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THE CRAIG POISONING MYSTERY

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THE CRAIG POISONING MYSTERY

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CHAPTER I

YOU say you're going up to town, Bob, as soon as you've left here. Anywhere near Pont Street? Good. Then do you mind wheeling that nearer to me?" The sick man waved a thin, but still brown hand, to where a little writing cabinet, shaped like a miniature roll-top desk, stood on a swing table.

"Thanks," he went on. "Just wait a minute, will you, while I write a note. If you'll drop it in Houghton's letter-box, or hand it in yourself, I shall be much obliged." He hesitated. "Yourself," he repeated. "It's most important, and I don't want to wait for the post."

"You write it and I'll deliver it within the hour." Dr. Lindrum, after swinging the table up and across the bed as requested, went to one of the windows.

"Without fail?" persisted the man in bed, unlocking the cabinet.

"Let's see. I must look in for a moment at home . . . within an hour and a half without fail. You can count on that as the outside time limit unless some accident happens to me or the car," Lindrum assured him.

His good figure, crisply curly hair and fresh coloring gave the doctor an air of vitality and strength which

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made him a pleasant enough young man to look at, though his features summed up to a rather indeterminate whole. He spoke without turning around, his attention riveted by something outside. That something was a girl walking along the path below. Very slender, she was dressed in green with white muslin at the open throat. On her feet were sandals. Her slim, well-shaped legs, like her arms, were bare and brown as a Neapolitan baby's. They suggested sunshine and summer, just as her buoyant walk suggested youth.

Behind him a pen could have been heard traveling swiftly over a sheet of paper, but he did not hear it. He only heard the crunch of gravel under light, small feet, the feet of Countess Alexandra Ivanoff, the Russian girl to whom the sick man behind him was engaged to be married.

Ronald Craig wrote for nearly five minutes, and not once did Lindrum take his eyes off the figure in the green frock that swayed and swung about her like the calyx of a tossing flower as she strolled on, moving with a rhythm that suggested that she was humming as she walked.

Finally the pen stopped. Craig read over what he had written. It ran:

DEAR GUY,

I am being slowly poisoned. I found part of a letter this morning which proves it, though who the confederate is, and how it is being put into my food, are beyond my present brain capacity to unravel. I will go into that when I am better. Be

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here tomorrow morning at nine, in a car, and take me away. I shall never leave this room alive unless you get me out of it. If I were to try and go by myself they would prevent me, on the plea that I am too ill to get up. Lindrum, of course, is all right, only he is a silly ass and would make a fearful fuss if I told him why none of his medicine is helping me. And there must not be a fuss. Not here. I am getting him to wait while I write this, and drop it, himself, into your box. Telephone me that it has reached you. Be careful what you say, as I shall be. Until you come, I shall touch nothing that is not opened before me. If by any chance you are delayed, I shall arrange with Match. He, too, can be trusted. I can write no more. I feel very tired.

Your affectionate cousin,

RONALD CRAIG.

He addressed this staggering note to Guy Houghton, Esq., Pont Street, London, S.W.1.; sealed it, and then held it out with evident effort.

"I suppose I can rely on you, Bob?" His eyes seemed to search the young doctor's very soul.

Bob Lindrum was the son of a former rector of Woodthorp, and this was Woodthorp Manor. He and Ronald Craig, though the latter was fifteen years the elder, had known each other, off and on, since the days when Bob toddled about in pinafores, though they met rarely of late years, for the Craigs had left the place some time ago, and only kept on the manor, shorn of land and rights, as their dower house.

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"You certainly can, Craig," the other assured him, as he tried to put the big, square envelope into an inner pocket. It was too big and he held it in his hand.

The door of the sick room opened and the nurse came in. She was a woman in early middle age, with a firm chin and firmer eyes. Something in the way Craig looked at her suggested dislike, or possibly—to anyone who knew what he had just written—suspicion. She carried a tray with a bottle of Vichy on it.

"Where's Match?" Craig asked in a weak voice. He was a man of a little over forty, with a rather rugged face, the face of a man of the people, which he was not. Just now he was blanched to a pallor that seemed to extend to his eyes, but he had evidently been an out-of-door man, big of frame and powerfully built.

"The butler is away at the moment." The nurse had a lady's voice, but not one that suggested great tenderness for her patient. "He is expected back in time to serve lunch," she added.

Craig nodded. Then he glanced down at the tray.

"I asked for an unopened bottle of Vichy," he said, with a twitch of his white lips.

"I have just this moment opened it," the nurse assured him with smiling urbanity.

"By God!" Craig raised himself on an elbow and actually clenched his fingers. "By God, nurse, you'll bring me an unopened bottle when I ask for it, or you'll leave the house!"

His eyes might be faded by illness, but they could still flash with fire. He looked for a brief second what

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he was when well—a man whom it was next to impossible to placate should he be really roused.

The nurse bit her lip.

"Get another bottle and open it in here." Lindrum's tone was low and almost apologetic. "It's apt to taste flat unless opened at the moment of drinking."

She went out silently.

"How I loathe that woman!" Craig spoke with energy. He bit back an "I don't trust her," and said instead, "By the way, just hand me back that letter I gave you, will you? I want to add a postscript."

Lindrum handed it to him and Craig levered up the flap with a touch from a paper knife, added a couple of lines and refastened it. The gum was still damp.

"I'm sorry you don't like the nurse," Lindrum said while this was being done. "She's very capable. However, you won't have any need of her much longer."

"You think not?" Craig asked slowly, handing him the letter again, while his eyes lingered on the doctor's face with a probing, searching stare.

There was a moment's silence. Usually Craig had a string of complaints, the complaints of a man not used to being ill, and a stream of impatient wonder that, after nearly a month's illness, he was no better. But today there was a cold, bleak withdrawal, quite different from anything that he had shown before.

Lindrum broke the silence by asking for a rubber band, as the letter entrusted to him partly slipped from the papers he held.

"I haven't any bands to spare," was the reply.

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"My dear chap!" Lindrum's eyes looked meaningly and reproachfully at the roll-top writing cabinet. "Look in there."

"You can get some at the shop just outside." Craig made no move toward the table in question.

"Hope I shall never be in need of a life-line with you on shore," Lindrum said laughingly. "You'd shout to me to get one in Davy Jones's locker." He held out his hand to his patient. "Cheer up, and don't feel so doubtful of your progress. Malaria is a tricky thing. So is summer cholera, as the people call it. And when you get both together, you get a trying combination."

Craig nodded almost contemptuously.

"Look here!" Lindrum said suddenly, looking at him in his turn rather hard, his finger on the other's pulse. "What about a consultation? I've tried all the usual treatments; let's see if there isn't something fresh. When I'm in town this afternoon I'll look in at—"

"I'll talk that over with you tomorrow afternoon," Craig said in a weary but very decided voice. "I think I shall sleep a little now." There was a tap on the door, a light tap that changed both men's faces. Into each came a brightness, a glow, as though the sun himself stood without. Craig lost his sleepy look.

"Come in!" His voice was clearer than a moment ago, his face seemed to fill out as the door opened.

Countess Alexandra—Jura, as she was called—came in with a sprig of mignonette in her long Byzantine hands. Ronald Craig seemed to drink her in as she stepped to the bed and stood looking down at the man

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whom she was to marry in a couple of months with a grave, speculative look in her young face.

Of its claim to beauty there were two quite opposite opinions. Some people considered her plain, but for her clear creamy complcxion. While some, on the other hand, thought her very lovely, and to this group belonged the two men in the room.

To Lindrum, as he looked at her, his heart thumping, she seemed like a beautiful tea-rose. The comparison was not inapt as far as tints went. A tea-rose's soft creams, and yellows, and shell-pinks were all reproduced in her. In her pale honey hair, her pale ivory skin, her cheeks but faintly streaked with color. Even her lips were but a shade deeper. Nothing about her was vivid. To Craig she was like a wash-drawing on vellum come alive, a drawing made by some Byzantine artist, with her eyes that suggested a slanted setting, her high cheek-bones, her slender, almost attenuated, body. To him, as to Lindrum, she was fragile and perfect.

Her long narrow eyes, in color they suggested amber seen through smoke, were bent on the sick man as she gently tapped one of his hands, the hand that would have clasped hers, with the mignonette spray.

"You should be out in the sunshine." Her voice was faintly hard. A hardness of accent, Lindrum thought, rather than of actual *timbre*.

"I hope to be soon," Craig said eagerly.

"Bravo!" applauded the doctor. "That's the spirit." The other had not spoken so hopefully during the whole interview this morning.

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"Stay and talk to me!" urged her fiancé. She shook her head, not smiling. Jura rarely smiled.

"I am going to write a letter and then I am going to try on a dress." She spoke without any accent, yet not as an English girl would have run the words together.

She looked around for a tumbler, found one, and put the sprig in water.

"It's the only flower you have ever picked for me," Craig said sentimentally.

"Lady Craig picked it," Jura said flatly, "together with some sweet peas."

Lady Craig was the widow of the former owner of the house, a knight who had been the sick man's cousin. She was the only dowager in the family, so Woodthorp Manor was hers to live in during her lifetime. Ronald Craig had been taken ill over three weeks ago now while on a week-end visit. As for Countess Jura, the Russian was an orphan, and Lady Craig was bringing her out.

"But one must not put mignonette in with sweet peas," Jura went on. "One cannot have the two together," she said again, as though the fact interested her and might interest him. "One can have either—alone—but not both."

"Why not?" Craig asked, as he pulled the stem through a buttonhole of his creased pajama jacket. Craig was not a fastidious man, as his crumpled appearance showed, in spite of all the efforts of the nurse to smarten him up.

"The one or the other will die." She still looked

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dreamily at the flower. Lindrum left them and said a word to the nurse outside.

"I don't like the way this thing, or these things, are dragging on. Craig is losing strength, not gaining any. He seemed so much better for a while after you came, but these last days . . ."

Countess Jura came out. She had caught the last sentences, and motioned him to follow her to a distant window.

"Do you think he is going to die?" she asked under her breath, but without a tremor.

"Certainly not!" Lindrum said explosively.

She met his expostulatory gaze with a blank look.

"It is not a sin to die. People do it all the time. Especially sick people." And turning, she passed on to her room, her skirt swaying to her steps.

Lindrum was very white when he rejoined the nurse, who also stood watching the Russian girl.

"I'm always so sorry for Countess Jura." She spoke very quietly. "Of course, a nurse is supposed to have neither eyes nor ears except for her patient—and the doctor," she added, a trifle sardonically. "But, as I told you when I came, I think it's very pitiful about Countess Jura."

He said nothing.

"She's so helpless. And she's being forced into a marriage, as we both know. However, perhaps something will turn up to prevent it." Her eyes were carefully on some notes she was making of what he had ordered for her patient.

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As for Lindrum, he only shot her a swift, uneasy glance. He should have made some scathing reply, but, though a nurse, Mrs. Kingsmill was also a doctor's daughter, and his sister's friend.

"Why not take her out for a spin this afternoon?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "Too much to do; besides, Craig wants me to drop a very important letter in the letter-box as I pass Pont Street. A letter to a cousin of his."

"Well, why not take Countess Jura? Pont Street means Sloane Street, which in its turn means Brompton Road, which in its turn means shopping, which in its turn means Countess Jura." Mrs. Kingsmill was laughing a little now under her breath, but her tone was insistent.

For a second he hesitated then he shook his head firmly. "No, no!" And, so saying, he went slowly down the stairs.

In the lounge hall below, the figure of a woman could be seen standing. The figure of a young woman. A fact which cost the figure's owner, Lady Craig, resolute massage, iron dieting, and much expense. Vaguely Lindrum wondered, as he had often done before, why she went to so much trouble, for, as she turned her face toward him, its years showed as fifty in some magical way, in spite of smoothed skin and red-brown hair. She was very nearly an ugly woman, but she looked as though she had plenty of that quality we call character.

"Is anything the matter, Robert?" she asked quickly.

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She had known Lindrum as a tow-headed baby. "You're not really anxious about him, are you?"

"Yes, I am, this morning," he said gravely. "No remedies of mine seem to help him for more than a day or two. That was a bad relapse he had last week, and it looks to me as if it might be about to repeat itself."

"You don't think he is going to die, do you?" She spoke in hushed tones. Her eyes, cool and emotionless, were fixed on him.

"Of course he isn't!" he almost snapped. "Why should he?"

"Jura fears the worst," she said quietly. "I don't know why—but I think she is nerving herself to lose him." This time her eyes were on the floor.

"There's no reason whatever why he shouldn't recover—none!" Lindrum spoke forcefully.

"That's good news." She gave him one of her meaningless smiles. "Jura is overanxious, doubtless. Just as we all are."

But it struck him that her whole manner was much more indifferent than it had been when Ronald Craig first fell ill. Then, her concern had been undeniable and very great. Yet at first his illness had only seemed to be a passing chill.

"I think you ought to press the arsenic in his tonic." She spoke idly, with no imperative in her voice. Emily Craig had traveled much in Africa, and like many another, she had found that arsenic often helped where quinine was of little use.

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Lindrum knew this, and murmured some vague assent. He said good-by and walked out to his car. He was just climbing in, when he thought of Craig's letter. For a second he could not recollect what he had done with it. Then he remembered laying it down on the landing table while he made some alteration in the nurse's diet list. He ran up the stairs in search of it. The door of the nurse's bedroom was open. She was standing in the room, the letter was in her hand. Catching sight of the doctor she came out quickly, holding it up.

"You dropped this, didn't you? Countess Jura found it lying on the landing. I thought I saw you lay it down a moment ago, and was just going to run after you with it."

He thanked her, took it, and hurried down to his car again. He drove as if he were practicing to break the record—or his neck. At his gate he stopped, left the machine to look after itself, and leaning his arms on the top of his gate, stood looking at the building as though he had never seen it before.

It was a pretty house. Roses surrounded it, roses climbed up on it, virginia creeper covered it from end to end. Yes, it was charming. But, could it find favor in the eyes of Countess Jura? Though she did not remember them, the houses where she had lived as a baby—before 1917—had been palaces. Alexandra Alexandrowna, penniless though she was, was a cousin of the Kalkoffs, kin by marriage to the dead tsar himself. She was about to make a very wealthy marriage,

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though not a smart one. She was no wife for a doctor. Even if—even supposing . . .

The nurse's words stung him afresh. They were only a repetition, aloud, and by an independent witness—for what motive could bias her?—of what he had not dared to tell himself explicitly, but what he had known since he first saw them together, and that was that the Russian girl did not care for Ronald Craig. That she really disliked him. But that, in spite of that dislike, she was going to marry him. Unless something intervened. . . . Lindrum tried to whip up some scorn for the girl who was prepared to sell herself with her eyes open. Those enigmatic long eyes of amber seen through smoke. But Lindrum could not find any scorn in his heart for Jura. He knew that with her lack of training, her fragile build, she could no more support herself than can a young canary turned out of its gilded cage. He told himself that generations of cage-birds had gone to her making, and that she must find another cage or die. And a gilded cage, of course . . . yet Lindrum felt that in her heart of hearts, in the center of that wayward, difficult-to-understand complexity that was Alexandra Ivanoff, she really cared for him—Bob Lindrum.

The nurse could have told him that Jura no more loved him than she did Ronald Craig, or at best only substituted a tepid liking for an active dislike. Lindrum would not have believed her. He felt sure that if Jura were free, she would choose him. But she was not free.

He flung the gate open, and stormed into the morn-

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ing room. Lunch was laid in the deep bay window that opened onto the lawn. Two beds of roses almost encircled it. In the space between, across the grass, a clump of delphiniums seemed like a part of the deep-blue sky above them. On the dull ebony table, sprays of Dorothy Perkins, in a bowl of the same soft azure, nodded their heads to their luckier sisters outside. The mats were blue and green raffia. The cream china was flecked with blue. A little silver, a little glass, all very ordinary but brightly shining, made up a most attractive picture. Lindrum eyed it moodily. The ebony of the table was painted deal. The silver was plate; the glass, just glass. Craig was said to have bought some of the imperial china for his bride to be. . . .

His sister came in. Agatha Lindrum was a handsome girl, but with something rather bitter in her face. Good at every game; keen rider to hounds, first-class dancer, she was intensely interested in the women's work of the village. With her many interests, she seemed to radiate vitality, and yet it struck the doctor that she looked very tired. For the first time he noticed that she had artificially touched up cheeks that used to be as fresh as a rose. Well, small wonder if she felt cabined. And, unfortunately, there was now no leaving for her. Driving her mother in town, she had had a bad smash, and since then Mrs. Lindrum walked only with the help of a stick and a supporting arm. Agatha had wasted no words in self-reproach; she took her mother home when she was able to be moved, and was her constant companion.

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"If I put up a bottle for Craig, Agatha, will you see about it at once? I'm trying something different."

"I'll take it up myself. The boy has started on his rounds."

She went to put her things on. Or, rather, she started toward the door. Something heavy moved outside. A stick could be heard thumping along. Mrs. Lindrum came in, leaning heavily on the arm of the servant, her cane in her other hand. She was a handsome woman, with a rather imperious air. Catching her eye, one did not wonder at the signs of good housekeeping on every side. It was a most autocratic eye.

"Dearest, you should have waited for me!" her daughter scolded her affectionately, as she hurried off.

"Is anything wrong?" Mrs. Lindrum asked, turning to her son. He was surprised at the question.

"Wrong? With Agatha? Not that I know of. Why?"

"She looked—worried, I thought." The reply was guarded.

"You're thinking of me," he retorted. "I look worried. I am worried. Over Craig."

"Is he very ill? You don't think he's going to die, do you? I mean—I mean—" She stopped with an expression that showed that she had not meant to phrase her thought in just those words.

"Certainly not!" her son said with energy. "Only his illness is a bit baffling." This was the third time this morning that the question of Craig's death had been mentioned. And the third time that in refuting the suggestion as absurd, he had had a vague, most uncom-

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fortable feeling that the vehemence of his denial gave no pleasure. Mrs. Lindrum took his arm and grasped her stick.

"I'll sit out in the garden for a while," she murmured, and he placed her carefully in her favorite deck-chair.

In about ten minutes he hurried back to the morning room, where Agatha sat reading the paper.

"Looking for a situation?" he asked, for that was the page before her. She only smiled and took the bottle from him.

"Now then, I'm off," he murmured, half to himself. "I'll lunch at my club. Where's that letter I promised Craig to drop in Houghton's box?" He saw it as he spoke lying on top of his coat, where he had placed it so as to be sure and catch his eye.

"It seems to've come pretty well unstuck." Reaching for a bottle of gum, he gave a dexterous sweep of the brush under the loosening flap, then he hurried off.

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CHAPTER II

GUY HOUGHTON received his cousin's letter as he was finishing lunch. He opened and read it at once.

He was a short, slender, rather ugly young man of around thirty, with a pleasant smile and merry blue eyes. Just now they stared at the letter before him in stupefaction.

Ronald thought he was being poisoned! Ronald thought that that was why he was ill. Wanted to be fetched tomorrow around nine . . . without fuss. . . . Lindrum and Match were all right. . . . Good heavens! what on earth was happening at Woodthorp?

He jumped up so suddenly that the terrier, snoozing against his knee, gave a bark and then dived after him. Dogs adored Houghton. The master made for the telephone. A moment more, and he was speaking to his cousin, for Craig had an extension beside his bed.

"That you, Ronnie?" Houghton asked. "I've just got your letter." His voice betrayed an effort to sound ordinary. "Look here, can't I run down to see you this afternoon? No? You don't feel up to it?" There was a moment's silence on his part as Craig replied, "Stick to the plan, Guy. Glad you got my letter."

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But Houghton had more to say. "I wish you'd post me at once that volume of Hakluyt's 'Voyages' you wrote about last week. One of an early edition, you remember? If you wrap it up well it won't get damaged, and I'll take the greatest care of it, and oh," he managed to make his voice sound really casual now, "why not slip into it that print you mentioned in the letter that I've just received. That—eh—first impression you found. Or, at any rate, a replica of it. Just in case it might get lost. As it's very interesting, quite amazingly so, I'd very much like to see it. Now, don't put off sending it, there's a good chap. Post it as soon as possible, will you? Without fail?"

There was a second's silence, then Craig's answer reached him.

"All right. Perhaps it might be as well. I'll post the book to you this afternoon. Come and see me sometime, Guy."

"I may be passing quite soon," Houghton mentioned carelessly, and Craig's voice replied with a contented:

"Good! Look in on me any time you're near here. By-by."

Just before the receiver was hung up, Houghton's ear caught the sound of a door opening in Craig's room. He thought he heard a young, rather hard little voice saying:

"Don't stop telephoning, Ronald. Or am I interrupting you? Is it anything very private?"

Houghton frowned. He disliked the Russian girl intensely. Well, at any rate, Ronald now knew that the letter had arrived safely, and that he could count on

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him, Houghton, turning up to the minute tomorrow morning.

And, meanwhile, that "part of a letter" which Craig wrote proved his suspicions, or at least a copy of it, would be safely on its way to town in a volume of the "Voyages." He ought to get it by tonight. What in the world could it be? Written by whom, and to whom? Houghton felt as though his head were whirling.

First of all, he rang for his man and gave directions as to getting a room ready for Mr. Craig tomorrow morning. Mr. Craig would probably keep to his bed, he added, as he had got a slight chill in the country. Then he reached for the telephone directory. Ronald wanted no fuss. No, of course not—in the house of a relative, with his fiancée as the only other guest! But Houghton was determined to take down some authority on toxicology with him in the morning. Just whom? He sat awhile reflecting. He wanted a first-class man. But a discreet man . . . and not a man whose mere name would inform all Woodthorp what was feared. Then he had an inspiration.

Houghton, who was a first-class bat, and played for his county, had met a Dr. Gilchrist more than once when the latter played for London University or the Hospitals. Gilchrist was a brilliant research worker in disease-antidotes, and Houghton remembered hearing that, by reason of his field of work, poisons were also his specialty. Houghton felt sure that if there were anything to be found out down at Woodthorp Manor, Gilchrist would find it. And yet his name would mean nothing sinister, not even to Lindrum.

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He rang Gilchrist up. The doctor was in his Richmond rooms. Would he be free, Houghton asked, to go down into the country tomorrow, Saturday, morning, on a very special case? As a consultant. He was free? Good. So that, supposing he were properly asked by the medical man in charge of the case, Gilchrist would do Houghton the great favor of coming down to look at a cousin whose illness seemed to be dragging on a bit long? Houghton went on to say that a very early consultation would be wanted, so perhaps Gilchrist would let him, Houghton, call for him around seven tomorrow morning. It was a fearful hour, but he would be most grateful.

Gilchrist, who had intended spending the week-end in the country in any case, said that he had no objection to the idea, supposing, of course, that the usual formalities were complied with . . . and that he liked to get up early.

Houghton thanked him and assured him he would be called up shortly by a Dr. Lindrum who had charge of the case. After ringing off, Houghton tackled that young man next.

Lindrum seemed delighted at the suggestion of getting Dr. Gilchrist of the Imperial Research Laboratory down to see Craig, but doubted if Craig would welcome the idea of another doctor overhauling him. Houghton assured him that he would overcome any objections of his cousin's, and again Bob Lindrum seemed delighted to hear it.

At his very unusually early breakfast next morning,

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Houghton told his man to take particular care of a book which would probably arrive by the morning post, and to telephone to him at Woodthorp Manor, when it came.

In the car, Gilchrist asked for the first time for general particulars of the man whom they were going to see.

Houghton explained that his cousin, Ronald Craig, had come down to spend a week-end with a relative's widow living at Woodthorp Manor, and had caught a chill on arriving. As he had had malaria several times, he and the local medical man, Dr. Lindrum, thought that he had got another bout of his old enemy, but that was nearly a month ago now, and Ronald Craig was still in bed.

"He's getting very anxious about himself," he added, "and I'm very fond of him. He was a good pal to me once when I was in a hole. From a letter I got from him yesterday, he seems to think that he is going to die."

"Well, so he is," was the uncompromising retort. "We all are!"

"Ah, but not yet! Not at only forty. And just about to be married." Houghton spoke with energy. "Not if I can help it!"

A thrush burst into song as they turned in the main street of the little village. Gilchrist commented on the pleasure of hearing such music.

"My cousin's fiancée says that thrushes are the guardian angels of Woodthorp Manor, there are so many.

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That's the place over there!" Houghton waved a hand to a small, unpretentious house with a good deal of ivy doing its best to pry the bricks apart. As they turned in at the gates—there seemed to be no lodge-keeper—another thrush stopped its rippling song to stare down at them. Gilchrist had no idea that thrushes looked so fierce. Its eyes were the cruellest that the analyst had ever encountered. Not the eyes of a guardian angel. Who was it who said, *"Ubi aves, ibi—"*?

A half-strangled cry came from Houghton.

"The blinds, man. Look at the blinds!"

Gilchrist looked. As they swept up to the front door, the blinds were being pulled down consecutively in room after room. Houghton was out and onto the steps in a flash, Gilchrist with him. Before Houghton could touch the door, it opened, and a man, obviously a superior servant of some kind, stood there. He looked very pale. It was Match, the butler.

"Oh, sir—I'm very glad to see you!" He hardly needed to say more. His face told what had happened before he went on, "Mr. Craig has just died, sir."

"Just died!" Houghton looked stunned.

Match drew out his watch. "Just a quarter of an hour ago, sir."

It was not yet nine o'clock.

"Dr. Lindrum upstairs?"

"No, sir. He was kept away all night by a maternity case. But he's started for here at last. He'll arrive any minute now. We tried for Dr. Williams, but he was away too. There's been a bad fire over at Chesham

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Millwall. Poor Mr. Craig." Match shook his head with a look of retrospective pity. "It was awful, sir. Till just at the end. The end was peaceful."

Gilchrist turned to go back to his car. There would be no consultation now.

"Don't go!" Houghton said brokenly. "Lindrum won't be long. And we shall want you."

It was irregular, but Gilchrist asked Match a few questions, at first almost automatically, then with alert interest. At one of the replies he shot a sudden swift glance at Houghton, who was listening closely. Houghton's eyes were on the doctor's face, but they could read nothing there.

Match explained that the nurse had just gone to lie down, utterly worn out with trying to cope with the hours of agony that had preceded her patient's death. The ladies had also gone back to their bedrooms. When Gilchrist finally stood silent, looking at a hunting print on the wall as though it very much puzzled him, Houghton touched his arm and motioned to the stairs. Gilchrist followed him. Match would have preceded them, but Houghton made him a sign to stay where he was. The butler, however, came on up.

"Here's the key to the room, sir," he said, handing it over. One of Gilchrist's swift glances ran over him, but Match stepped down again with his eyes on the ground.

Houghton took the key without comment, and going on up, unlocked the door.

The bed was covered with a sheet. Beneath it, as

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they turned it back, lay Ronald Craig's dead body. Houghton stood for a long moment looking down at his cousin with the grieved and horrified expression of a man who does not want to believe the evidence of his eyes, then he turned away.

"There's a letter, or part of a letter, rather, which he meant to send me yesterday, I think. It hadn't come before we left town. I wonder if it's lying about anywhere. . . ."

Gilchrist had only eyes for the body before him. Bending down, he studied it with the same kind of attention, though in a heightened degree, that he had paid to the final answers of the butler.

Houghton meanwhile found a bunch of keys on the corner of the mantel, and unlocking the writing cabinet went systematically through it. There was no "part of a letter" inside. He had just relocked it, when Lindrum hurried in. He, too, went to the bed for a second, before he shook hands with Houghton, who introduced the doctor from London.

"It's too late for a consultation," Lindrum said, shaking his head sorrowfully. "Terribly sorry I couldn't get here last night," he went on to Houghton, speaking in a voice that sounded genuinely pained. "But it was touch and go all night long with a confinement case, and Dr. Williams couldn't come either, most unfortunately. He was kept at the hospital owing to a fire that injured a lot of people." Lindrum turned to the bed again. "Not that we could have done anything. Though it was so frightfully sudden . . . malaria and dysentery are tricky things apart, let alone

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combined. . . . Well, I have the death certificate with me and—"

"I want a word with you, Dr. Lindrum," Gilchrist interrupted. "I'm too late for a consultation, as you say, but I should like to talk the illness over with you." There was an undercurrent of command in Gilchrist's tone.

Houghton said that he would wait in the library to hear their conclusions, and would they kindly lock the door and bring him the key when they had done? He particularly requested that no one was to be allowed to enter on any pretext whatever.

The two doctors assured him that they would do as he wished, but, in point of fact, they scarcely heard him. As soon as the door had closed, Gilchrist wheeled on the other man.

"Look here, were you giving him arsenic, and was it an overdose? Do you do your own dispensing?"

Lindrum stared at the speaker with dropped jaw.

"Speak, man!" Gilchrist said impatiently. "He died of arsenic poisoning." He jerked his head toward the bed. "As clear a case as could be. The symptoms of the final attack as detailed by the butler—besides, look at his gums, his lids. Now, if it was an honest accident, one of your own prescribing or dispensing, God forbid that I should ruin you. But I must be sure. What were you giving him?"

"I deny it!" Lindrum said, his voice shaking. "Your guess, I mean. Absolutely. The case was possibly gastric influenza—"

Gilchrist interrupted, and in a quiet, level voice ran

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over the symptoms as told him, and as evident in the dead man before them, which, to his thinking, stood for poison, and arsenic poison at that.

"Each one is compatible with my reading of the case." Lindrum spoke stoutly enough, but there was a look of suppressed terror in his eyes.

"No, they're not!" Gilchrist said bluntly. Then, in a gentler tone: "You see, poisons are my specialty. Whereas, I don't suppose you've ever had a case before." He was sorry for the other chap. "There's no shadow of doubt," he went on inexorably, "but that he was poisoned, and, to account for certain things"—he mentioned them in detail—"he must have had the poison administered to him in small doses—very small indeed, I think—for some weeks, and then, yesterday, he got a heavy dose that finished him off."

There was a long pause. Lindrum's face had grown whiter and whiter as the other proceeded.

"If you're right—" he said now shakily, "you may be—I don't say you are, but you may be—it's my ruin!"

"Not necessarily—" Gilchrist spoke under his breath, though they were both talking very low. "Think well! Could it have been some blunder? *Grammes* for grains? Anything of that sort?"

"He had a tonic of his own"—Lindrum's voice was as gray as his lips, it was the voice of a man facing horrible things—"an arsenic tonic. Some quack stuff. I warned him to discontinue it. But he was an obstinate man. It's possible he was still taking it. . . ."

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"That might account for the small doses, but his end was due to a definite largish dose taken, according to the butler's account, in the afternoon. I'll stake my reputation that I'm not out in saying so much. How can you explain the final dose? By the way, I don't see any medicine at all in the room."

Lindrum did not look around. He made no reply. He was evidently overwhelmed, either by what had happened, or by Houghton's having brought this man down at once to the deathbed.

Gilchrist's face hardened. Then, as the other stammered, "I—I—" and seemed to be choked by emotion, it softened again.

"The truth!" he urged. "If it's a blunder, and you can prove it to me—I must be sure on that point, of course—there need be no autopsy. Houghton may suspect—"

"He will!" muttered Lindrum, biting his lips.

"He may. But there's no one so vindictive that they would want to pillory a man for an honest blunder, let alone a friend. He said you were a friend of the dead man as well as of himself?"

Lindrum nodded. He looked as though he could not speak. Sinking into a chair, he sat with a hand pressed against his eyeballs, almost, a keen observer might have said, as though shutting out some sight, some remembered sight that had now grown unbearable to recall.

Suddenly Gilchrist caught sight of the door handle turning. Very cautiously, very tentatively. Apparently the person on the other side was not sure if the door

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was locked or not. A second later it opened, also very gently, and Gilchrist saw a white, haggard woman's face staring in at them. On the instant, noiselessly, silently, the door closed again. Gilchrist went to the door and locked it.

"He's a white man," he went on in his rapid, low tones, coming back to the other. "Besides, no one wants the rumor of death by poison spread about one of his own family, unless it's due to a criminal act. No, Houghton may guess, but, if I stand by you, he'll let things lie, or I'm much mistaken."

Gilchrist did not add that, even so, the manor house would probably change its medical attendant.

"I must have the facts, however," he urged again, as the other said nothing. "The full facts."

Lindrum made a great effort and pulled himself together. Haltingly, but sufficiently clearly, he indicated the course of Craig's illness of now nearly four weeks, and the remedies given.

Gilchrist listened attentively, now nodded, now looked dubious and asked a question or two.

"Of course, I blame myself—now—" Lindrum broke out at the end, "for not having been more suspicious, but there's no one in the house but women. His own family! How could I suspect—" he almost implored.

"Granted your diagnosis, I don't think anyone can blame you for your treatment," Gilchrist said now. "Evidently, however, there's been foul play. You will, of course, as matters are, insist on an autopsy, and communicate the results, which will most certainly bear

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out what I've just said, to the police. You should come out all right if you carry things with a bold hand, and tackle them immediately. As you say, no one expects, or wants, their family doctor to be a suspicious criminologist."

Lindrum drew a paper from his pocket, it was the death certificate, and tore it across. "I had already signed it!" he murmured under his breath. "Well—I wonder where this will lead—how far—" He pulled up, and began to talk of the arrangements for the post-mortem.

Meanwhile, Houghton had been joined in the library by Lady Craig.

"Guy"—she gave him a cool, beautifully manicured hand—"I'm thankful for this chance of seeing you alone. An awful thing has happened! Oh, not Ronald's death, that is only sad, but this is awful. Last night—before he died—he called out loud that he was dying of poison. Those were his words. Match was in the room and heard them. So did the nurse. Now, you know what that means—unless the doctor squashes it at once. But Bob Lindrum couldn't even squash a caterpillar!"

"Did Ronnie say anything about a paper he wanted to show me?" Houghton interrupted her without any ceremony.

"Paper? Do you mean a newspaper?" Lady Craig spoke after a second's pause, and after a rather startled glance.

"No. Not a newspaper," was Houghton's only answer.

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"All sorts of letters of his are upstairs"—she spoke with seeming carelessness—"if it was a letter? Whom was it from?" Then, as he said nothing, she went on hurriedly. "But we can talk of papers later. The point now is this awful remark of Ronald's. He was rambling, of course. Quite out of his mind. But, with Match in the room as well as the nurse, how are we to deal with it?"

"I brought down a doctor with me from town for a consultation with Lindrum. As it happens, he's not only a specialist in tropical diseases, but an expert on poisons. Suppose we wait and hear what he has to say."

"*You* brought him down!" Lady Craig evidently bit back some remarks with difficulty. Houghton was now the owner of the manor house, and there were certain debatable points about some of the charges which she expected the estate to settle for her annually, that enjoined anyone of an economical nature to go warily—and Emily Craig was very economical.

"I think that most uncalled for, Guy," she said finally. "What happened was that Ronald was wandering at the last. *We* know that, but it must be stated by the kind of person other people will have to believe. I don't know why on earth you brought an unknown medical man along. He's no good, socially. What we need—"

The door opened. The two doctors came into the room together. Lindrum was very pale, but seemed quite collected.

"Well, Bobby?" Lady Craig said, rising and going

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over to him, her whole face and manner friendly to the point of being maternal.

Houghton, too, took a step forward.

"I'm sorry to say I can't give a certificate," Lindrum said, glancing a little nervously from one to the other. "I—I—there must be an autopsy."

"Oh, surely not!" she said beseechingly, while Houghton turned and gave Gilchrist a long, inquiring look.

"It's unavoidable." Lindrum spoke with more assurance now. "I needn't tell you how frightfully sorry I am, Lady Craig. How I wish it could be avoided."

"You need not," she assured him coldly.

"But there's no other course open to me, as his medical man," he protested. "Dr. Gilchrist here—"

At this stage the man from London was introduced to the lady of the house, who welcomed him graciously, with a few words of regret that he had not been summoned earlier. Then she turned to Lindrum again.

"Why won't you give a death certificate?" she asked.

The young man hesitated. Then he said baldly: "I'm sorry to shock you both, but it looks now as if Craig had died of poison—of arsenic poison."

"How long has this been going on?" Houghton asked with a quiver in his voice. "This poisoning of Ronnie, I mean, Bob?"

Lindrum looked at him very unhappily. "Dr. Gilchrist and I think it must have been for some weeks. I can't tell you how sorry I am that I didn't guess what the matter was, but I didn't! I think it's possible that

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he was dosing himself with some patent medicine, or some old tonic, all the time without letting me know, and that the arsenic in it—supposing I'm right in my guess, of course—may have done the harm. Arsenic is cumulative, you know."

Houghton started to speak, but checked himself. The matter was too grave for hasty words. Nor were words of much account now.

The doctors excused themselves. They wanted to return to the bedroom for some further examinations and tests. Lindrum had the key in his pocket and now led the way upstairs again.

Once alone with him, Lady Craig turned on Houghton with fear-distended eyes.

"I can't believe it. It isn't true!" She was not on guard now. Her face showed suddenly all its lines.

"Would to God I had got here sooner with Gilchrist," Houghton said bitterly. "I had a feeling last night that something was wrong. I half thought of rushing down here yesterday evening—"

"All the more need for us to get hold at once of some clever man who will be of use," she interrupted hastily. "The secretary of the Crime Revelers might be able to put us on to the right person—"

"We must get hold of the police at once," Houghton retorted, looking around for the telephone.

"Not first!" she urged. "Of course, if the doctors are right, it may have to come to that, though it's some mistake on Bob's or Agatha's part. But first of all we need—"

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"The police," he finished firmly. "You see, I happen to be concerned with finding out the truth about Ronnie, not merely with having some smart amateur give your household a clean bill of health. I want the person who killed Ronnie to swing for the killing. I'll find out who did it, if it takes every penny of my own, as well as of his, money."

"For goodness' sake, don't tell that to whomever we decide to bring in!" Lady Craig said irritably. "Though, of course, it's nothing to do with me—financially, I mean. But that kind of man charges quite appallingly enough, as it is."

Houghton was not listening. He had got the number of the local police station, and now reached again for the instrument.

The door opened. It was Match.

"The chief constable is just coming up to the house, my lady. I know his car."

"Chief constable?" Houghton repeated. Lady Craig started.

"Yes, sir. I telephoned to him last night, or rather this morning, when Mr. Craig died. Just before you came."

"What do you mean?" Houghton asked bluntly.

"Mr. Craig told me, in between his horrible spasms of pain, sir, that he had been poisoned. I felt it my duty to let the police know, yet I didn't quite like to call the police in from the station near here, so I passed the matter on to Colonel Godolphin."

"Match!" came in almost a shriek from Lady Craig.

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"As you know, my lady, I am leaving service next week," he went on suavely. "Ah, there is the ring now! Shall I show him in here, my lady?"

"Certainly not! Into the morning-room."

"Very good, my lady."

Houghton could not repress a smile as the butler left them.

"Well, my dear Emily, the question is taken out of our hands." He looked well pleased that it was so.

"Anything but!" she said under her breath. "But it disposes of my intention of giving Match a handsome present when he leaves." She stopped. They could hear the front door open.

"Now, every word in this house will be weighed, and all sorts of questions put which needn't have been gone into." It struck Houghton that, deep down, the woman facing him was horribly uneasy. She was aging before his very eyes.

"As long as they get the criminal, who cares!" he said half-comfortingly, half-menacingly.

"Ah, my dear Guy," she retorted sweetly, "we are not all in the same fortunate position as yourself. *I* have not ample means of my own, nor shall *I* step into a vast fortune owing to poor Ronnie's death."

Before Houghton could speak, the butler came in to announce Colonel Godolphin and another gentleman.

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CHAPTER III

LADY CRAIG drew a deep breath as she entered the morning-room. The chief constable, Colonel Godolphin, was a middle-aged man with a rather grim face.

"How good of you to've come at once!" she said fervently. "But I thought—" She looked around for the colonel's companion.

"Chief Inspector Pointer of the C.I.D. happened to be down near here last night on another matter, so I got him to come along—just in case he should be wanted. He's seeing about the car at the moment."

"Does this mean that the affair will be in the hands of Scotland Yard?" Houghton asked. "I hope you won't think it rude of me, colonel, but I should be delighted to hear as much."

"Yes, indeed!" breathed Lady Craig, casting a stony glance at the speaker. "Not that we haven't entire confidence in your men," she murmured to her guest.

"So it's true!—what was told me over the telephone. I hoped there might be some mistake. Your butler—at least the voice sounded like his—" Godolphin began briskly.

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"It was my butler speaking." Lady Craig's tone conveyed the impression that Match had been merely her mouthpiece.

"—rang me up half an hour ago, and said that Craig had just died—" Again he paused. Lady Craig nodded sadly. Godolphin murmured his condolences to the two before he proceeded briskly: "Your butler went on to say that, before dying, Craig had gasped out that he was being poisoned, and would we look into the matter. So, of course, I hurried up at once."

"Dreadful, isn't it?" she said with a sigh. "And the doctors think it's true. It's very terrible that, if Dr. Lindrum had only been more, well—up in his work, poor Ronald might have been with us still. We had a man down from town for a consultation finally, but—he only got here this morning. Too late! Dr. Lindrum thinks poor Ronald was taking some medicine of his own, which combined with Dr. Lindrum's medicine to poison him. However, that's as may be! Of course, the only thing for us to do was to insist on an autopsy, and put the whole matter immediately in your hands."

Godolphin gave her rather a curious smile. He knew the woman. He very much doubted how far she had insisted on any such disagreeable thing, but he said a few civil words of approval, and then asked for Lindrum. "He's still here, isn't he? Mr. Pointer thought he must be."

The detective-officer in question had assumed as much, since the blinds were up in the room which the colonel had told him was Craig's. He thought that only

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a medical examination would explain that in the otherwise discreetly darkened house.

Godolphin was told that both the medical men had gone back for another look at the body.

"But they seem to have no doubt of what caused his death," Houghton went on. "Both are certain that it was due to arsenical poisoning. Of all the terrible ideas!" He stopped himself.

"What about weedkiller?" Godolphin asked.

"We only use a non-poisonous kind. I won't have any other," Lady Craig replied.

Match opened the door.

"Detective Chief Inspector Pointer," he announced.

In came a tall, lean, bronzed young man, with a definitely efficient look about his grave face and quiet movements. His eyes were his best feature. They were large, dark gray, and well-opened, with an expression of seeming frankness which yet baffled all attempts to read them. Lady Craig decided that there were both brains and power in this man.

"Hope you won't mind my having put a constable outside Mr. Craig's room," he said, as Lady Craig offered her hand. He did not add that another was in the garden, and another in the hall.

"I'm thankful to know one's there!" she said gratefully. "Though, personally, I am certain that this dreadful affair will be soon cleared up. Dr. Lindrum's theory is—" She repeated it as still more of a certainty than before.

"Can we have a word with the butler?" Godolphin suggested, when she had done.

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Houghton, without asking leave, rang the bell.

Match, when he came in, briefly ran over the events of last night. He seemed to consider them the continuation of yesterday afternoon, which, according to him, marked the beginning of the end. He had gone into Mr. Craig's room, around four, to see whether he should take out to the post a book which Mr. Craig had been wrapping up. He found him sitting up in bed, looking terribly ill, with his face twitching. Countess Jura seemed unconscious of his state, as she stood with her back to him, looking out the window.

"I thought the tea had disagreed with him. The Countess Jura had ordered up the tray a few minutes before, and two cups were standing on it by the bed, each about half-empty. Mr. Craig couldn't speak, seemingly, or daren't, for fear of groaning aloud or crying out. That's what his face looked like, sir," Match went on, addressing Houghton. "He made me a sort of sign with his eyes, as I entered, to get her away. So I said: 'I think Mr. Craig looks very poorly, my lady, perhaps you'll be good enough to call the nurse.' She didn't take my meaning." Match was speaking very carefully and slowly. "Not at all, apparently, for, without turning round, she said that the nurse and Lady Craig had only just left the room. And I was to leave the tray, as she hadn't finished her cup yet. Well, it was no time for ceremony, so I said, hurrying to the bed: 'Please call the nurse at once, my lady!' Then she did look round, and then—well—she rushed off to Mrs. Kingsmill as fast as she could go, carrying the tray away with her.

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The nurse came in, but there didn't seem anything she could do. We tried for the doctor on the phone, but he was making his round, and there aren't many telephones here about. The nurse said something about the new medicine not suiting Mr. Craig. After a while he grew quieter, and fell into a sleep. When he woke up he seemed much better—so much better that the doctor, when he hurried in at seven, seemed to think we had been a bit exaggerating things to ourselves. I heard him tell Mr. Craig that he had been possibly taking his Vichy too cold. Mr. Craig had asked for the bottles to be set on ice," Match explained. Mr. Craig had wanted nothing for his dinner. He, the butler, had sat with him as usual from nine to eleven, during which time the nurse was off duty.

Craig had no night nurse, Lady Craig here put in, indeed, he resented having one during the day, but, with her small staff, it was impossible to attend to a sick person properly. In Craig's case, Match had acted as a sort of second attendant. Last night, Match resumed, the sick man had not talked to him at all, but lay, apparently reading, though he, Match, noticed that he never turned a page. But he took the open book as a signal that Mr. Craig did not want to be talked to.

At eleven the nurse came in. Something about the sick man's appearance must have startled her afresh. She asked Match to sit on a moment longer. He heard her using the telephone—telephoning to the doctor, as she told him afterward. He himself only thought that Mr. Craig looked very sleepy. Match went to bed on

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being relieved, and slept until he was awakened by the groans of the sick man, whose room was below his. He heard him calling out as though in great pain. This was just after midnight, as he saw on glancing at his watch before hurrying down to help the nurse.

"Mr. Craig's eyes were open, but," Match went on, "I don't think he was rightly conscious. He asked what the time was. I said just past twelve, as near as no matter. He said: 'Twelve o'clock, and Guy hasn't come yet!' I replied that Mr. Houghton might come in the morning, and he said: 'Oh, is it night?' I told him it was, and his face cleared. He said: 'Be sure and bring him straight to me.' And on that"—Match shut his eyes with a look of sick repugnance at the memory—"he had an awful seizure. So bad that he called out to me: 'Match, I'm dying! They've poisoned me!' But, after a bit, it passed, and he seemed to grow drowsy again. The nurse went to wake her ladyship up. I don't think Mr. Craig rightly knew anyone when they came in. He seemed to be again in a sort of stupor. I thought that meant that he was better, but, around eight this morning, he had another dreadful attack and, after it, seemed to fall away as it were and died without opening his eyes again, at a quarter to nine. I telephoned to you, sir, just as Mr. Houghton was driving up in his car."

"'They've poisoned me!'" Houghton repeated. "Surely, Match, Mr. Craig must have said something more definite to you. After calling out that? Or before?"

"No, sir," Match said in a low voice, and Pointer did not believe him.

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"Were you in the room when Mr. Craig actually died?" Godolphin asked.

"Yes, sir, and afterward, too. I didn't leave it till I locked the door when everyone had left. I handed the key to Mr. Houghton here, as the head of the family now."

"So you were in the room last night practically continuously from nine o'clock on, with the exception of about an hour from eleven till past twelve? . . ." Godolphin wanted to have the hours clear in his mind.

"Yes, sir. All the time."

"Nothing has been taken out of the room?"

"Nothing but the bed covers, sir. The nurse took them before I knew what she was about. The blankets, and pillows, and so on, sir. The sheets were left."

"And these bed covers and pillows are where?"

"In a hamper which I had taken into my pantry. Also I took the medicine bottle that had been used for Mr. Craig. It was empty but, even so, after he died as he did, I wrapped it in my handkerchief in case of fingerprints, and put it in my pocket. It's down in my pantry at this moment along with the hamper."

"And the pantry door?" Pointer asked.

"Locked, sir," Match replied with dignity. "And the key is here." He touched his breast-pocket significantly.

"Good man!" Houghton said warmly. "Keep it so."

"But I suppose you tidied up the room, put things in their proper places, and so on?" Pointer threw in casually.

"No, sir, not a thing was touched except the bed, and the bottle of medicine. As I say, before I knew what she

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was doing, the nurse had the pillows and blankets off, but barring that, I wouldn't let her touch anything. She wanted to stay behind and tidy up, but I was firm. Of course, when Mr. Houghton arrived, I let him have the key, and can't speak for what has happened since."

The doctors came in as he finished. Lindrum was very pale. He shook hands with the chief constable, whom he knew, and there were introductions all around.

"As I just told Lady Craig," Lindrum began, in a voice that had a suppressed tenseness in it, "we suspect that death was due to the administration of arsenic. Until the autopsy, which must be held, of course, that is as much as I care to say."

"Do you suspect a big dose?" Godolphin asked nevertheless.

"Yes, as the actual cause of his death last night. But"—Lindrum flushed and then paled again—"but certain signs make us think that the poison must have been being administered for some weeks past as well."

"Four weeks past?" Godolphin asked under his breath.

"Not as long as twelve weeks is all we can say with certainty, I think." Gilchrist answered for the other.

"How the deuce can you tell that?" Godolphin almost whispered, drawing him aside. "Merely as a matter of curiosity—"

"Apparently there's none in his hair yet," was the brief but sufficient reply. Meanwhile, Lady Craig had

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turned to Lindrum. She took no trouble to lower her voice.

"There was a good deal of arsenic in the tonic that you were giving him, wasn't there?"

Lindrum quite scouted the idea that his medicine could have had any deleterious effect on his patient, unless the latter had been taking some other remedy or remedies, unknown to his medical attendant. As to the acute seizure of last night—having said that, he could say nothing more until the finding of the post-mortem. Lindrum seemed unable to stop talking—he had prescribed a variant of a new, but well-tried, tonic for malaria, and the solitary dose of it which had been given by the nurse at noon yesterday could not possibly have done any harm to, let alone killed, Craig.

"But I thought Match found the bottle—" Houghton began. He did not get to the word "empty," for the eye of the chief constable was on him with an expression as though Houghton were a recruit, and had dropped his rifle on parade.

Lindrum and the chief constable then discussed the arrangements to be made for the taking of the body to the nearest hospital. Gilchrist had promised to assist at the autopsy, and the house surgeon would be available as a third. The actual final analysis would be done by a Home Office expert. That settled, the two medical men would have hurried off, but Godolphin detained Lindrum.

"I should be much obliged if you would not go to your poison cupboard from now on. I have no power

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to enforce that request until the finding of the autopsy is actually in my hands, but it would be a prudent step on your part, Lindrum."

Lindrum's jaw muscles moved as though he set his teeth for a second. "Certainly," he said stiffly. "Here is the key." He detached it from the end of his watch-guard, and without another word left the room.

"Obviously—" Lady Craig began as soon as the door closed behind them, "it was an overdose, or a mistake in the prescribing. A new bottle was begun yesterday. Robert Lindrum puts up his own medicines, and his sister Agatha helps him. Well—there you are!" She looked around the little circle. Something in Houghton's expression made her add, reluctantly, "Apparently, it wasn't suicide—"

"No, Emily, it wasn't suicide," he said curtly. "But I want a word now with the colonel and the chief inspector, *alone*."

"It's thoughtful of you to spare me," she murmured, as she let him open the door for her. "I'll go up and see if Jura Ivanoff is awake. Poor child!"

Houghton, standing in the doorway, looking after her, saw her feet slow up more and more with every step of the stairs. She had forgotten him, she had forgotten the police, he felt sure, as with compressed lips she all but came to a standstill on the landing.

He closed the door and led the way to the farther end of the room.

"That idea of Lindrum's about doubled doses of medicine won't work. It wasn't only to Match that

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Ronald spoke of being poisoned," he began: "he wrote me to the same effect."

Houghton now handed over the letter which he had received yesterday noon. Colonel Godolphin read it through with the closest attention, and his lips shaped themselves as though he were giving an inaudible whistle.

"Well!" he said, finally passing it over to Pointer, "well!" Then, after a pause: "That certainly settles the question of suicide or a mistake in his medicine, as you say! Where's the part of a letter to which he refers?"

"Ah, where!" Houghton echoed. "I suggested to him to send it to me, inside a book, so that no one would suspect what he was doing. Match saw him wrapping one up. Yet nothing has come from here for me this morning, or I should have heard from my man. And I caught sight of the book agreed on lying by his bed. Someone, or something, made him change his mind—most unfortunately!"

"I suppose Mr. Craig was a man whose judgment could be relied on?" Pointer asked. "This letter of his must form the very foundation of any inquiry."

"My cousin made a fortune on the stock exchanges of the world," Houghton said. "Not in one lucky sweep, but in operations extending over years. You couldn't do that without having accuracy of judgment that amounted to genius."

Godolphin said that he, too, would rely implicitly on Craig's judgment.

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"If we take up the matter," Pointer went on, "the letter will, of course, be sent up for investigation by our experts. Not that I suspect it to be a forgery. On the contrary."

"It's his writing," Houghton said almost sadly, "as it was this last week or two."

"Are the people staying here in the manor house friends of yours, too, Mr. Houghton? Would any of them be by way of staying with you in town?"

Houghton shook his head. The household at the manor consisted only of Lady Craig, Countess Jura, and a children's governess, besides the servants. None of the three ladies had ever, or would in all probability ever, stop with him.

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"Well, Mr. Craig evidently thought he would be safe, if he could get off with you," Pointer explained. "That being so, it would narrow down the circle of possible suspects here by clearing any who were also great friends of yours. But, since that isn't so, since Mr. Craig would know that by going with you he would get away from everyone down here, it leaves things pretty much as they were. He may have had his suspicions of any one of them."

"That letter is damned vague," Houghton agreed. "Does it tell you anything at all?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if the guilty person were someone known to you both, Mr. Houghton," Pointer thought. "At least, that's a fair guess to start with. Evidently he was certain of the real poisoner's identity.

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"Several, I think."

"Can you remember them?"

Houghton thought a moment. "Five hundred a year to whoever has the Dower House. It was to be made into a sort of fund, of course, but the interest amounted to that. Varying sums to men in various parts of the world who had worked for him. Nothing striking, that I can remember. . . ."

"Anything to any servants here?"

"I rather think that Match's wages were to be continued during his life, as an annuity, but I may be wrong. We shall soon know."

The chief constable was staring at the carpet, however, lost in thought. "That confederate—" he murmured, "that confederate inside the house. . . . Nothing to go on there. . . . Damned vague, as you say, Houghton. But, as Craig excepts Match, the butler, it evidently lies among the women."

"One fact will help," Pointer thought. "This letter reached Mr. Houghton around two. It should be easy to find out when it was written. Was Mr. Craig's manner different, after it, to any member of the household? The answer to that question might give us a lift part of the way. Shall I keep this letter, sir, or will you? I suppose Mr. Houghton has no objection to one of us taking possession of it?"

Houghton's gesture waved away the idea of any objections on his part to anything the two officials might do.

"You keep it," Godolphin said. "I shall have to

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leave the case entirely to you. Last night's fire looks like arson. Together with our preparations for quarter sessions it will keep me fully occupied."

Houghton initialed the letter and watched the chief inspector put it carefully away.

"You know," he burst out, "it can't seem such an incredible nightmare to you as it does to me. To me, who know all the people in the house, and would have vouched for all of them. Yet he wasn't murdered from outside, but from inside. And, what's more, he was murdered before he could show me the proof which he had found, which was actually in his hands. . . . I think he was killed *because* he had got hold of that guilty letter and had written to me to come at once. We weren't to be allowed to meet."

"By George!" muttered Godolphin, "that's a possibility! That you weren't to meet! Still, the doctors seem sure that he was being poisoned for some time, in small doses. . . ."

"But he wasn't actually finished off until he had sent me that letter saying that he had hold of a paper which proved what damnable thing was going on—until he wrote me to come and take him away."

"One thing is certain, if you're right in thinking that Mr. Craig was killed to prevent a meeting between you," Pointer said thoughtfully: "it would mean that someone knew of the contents of this letter. For, from the wording of it, it doesn't seem likely that he would have shown the paper he had found to anyone else, or even spoken of it." Houghton agreed.

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"Unless Craig was indiscreet when he telephoned you?" suggested Godolphin.

"I don't think anyone could have guessed—no," Houghton said with certainty as he repeated the words they had exchanged along the wire, "no one could have guessed from overhearing what either of us said. Unless"—his face darkened—"unless they got it out of him afterward. Unless someone overheard enough to make them curious. Someone who suspected that Ronnie might guess what was happening, and was on the watch. . . . In that case, they might have got it out of him afterward, about my coming down here this morning, I mean. Only that much, of course."

"Would he have been likely to speak of your arrival?"

"To only one person, he might have. To Countess Jura." Houghton's voice was studiously level; he deliberately would not meet the eyes of either man.

"How did this letter reach you, and when, exactly?" Godolphin asked him. "According to what Craig writes here, Lindrum was to drop it in your box himself. I see there's no stamp or postmark on it."

"Someone—Lindrum, evidently—did drop it in my letter-box, and my man brought it in at once."

"You heard the ring? You know that it really was brought to you instantly?" Godolphin pressed.

"I do. I was at lunch. Time would be around ten past two. I heard a ring, and Hughes, my man, left me and went to the door, bringing in the letter you have there. And, for extra certainty, I heard the letter drop

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into the box. Hughes certainly had no time to open the envelope, or do more than see that it was addressed to me."

"Yet the envelope's been opened." The chief constable pointed to a line of dried gum outside the flap.

"Opened while it was damp, I think," Pointer added, he was inspecting it through a glass, "and, as you say, sir, stuck down with some fresh gum."

Houghton gave an exclamation. He, too, peered in his turn, and now noticed, for the first time, the slight wrinkles and waviness.

"If done while it was wet," Pointer thought, "your cousin might have opened it himself for some last word, or postscript."

"There's no postscript," Godolphin pointed out. "Might have forgotten the date, of course, and opened it to put it in. . . ."

He pulled at his mustache for a moment. "This very much backs up your idea, Houghton," he said finally. "We haven't any right—officially—until the finding of the post-mortem, to assume death by poisoning."

"Don't stop for red tape," Houghton urged. "Only clear up this nightmare."

"Lucky you're the head of the family," Godolphin murmured a trifle grimly, as he thought of Lady Craig, whose gushing welcome had by no means hoodwinked him.

"The house is hers," Houghton went on, "but she won't want to antagonize me just now. Supposing I'm right in thinking I'm Ronnie's executor. So ring bells;

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order the servants about as though they were your own; take anything away, for the time being, that you want to; open everything you see. In short, search the house from top to bottom, only find that part of a letter that Ronnie wrote of."

"Have you looked in the bedroom for it?" Godolphin asked.

Houghton explained that Lindrum had come in just as he was starting the search, and that, naturally, the two medicos had wanted the room to themselves.

"You disarranged nothing?" Pointer asked. "It may be most important to know if you altered the position of anything."

"I think I can say with certainty that I didn't lay so much as a finger on anything but a writing-cabinet which stood, locked, on a table close to the bed. I looked around the room, saw that there was no pillow under which the paper might have been tucked, thought of feeling under the sheet at the head of the bed but couldn't bring myself to do that—and decided to first look in the writing-case. I had just relocked it—my cousin's keys were on the mantel, and I put them back there—when—"

"So you did touch the keys, Houghton, as well as the cabinet?" Godolphin said with a dry chuckle.

Houghton gave a half-smile in reply. "Well—true. In the same way that I suppose I touched the door handle, the key which Match gave me—by the way, here it is; Lindrum handed it to me when they had finished—even the carpet. I trod on that too. Sorry.

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But now, look here, I quite understand that no one can be allowed to go into that room alone, or I shouldn't have stayed down here for a second, but will you both come up with me now, at once, and let us see if we can't find that precious paper my cousin referred to?"

Godolphin and Pointer both rose by way of assent.

"Supposing it to be still in existence I shouldn't locate it, off-hand, in the room where Mr. Craig died," Pointer said in a low tone to the chief constable, who gave him an emphatically assenting look.

Houghton led the way upstairs. Godolphin followed and waved to Pointer to come along. Strictly speaking, as yet the Scotland Yard man was only an onlooker. Indeed, still more strictly speaking, if the affair were placed in his hands, he would still be supposed to act only as an adviser to the chief constable. But even that standing was not his yet. For the moment, there were only the words of the dying man, written and spoken, and the belief of the two doctors, to show that a crime had been committed. Such, at least, was the theory. In point of fact, none of the three men had the least doubt on the matter, and the chief inspector carried with him up to the bedroom a camera which he had borrowed from his host of last night, the local superintendent.

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CHAPTER IV

AT a word from Godolphin, Houghton remained with the former in the doorway while Pointer took several photographs of the room and then quickly measured the distances between the various most important pieces of furniture and marked them on a plan.

That done, the room was free to move about in, though Godolphin asked Houghton not to touch anything. He himself stepped first of all to the bed and looked long at the face which had been hidden by the sheet. "He's altered," Godolphin said pityingly; "must have suffered agonies, by the change in him."

"He relied on me—and I wasn't there!" came in a choked whisper from Houghton, who strode to the window a moment and stood there, back to the room, biting his lips.

Pointer eyed the dead man closely. He saw a good-looking man with sharply cut features—features that suggested considerable driving power. He looked a very unyielding man, the detective thought, a man whom he would expect to insist on his own way even in trifles. He looked, to Pointer, like one who would

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live to schedule, and insist on others living to it too. There was nothing easy-going about the face. But it was emphatically the face of a law-abiding man.

"I'll see to it that whoever did it pays for it!" Houghton now said tensely, moving away from the window and stepping to the writing-cabinet. He picked up the keys, which lay where he had left them, unlocked the case and flung back the top.

"You see, the paper's not in here!" He fluttered through the contents a second time, more carefully.

Godolphin good-naturedly forbore to remind him about not touching things, and went through the little cabinet too.

"There's no gum here," he remarked as he did so, "otherwise it seems to be stocked with everything that the mind of a stationer could think of. What's the word the house-agents always use? 'Replete.' That's it."

"Yes, a sort of portable office. But as you say, there's no gum, though there's a pot of Stickwell. And what's much worse, there's no 'part of a letter.'" Houghton shook his head.

Pointer, after looking the case over very carefully too, took out the letter sent Houghton by the dead man.

"It evidently came from that block there. Want to make sure?" asked Godolphin, without much interest.

"I think we'll find it's an inch shorter than the rest of the sheets on this pad." The man from the Yard was measuring the two with his long but very strong-looking fingers, the fingers of an engineer.

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Godolphin, who was turning away, turned back keenly interested. As he had thought, the letter sent Houghton was identical in make of paper and color, but, as Pointer thought, it was an inch shorter. The envelope, on the other hand, tallied absolutely with the others in the same division, envelopes made to go with that particular block.

Pointer eyed the lower edge closely.

"I rather thought that something had been torn off here and that the edge had then been roughened to look like the other edges," he murmured half to himself.

"That would explain why the envelope was opened!" came in great excitement from Houghton.

"Y-yes, only I don't think it was Mr. Craig who went to the trouble of trying to hide the fact that the paper had been shortened," Pointer said, deep in thought. "Someone with plenty of time did that. Neatly done."

"It looks as if a postscript had been added and cut off by someone," Godolphin thought. "I can't imagine Craig working to make the sheet look as if it hadn't been touched, can you, Houghton?"

Houghton ridiculed the idea. "The last man in the world to've cared how the paper looked," he added. "No," his voice was husky, "what was taken away was the name! I feel sure Ronnie opened it to scrawl with his weary fingers the poisoner's name. Perhaps a sort of feeling that he had better tell me. . . . Well, this, at any rate, proves that the letter is no forgery, had proof been needed."

"Whoever tore it off must have known—positively—

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