter at all," Cleek said as he smiled into Mr. Narkom's eyes. "But it's as well to be careful. And Mr. George Headland is good enough to take chances on. Come along."

Mr. Narkom "came along" forthwith and it was not until they were safely seated in the limousine and heading swiftly for the purlieus of Drury Lane, that Cleek spoke of his doings.

"I only hope the old-clothes woman has come to life again, like my corpse did this evening," he said with just a tinge of whimsical humour as he remembered the incidents through which he had just passed.

Mr. Narkom stared at him in natural astonishment and Cleek proceeded to relate his adventures of the night, with the utmost detail, from the moment when the shot attracted his attention outside Cheyne Court, down to that when the ghastly discovery was made by him in the dusty ballroom.

"You are absolutely sure the woman was dead?" said Mr. Narkom, mopping his head with a silk handkerchief.

"Quite sure. I have seen death too many times not to recognize its presence immediately, my friend. No, that woman was dead right enough, but as to

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whether she was in reality Miss Cheyne, or whether it was Miss Cheyne who drove us out of the house an hour later, is quite another matter. The thing is not supernatural, it is simply a trick. Once, in the old days that lie behind, when I was amongst those who are hunted, in the old 'vanishing cracksman' days, I saw Margot play a similar trick. Even in that time of the 'Kid Crawl,' I employed a similar method to achieve a coup which would otherwise have ended badly enough."

"Margot," repeated Narkom. "Yes, I wonder if it was she and what her object was, but even if we knew it would not help us. Besides, she would have recognized you."

"Oh, no, my friend," replied Cleek, with one of his curious smiles. "I do not think any living being would recognize me, unless I wished them to. I can assure you, and I think I should know, that it was not Margot. As to an object, that is another matter. Do not forget the fact that the jewels belonging to the house of Cheyne are historic, and worth untold wealth. All are or will be shortly in the power of the poor little girl I drove home and who stands a very good chance of being the target of every jewel thief in Europe. Still, I don't suppose any one would be allowed to remove them without there being first-class evidence as to their identity. That is where the mys-

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tery lies. It is a pity we do not know the family lawyers, or we could put them on their guard."

Mr. Narkom looked up with a little start. "That's strange, now you come to think of it, for as it happens I do know them—they are Shallcott, Woodward & Company of Lincoln's Inn, and I came up to town this morning with old Mr. Shallcott. He's a precise old soul, and I don't fancy there's any chance of their playing any tricks on him. He was telling me about a young client of his who comes into her kingdom of jewels in a week or so's time. He did not mention any names, but in the light of what you say, it must be this very same lady. Perhaps you would like to see him for yourself, old chap, and if I can get off I will see into the matter of that dead body without fail. I will issue a search warrant if you like. That is, if it'll be any good to you, with your amazing methods!"

"You never can tell, as the old woman said when she married for the fifth time, and a search warrant is a search warrant when necessity arises. I'll have it, my friend."

Mr. Narkom nodded. Then he looked out of the window of the limousine and beckoned to Lennard to stop.

"Here we are," said he, "and I promise you poor Madame will be dead enough!"

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Dead she certainly was, and the cause of death was only too plain. The poor soul had been stabbed straight to the heart as she had stood bargaining over her own counter. Cleek gave a little sigh as he turned away from the gruesome sight. Except for the fact that every wig and article of woman's clothing had been removed, there was no evidence of any robbery in the shop. It looked likely to prove one of those plain, straightforward cases that end simply in the verdict of murder against some person or persons unknown.

He was about to follow Mr. Narkom when his eye caught sight of an old, faded daguerreotype photo standing on the mantelshelf. It was no less than a photo of the Honourable Miss Cheyne, in a red dress and her unique rings and at the bottom of it was inscribed, "Elsie McBride from her mistress, Marion Cheyne."

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CHAPTER VI

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

LADY MARGARET CHEYNE awoke suddenly. As Cleek had surmised, left to herself, she would have slept on undisturbed for hours, but the sharp sound of opening and closing doors, the buzz of voices, and blaze of light, caused the forget-me-not blue eyes to open and stare dazedly round her. For the moment she thought she was back in the seclusion of the convent.

"Am I late, sister?" she murmured drowsily. Then as she grew wider awake, the recollection of the events of the last hours swept over her, and with this came the memory of her journey, and all the misery that it had entailed. With a little cry, half mental pain, half physical tiredness, she started up, and her eyes fell on the figure of the Honourable Miss Cheyne, who stood at the side of the chair, a lamp in hand, looking anxiously down at her.

"Auntie," cried the girl joyfully, and grasping at the hand put out to her, she remembered only just

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in time not to kiss her aunt, for Miss Cheyne had invariably hated caresses.

"Oh, you are back at last. I missed you at the station——"

"So I should think, my dear," said Miss Cheyne, grimly. "I've had the servants looking for you, such lazy devils as they are, gobblers all of them. I've been looking for you, and I find you here all the time. I want to know who the person was who brought you." She finished as she turned to put the lamp down on a table.

"I don't know who he is, except that his name is Lieutenant Deland," cried Lady Margaret, "and that he is a friend of a lady who was on the boat, Miss Ailsa Lorne, who was so good to me. Oh, Auntie, I was so sick. I shall never go back again. I simple couldn't go through it."

"No, no, you shan't, my dear," said Miss Cheyne, almost amiably for her, "you shall have a good time over here, but now you are tired out, and must get to bed. I don't keep any servants, so you'll have to set to, and do for yourself—the lazy good-for-noughts, they eat you out of house and home! John shall get you something to eat and drink, my dear, and then to-morrow we'll have the house to ourselves."

Lady Margaret was too tired to argue, even if she

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had thought of so doing, and she knew of her aunt's parsimonious habits.

She certainly did not like the look of John, who leered into her face as he brought a glass of what was presumably lemonade and a plate of thickly cut bread and butter, which she could not touch. She was thirsty, however, and carried the glass quickly to her lips, only to be put down with a shudder as she detected the flavour of strong spirit.

"I don't think I want anything, Auntie, after all, only just to go to bed."

"Nonsense, my girl, you drink it up sharp," was the response. "You'll catch your death of cold driving about with strange men at night. Come, down with it."

"Better hurry up," said John, significantly, and even Lady Margaret's tired mind took in the strangeness of the remark coming as it did from her aunt's butler.

With a little puzzled frown, the girl took a long gulp of the liquid, then fled up the staircase, pausing at the first landing only long enough to pick up a candle.

"Good-night, Auntie," she called down to the bejewelled and rouged figure standing at the bottom. "I'll be better to-morrow."

With a little nod she vanished, and the listeners

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heard her light footfall on the bare staircase of the second flight. A moment later there came the click of a door shut to. Lady Margaret had retired for the night.

A sigh of relief came from Miss Cheyne's lips and she met the peculiar look of her servant with one equally significant.

"Send Aggie up to her," she commanded, "and don't forget to lock her in."

With this remark she turned on her high-heeled shoes, and minced painfully back to the dining room.

Whether it was the effects of her journey, or what was more likely the strong spirit in the lemonade, Lady Margaret slept as soundly as the proverbial top till close on mid-day, when she was awakened by the rough entry of the person designated as "Aggie."

She was a queer-looking maid, Lady Margaret thought to herself, with rough, unkept hair, and strangely roughened and stained fingers.

She did not like the way the woman looked at her as she banged on the table a cup of weak tea and some thick slices of bread and butter.

"Here you are, Miss—yer ladyship, I mean," she said in harsh cockney tones which made Lady Margaret wince unconsciously, accustomed as she was to the soft, pure French of the good nuns at Notre Dame. "An' the quicker you gets up and attends

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to yerself, the better I shall like it," the woman continued, muttering more to herself than to the girl. "It's a bit more than I bargained for."

"That will do very well. I shall not require anything more, and please tell my aunt I shall be with her directly."

"I don't doubt you will," responded the blunt Aggie in a rather surprising manner, then without another word she swung on her heel, and stalked out of the room, banging the door behind her.

"What an awful creature," said Lady Margaret as she jumped lightly out of her bed. "I shall get Auntie to discharge her very soon. Oh, I am so thankful to be home," and she ran lightly to the window and looked out. With all the resilience of youth, she seemed a different being this morning from the worn-out, fragile child who had been driven home last night by Lieutenant Deland.

A few minutes later she ran lightly down the staircase and into the dining room where she found the Honourable Miss Cheyne deeply absorbed in the morning newspapers.

She greeted her niece a little gruffly, but knowing her eccentric ways, Lady Margaret took but scant notice. It was not long, however, before she realized that her future life was not to be entirely a bed of roses.

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