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The CRIME at the CROSSWAYS

BRIAN FLYNN

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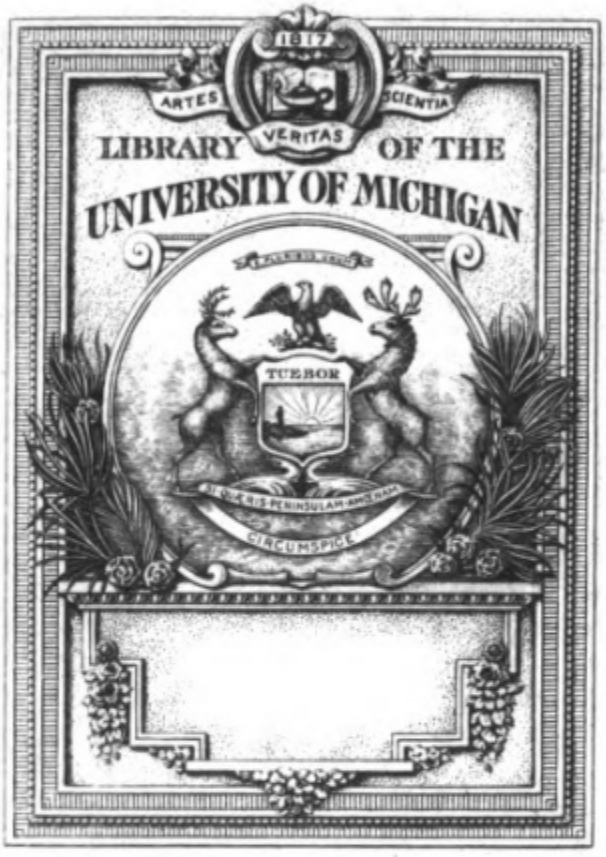

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The *Crime* at the *Crossways*

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Brian Flynn

THE CASE OF THE BLACK TWENTY-TWO
THE MURDERS NEAR MAPLETON
THE MYSTERY OF THE PEACOCK'S EYE
THE BILLIARD ROOM MYSTERY
THE CRIME AT THE CROSSWAYS

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The CRIME at the CROSSWAYS

BY BRIAN FLYNN

MACRAE-SMITH-COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA

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Bequest
C. F. Butler
11-14-39

CHAPTER I

IN THE space of six weeks the name of "Creeping Jenny" had become notorious in the southern counties of England and her capabilities immensely respected. A series of daring robberies had taken place from country houses and in each case where the robbery had occurred a card—in shape and size like a visiting-card—had been left behind in the bedroom where the actual theft had been perpetrated bearing the superscription in typewritten characters, "With Creeping Jenny's compliments. She takes but one." In two instances—those of Sir Graeme Grantham's diamond tie-pin and Mrs. Stanley Medlicott's pearl necklace with pendant and tassel of pearls—a ladder had evidently been employed at the front of the house while the company were seated at dinner, and also in each of these affairs very much more valuable articles had been left behind—untouched, quite in accordance as it were with the terms of the visiting-card. Mrs. Medlicott's necklace, for example, which was stolen two nights after Sir Graeme's pin, was worth perhaps a mere matter of one hundred and fifty pounds, while her famous emeralds had been almost at the thief's mercy had a little more care been taken. The view taken by the Superintendent of Police who investigated the affair of the

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Medlicott robbery was that the marauder had been disturbed and also that the fantastic sobriquet that had been assumed, and the somewhat vainglorious declaration of policy were entirely misleading, and intended to deceive. The Superintendent, who was looked upon with justification as one of the ablest men in the service, formed the opinion that he was dealing with a man "cat-burglar" of the most advanced and cleverest type who was throwing dust in the eyes of the police and preparing for much bigger "coups." When Sir Graeme Grantham's tie-pin had been stolen, a magnificent pair of amethyst cuff-links had been possibly overlooked and in the Medlicott case it was definitely proved, when the evidence of the various witnesses intimate with the affair came to be examined and sifted, that the thief must have been hiding in the bedroom while Mrs. Medlicott had actually been in there, for it was established beyond doubt that the ladder that had been used in connection with the theft must have been moved from its usual shelter and replaced within a period of no more than nine or ten minutes.

Following upon the two robberies that have been described, very similar occurrences took place in somewhat alarming succession at Mrs. Arthur Midwinter's near Crawley, Mrs. Topham-Garnett's on the outskirts of Rustington and then at the residence of Sir Gilbert and Lady Craddock at Cranwick in Sussex. Mrs. Arthur Midwinter lost a diamond chain with pendant of aquamarine, crystal and diamonds, a guest of Mrs. Topham-Garnett's was relieved of a pair of long drop turquoise earrings and

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at Cranwick Towers, Lady Craddock herself suffered a loss that caused her a great deal of annoyance. A very valuable opal ring was stolen from her bedroom—a ring for which she held a very strong sentimental regard—entirely apart from its intrinsic value. In this last affair the stains of mud upon a rug in the room, coupled with a broken pane of glass seemed to prove conclusively to the Police-Inspector who was called in by Sir Gilbert Craddock that yet another successful climbing feat had been executed by "Creeping Jenny" before the usual card had been deposited upon Lady Craddock's dressing-table. As a result of his operations several of the better known thieves of this particular type were combed out by the police from the unsavory seclusion of their respective haunts and their movements, comings and goings, most strictly investigated. But all to no purpose. The inquiry yielded no discovery of any importance and at last it became evident to Scotland Yard that a new star had arisen whose methods displayed a daring ingenuity and audacious originality worthy of a much better cause. For "Creeping Jenny's" unselfishness and altruistic principles still persisted and these traits, more than the qualities previously mentioned, captured the imagination of the public. "She"—if it were truly "she"—still and always "took but one," for Mrs. Arthur Midwinter, Mrs. Topham-Garnett, Mrs. Topham-Garnett's guest and Lady Craddock herself, were enabled out of her Robin Hood-like magnanimity to retain more valuable possessions that might very easily have found their

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way into this daring robber's pocket. An attempt made by the more sensational and less reliable press to call the thief "La Voleuse" met with immediate failure—"she" had christened herself "Creeping Jenny" and "Creeping Jenny" she remained.

On the morning that the theft of Lady Craddock's opal ring was announced in the newspapers Henry Mordaunt K. C. of "The Crossways" near Cranwick, Sussex, read the account of the affair with somewhat mixed feelings.

"Very good, Mitchell," he exclaimed to his butler who had upon instructions brought him the *Morning Message*, "many thanks. That will do for the present."

Very shortly after the withdrawal of the butler, the famous King's Counsel having exhausted the paragraph in question pressed the bell again.

"I'm sorry, Mitchell," he declared upon the butler's reappearance, "but I shall have to trouble you again. Tell Mrs. Mordaunt I want to see her at once—will you?"

Mitchell bowed. "Very good, sir. I will tell Mrs. Mordaunt immediately, sir."

Mordaunt awaited his wife's arrival very patiently, although patience was not his strongest suit. When she entered he greeted her with his customary courtesy.

"Good morning, Olive. I hope I'm not worrying you. But I wanted to show you this. It's er—extremely interesting. You remember what we were talking about last week? Well—have a look here."

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He pointed to the column in the paper that described "Creeping Jenny's" latest exploit at the Craddocks'.

Olive Mordaunt took the paper wonderingly. She was her husband's second wife and, of course, considerably his junior. Mordaunt's intimate circle had been extremely surprised at the marriage, for it was openly hinted that the lady chosen for the second union did not quite fill the bill as would have been generally expected. Physically she was decidedly attractive—her dark, somewhat meretricious beauty pleasing most men with whom she came into contact. She read the account that her husband had pointed out to her with an uplifting of the eyebrows. Then the suggestion of a smile played round her lips.

"Getting nearer and nearer," she said. "Is that what you mean, Henry?"

"It is," he replied, "and I am speaking, of course, with direct reference to next week. I wouldn't like anything to go wrong here next week—for Lorrimer's sake. His family I know has always placed a tremendous value on the Lorrimer sapphire as is only natural." He smiled across at his wife. "You will remember, my dear, that I have an excellent reason for saying that. In fact only two other people could have as good a one."

Olive Mordaunt returned her husband's smile and nodded brightly. "I know that, Henry. I remember you telling me when you wrote to me at Cannes, informing me of Margaret's intended engagement. I look forward to meeting Captain Lorrimer." She

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paused but proceeded almost immediately. "Rather a coincidence—don't you think—that Margaret and he, with Jane and Francis should be at Cranwick Towers at the moment? We shall at any rate get a first-hand account of this last 'Creeping Jenny' affair when they return here. It's an ill-wind, Henry ——"

He stroked his firm, clean-shaven mouth. "Yes, I suppose we shall! All the same—I don't like it. I seem to be suffering this morning from a presentiment. I think that's the best word to use to describe how I feel. Our house party and the reason behind it—Margaret's twenty-first birthday and the announcement of her engagement to Lorrimer—have been pretty extensively published—you know—in most circles. The *Morning Message* gave it three paragraphs, Olive, as recently as last Tuesday—very properly so, too. It stated, quite openly, that 'Margaret Mordaunt, third child and younger daughter of Henry Mordaunt, K. C. etc., etc., was to receive from her fiancé—Capt. Cyril Lorrimer, M. P. for the Froam division of Seabourne—the famous "Lorrimer Sapphire" for her engagement ring.' There followed some details—mainly incorrect—concerned with the ring's history." He stopped and pursed his lips in the manner that juries knew so well. "Seems to me, Olive, that that would be just the type of ring—jewel—whatever you choose to call it—to attract this 'Creeping Jenny' person . . . as an incentive. I've got a 'hunch' as our cousins across the Atlantic say—especially as her latest operations were at the

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'Towers'—no more than a couple of miles away from us."

"Rubbish, Henry. Now what has that to do with it really? That's only a coincidence—they do happen sometimes. Besides we'll have people staying here that we can form into a Committee of Defence—a Committee of Public Safety we'll call it." She laughed and clapped her hands gaily. "That would be rather fun, wouldn't it?" she cried, supplementing her previous remark.

"How many shall we have?" asked Mordaunt seriously.

"Our own three, back from the scene of the crime, as you might say, Captain Lorrimer and his mother, Adrian Challoner, John Raikes with Mr. and Mrs. Raikes, Mary Considine, Anne Ebbisham, Christine Massingham, Peter Daventry and Russell Streatfeild. You insisted on him—if you remember—although I don't know why—as well as your other old friend Adrian Challoner—another gentleman I am yet to have the pleasure of meeting. One or two of them have kept away a long time since you upset them all by marrying me, Henry." She added the last sentence mischievously, but Mordaunt made no sign that he appreciated its inner meaning. For there was bitterness allied with the mischief and he detected it.

"When are the girls and Francis expected back?" he inquired.

"To-morrow," she answered. "But Captain Lorrimer won't be coming over with them. So Margaret has told me,—at least. She 'phoned yes-

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terday afternoon. He has an appointment in town, I believe—business she says, that in all probability will take him a day or two so that we shan't see him at 'The Crossways' until Monday afternoon some time—the day before the *great* day."

"H'm," he remarked, as though pondering over some aspect of the matter that had not previously occurred to him, "do any of the others come before Monday?"

"You know there are some coming, Henry, as well as I do. Didn't I tell you so last week? Anne Ebbisham and Christine Massingham are coming over with Francis and the girls from the Craddocks' place and Peter Daventry will be coming down here for the week-end. Is there anything else that you want to know or have you remembered some of the things I have told you?"

"No—I'm satisfied now, Olive. All the same—I've still that feeling of insecurity. In fact, I've had it for some time. I can't explain it as I told you just now. I've just got it and that is all I can say about it. It is one of those curious, unreasoned anxieties."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a light knock sounded on the door. Mitchell entered noiselessly at his master's invitation.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but if it is convenient to you Inspector Baddeley would like to speak to you. He says it is very important, sir. What shall I tell him, sir?"

Mordaunt's brow furrowed with annoyance as he considered the butler's statement.

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"Inspector Baddeley?" he queried. "What on earth does Inspector Baddeley want with me? Any idea, Mitchell? Did he say?"

Mitchell shook his head gravely. "No, sir—he did not! And I did not inquire. If I had inquired I doubt very much whether the Inspector would have told me. I have noticed things like that before, sir."

Mordaunt looked across at his wife. "Better see him I suppose, Olive—though I can't imagine for a moment what he can want with me." He nodded with decision towards Mitchell. "All right, Mitchell! Tell the Inspector I'll see him at once. Leave him to me, Olive—you clear out—I don't suppose it's anything to cause either of us sleepless nights."

Mrs. Mordaunt acquiesced with unusual readiness for her, and slipped out of the room.

Inspector Baddeley of the Sussex Constabulary looked little changed since his investigation of the "Billiard Room Mystery" at Considine Manor some years previously. His closely cut dark hair still retained its color, his moustache was as trim as ever and his steady blue eyes had lost none of their brightness. When he spoke it was with the old snap and eminently business-like rapidity.

"Mr. Mordaunt," he opened immediately, "I'm Inspector Baddeley, just put in charge of the Cranwick Towers case. May I claim a few moments of your valuable time?"

The man he addressed looked puzzled but was quick to give his assent. "With pleasure, Inspector.

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Though I admit I'm completely at a loss to understand why you want me."

Baddeley smiled his quick and pleasant smile. "You don't surprise me when you say that, Mr. Mordaunt. But it's not my way to waste time—anybody's—my own included—and I never beat about the bush. I was called in at the special request of Sir Gilbert Craddock to investigate the latest of these 'Creeping Jenny' escapades. To tell the truth I was rather pleased—you can say if you like that I jumped at the chance." He rubbed his hands to show the extent of the pleasure that the affair had evidently given to him. "I hope, Mr. Mordaunt," he continued, "that by the time I've done with her, 'poor Jenny will be a-weeping.'" He smiled to accentuate his sally. "Well, to get along with it—I've made a discovery that I find extremely interesting—but at the same time—shall we say a trifle disconcerting?" He paused to see the effect that his words had had upon Henry Mordaunt.

"Go on, Inspector," said the latter coolly. "I'm listening. I've no doubt I'm going to hear something of interest. Though I don't know what."

"You are that, sir, I can promise you! The point is this. I'm pretty certain and so are the men that have worked on the case with me—including Inspector Bell, who was on it at the first—that the thief who cleared Lady Craddock's opal ring used a motor car. I will qualify that statement by saying either the thief or an accomplice. There were distinct tracks of a car leading from the 'Towers'

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down a lane very rarely used by motorists in the ordinary way and two villagers who have come forward and given us information state very definitely that a car passed them in this very lane on the night of the burglary just about the time to fit in with this theory of mine regarding the affair."

Mordaunt nodded. "Quite a reasonable theory, too, I should say, Inspector! Motor cars seem inseparable from crime these days. Certainly I can see nothing in your idea that would cause me to ——"

Baddeley raised his hand in his eagerness. "Quite so, sir. But that isn't all. That doesn't explain why I'm here to see you. I haven't finished yet—by a long way. The lane to which I refer, Mr. Mordaunt, is that known locally as 'Hangman's Hollow'—the very lane that comes out almost exactly opposite your house here—'The Crossways.' In fact it *might* be said to be in a direct line of communication between 'The Crossways' and 'Cranwick Towers.'" He caressed his neat little moustache with an air of extreme satisfaction and watched carefully the expression on the K. C.'s face.

"Well, Inspector?" said Mordaunt at length, with a certain amount of unconcealed amusement. "I don't deny that what you say is true—but still I find myself ——"

Baddeley changed his tone. "Your two daughters and son, Mr. Mordaunt, are I believe guests for the time being of Sir Gilbert Craddock at Cranwick Towers. That is so, isn't it? I am indebted

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to Lady Craddock herself for the knowledge and—I understand that ——"

"That's quite true, Inspector. But what's the point?"

Baddeley was some little time before he answered Mordaunt's last question and when he actually did so, his reply was not entirely direct.

"We have been unable so far, Mr. Mordaunt, to trace the tracks of the car beyond your house. Its tracks as a matter of fact seem to disappear completely as soon as 'The Crossways' is reached. There were the impressions in the lane—plain enough for anybody to see who has the eyes to read and understand such things—but at the end of this lane—'Hangman's Hollow'—they stop quite suddenly. You can't help me, I suppose, Mr. Mordaunt?"

Mordaunt's answer to this bore a tinge of annoyance.

"How do you mean, Inspector? How is it possible for me to help you? In fact I don't follow you at all."

But Baddeley, although he realized the note of asperity, was quite unperturbed. "You can't make any suggestion, Mr. Mordaunt, that would assist me towards an explanation?"

"None whatever, Inspector."

"Then tell me this, sir. Am I right in stating that one of your cars is over in the Cranwick Towers' garage and has been there all the time your people have been staying there?"

Mordaunt looked at him—the surprise on his

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face unmistakable. "You are, Inspector. But I'm hanged if I know at what you're getting. If you must know, my son drove his sisters over to Sir Gilbert Craddock's ten days or so ago. He's got my six-cylinder Sunbeam over there. But there's nothing unusual in that surely."

Baddeley turned his hat in his hands. "No," he ventured at length, "perhaps not. Perhaps I'm weaving a too fantastic theory about this 'Creeping Jenny' person. Still ——" He rose sharply from his chair and prepared to make his exit. "It's my way, you see, sir! I was always one to consider everything, no matter how improbable some of the things may be at first blush. Or seem to be would be a better way of putting it perhaps. However, in this case—I may have strayed a little too far. If I have I'll get back to the main path, never fear. But you never know. A 'Sunbeam' I think you said? Good-day, Mr. Mordaunt, and thank you."

"Good-day, Inspector. Sorry you've had your journey for nothing."

The eyes of the two men met and held each other across the room. Then the door closed behind Inspector Baddeley. Mordaunt took a cigar and lit it, and the hand that held the match was as steady as a rock.

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CHAPTER II

"CHRISTINE, my child," said Anne Ebbisham, as she dexterously swung the car round a sharp curve of the road, "I'm not sorry to be leaving Cranwick Towers. It hasn't exactly been a home of rest these last few days. Take it from my own sweet self, that Inspector gentleman that was so inquisitive about Francis' car and how far 'The Crossways' was away and how long it would take to get there (a) in September travelling light and (b) at Christmas—carol-singing as you went—is no 'bimbo' as they'd say on the 'talkies.' Look out, I'm going to tread on the 'juice' for a bit. The road's as clear as a City church."

As the car gathered speed, Christine Massingham, her companion, looked at her curiously.

"What do you mean, Anne—exactly?" she asked after a moment's hesitation, "about the Inspector?"

"What do I mean?" Anne repeated the question after her very deliberately. "I mean this, my temporarily unintelligent precious. The jovial Baddeley won't have the wool pulled over his eyes quite as easily as some of his predecessors did. If you ask little Annie—and believe me, oh my Christine, you could do a lot worse than that—the sprightly Baddeley has come to the conclusion that the 'Creep-

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ing Jenny' affairs have been worked 'on the inside.' I believe that is the correct expression to use in cases of this kind. I invariably buy the midday Wallace. Anyhow, I'll bet a pony to a peanut that he's properly poked the breeze up Papa Mordaunt; do him good too." She jerked her head at Christine. "What was that jolt, dreamy-eyes? Did you notice anything?"

"A hen, dear. Let's hope it was too old for laying."

Anne gurgled delightfully. "You'll be the death of me, Christine."

"If I am, Anne, I shall probably be merely getting my own back. I am noted for my powers of retaliation."

Miss Ebbisham repeated the gurgle. "'With your permission' I'm going to stop here for a moment, Cherub. We're quite near 'The Crossways,' another five minutes'll do it. I am going, Miss Massingham, to powder what Francis Mordaunt always describes as my singularly attractive nose." The young lady immediately suited the action to the words. "He is not, I may add, alone in that respect. I always tell him he has catholic tastes. I know no surer way of getting him into a 'snork' than by saying that." She gave her deliciously tip-tilted nose another dab. "All the same, Christine, I was deadly serious just now in what I said and lingering here won't purchase new apparel for the necessitous infant. Inspector Baddeley *suspects somebody!* Somebody *definite*, I mean. That's Anne Ebbisham's one-horse snip.

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Send five pounds for my unbeatable certainty that's running on Saturday next at Sandown Park—a veritable 'rod in pickle'—and turn the bookmaker's complexion from pale yellow to a deeper saffron. What did I give you for the Lincoln in 1928—when every other sporting ——" Anne spoke with the utmost nonchalance, but again Christine threw her a glance of strong curiosity as she interrupted her.

"Suspects somebody! What do you mean, Anne? I believe you know something. Do you mean somebody that you and I know or are you just ——"

Miss Ebbisham pushed the self-starter. "I'm not saying any more, Cherry Blossom—my lips are sealed—but keep your ears and saucy eyes open. Old Baddeley looked at Francis as though he were hungry and had been invited to a good meal and when she saw it—as I'm cast iron sure she did—Jane Mordaunt, who had been hanging round, looked about as happy as a canary rubbing beaks with a chinchilla. And she's quite a resolute little person usually. Serve old Lady Craddock right," she added, "shouldn't leave her 'pretties' lying about with 'Creeping Jenny' knocking round. Some people oughtn't to possess anything more valuable than 'bus tickets and tiddledy-winks counters, and then somebody should hold their little hands for them when they cross the road." Anne slowed the car down. "There's 'The Crossways,' Christilinda, just ahead of us. That noble pile. So look your dainty best and don't appear too enviously green when Molly Mordaunt first shows you the

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'Lorrimer Sapphire.' In case your virgin verdure should be hopelessly misunderstood and the wrong construction placed upon it. By the way—I've been going to ask you several times—how do you like my godfather—Adrian Challoner?"

Christine smiled at the question and if possible her determined little face grew in attractiveness.

"Very much, Anne. It takes one a little time perhaps to know him thoroughly and to understand him properly—but when you do, I think he's very charming. He's giving me quite a good chance in the new play. You agree with me, I know."

"Oh, yes, Christine. I think he's as white as they make them, but it's a bit different for me to think so, isn't it? I've known him so long, you see. Of course he likes himself a lot but one gets used to that and perhaps in the end it makes him even more attractive."

Christine nodded. "He's terribly fond of the Mordaunt girls, isn't he?"

Anne Ebbisham showed unmistakable agreement. "Too true. Particularly Jane. She told me once when I suppose she felt very confidential that he'd do anything for her. You see he's Henry Mordaunt's closest and oldest friend. Supposed to have been 'dippy' over the first Mrs. M. You know the old stunt, Christine, 'how happy could she have been with either, etc.'—she married the barrister but the actor loved her still—and after her—her children. Since then he's been the stern, silent figure in the background who loved but once and who ever since has been wedded to the what

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might have been. Dear, dear, very distressing, my precious, very distressing, but it has added to his attraction for the 'first-nighters' and at the same time he's had the exquisite felicity and supreme compensation of being godfather to yours truly. After all, the man can't have everything." She laughed and the mischief danced in her blue eyes. "He's a good sort, though, my angel—coming back to serious things again—and nobody could have been kinder to my brother and me than he has—and you'll find he'll help you no end at your job. If you've really got the talent, Christy Minstrel—be perfectly assured that Adrian Challoner will develop it. There's not a man on the London boards to touch him as far as that's concerned. But here we are. Hop out, my chicken. Francis and the girls will be wondering where the dickens we've got to, and we owe it to them to beautify the place as much as possible."

As she spoke her eyes narrowed perceptibly, a fact that her companion noticed immediately.

"What's the matter, Anne?" she asked.

Miss Ebbisham's mouth set in the serious lines of determination. "Look, my angel," she returned. "Gaze lingeringly long upon the gentleman who has just finished his morning call at 'The Crossways' and then give me a reverential pat. Extend to me a gesture of congratulation."

Christine Massingham followed the direction of Miss Ebbisham's eyes with her own, and she saw without difficulty the man whom Anne had indicated. It was Inspector Baddeley. She turned again to

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Anne and marvelled at the glitter in her eyes. But whether it was of doubt, daring or defiance, she found it impossible to decide. Wherein she was not alone, for others had endeavored to read Miss Ebbisham and signally failed.

"Wouldn't it be a 'spree,'" murmured that lady, "if 'Creeping Jenny' did a job of gate-crashing at 'The Crossways' and lifted the famous Lorrimer sapphire?"

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CHAPTER III

PETER DAVENTRY has been heard to remark many times since, that Molly Mordaunt's "twenty-first and betrothal" dinner was the cause of giving to him the most curious little thrill of his life. He had worked with Anthony Lotherington Bathurst upon one of the latter's strangest investigations, namely "The Black Twenty-two," but the adventure and excitement that had been produced by that case was different from what he was destined to feel ultimately at "The Crossways." Dinner itself had been entirely delightful. Well cooked, well served and garnished by a company of manifold charm. For there were no very obvious passengers in the social boat that put out that evening under the command of Henry Mordaunt K. C. On the left of the host sat Jane his elder daughter, Molly, the "principal" of the evening, flanking him on his right. Next to Jane Mordaunt and in order, came John Raikes, who had been at a preparatory school and afterwards at Winchester with Francis Mordaunt, Christine Massingham, Russell Streatfeild, solicitor of Hyde, Streatfeild and Digby, Anne Ebbisham, Francis Mordaunt, Olive Mordaunt, Adrian Challoner, the famous actor-manager, Mary Considine, Peter Daventry, Mrs. and Mr. Raikes,

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parents of the John Raikes previously mentioned, Mrs. Lorrimer, (Captain Lorrimer's mother) and Captain Cyril Lorrimer, M. P., next, of course, to Molly herself. It said something for Adrian Challoner's quality of distinction and power of personal magnetism that they should show so unmistakably in a gathering of this kind. Anne had hoped secretly to have been seated next to her godfather for she found him invariably an intellectual stimulus, but in spite of her disappointment she found Russell Streatfeild, her right-hand neighbor, extremely entertaining.

"You know, Miss Ebbisham," he said, with a twinkling grey eye and in his rather curiously high-pitched voice, "one should never let a host feel that one's first duty is to the cook. The ideal conversationalist should be conscious of three duties—the first to his immediate neighbors—in my own case this evening that particular duty has become a most pleasing one"—he bowed gallantly to Anne and Christine—" the second to his host and hostess —the third to the company in general."

Anne laughed delightfully. " I believe I'm going to like you, Mr. Streatfeild, and at first I was afraid that I shouldn't. I thought you looked a bit ——" She paused and screwed her nose up as though in doubt of her selection of the word.

Streatfeild smiled. " A bit what? Don't spare me, Miss Ebbisham, if the adjective in question makes a strong appeal to you. I assure you that I of all people ——"

" A bit 'legal,' " decided Anne triumphantly.

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"Would you have preferred me then—to have conveyed the impression of being—'illegal'?" The lines of his mouth rippled humorously.

Before Anne could reply Adrian Challoner's voice came across the table to them. "Don't believe a tenth of what she says to you, Streatfeild. Let me tell you that I never do. I daren't! She's very nearly my worst production. Only my most meticulous care and painstaking assiduity in what I promised for her at her baptism have saved her from being ——" He shrugged his shoulders in effective completion of the sentence but there was a smile on his face and laughter in his words.

Anne grinned at Challoner's remark, the imp as usual on duty in her eyes.

Christine answered for Streatfeild who had turned laughingly to Miss Ebbisham herself.

"If Anne's 'very nearly' your worst production, Mr. Challoner, what's your really worst? I'm intrigued."

"Himself," snapped Anne, turning the tables with ready retaliation; "don't ask questions that are so obvious, Christine. That was apparent from the first."

Challoner joined heartily in the general laugh at his expense.

"How's the new show going?" questioned Streatfeild.

"Which one—'Broken Threads'—or the one in rehearsal?"

"The new one—the one that follows 'Broken Threads.'"

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"Not too badly—ask Miss Massingham. She should be as good a judge as anybody."

"Very well!" said Christine. "Everybody seems quite pleased with it."

"There's only one thing, Streatfeild," put in the actor-manager, "it's a strong play; the big scene in the second act when I'm assassinated is immensely powerful, but, all the same, I'm thinking seriously of altering its title."

"Why? What's it called? I can't remember for the moment."

"'Sin and a Woman.'"

Russell Streatfeild pursed his lips in the consideration of appraisement. "I don't know," he said eventually, "not a bad title as titles go. Why alter it? What's the alternative if you do?"

"'Two women,' surely?" Challoner smiled.

Anne's spontaneous explosion was accompanied by the more decorous laughter of the others. Mrs. Raikes laid her hand on her husband's arm with her usual gesture of proprietorship.

"Defend my sex for me, George, against Mr. Challoner's most unjustifiable attack. The next time I sit in the stalls I shall remember it throughout the whole of the performance. It will probably spoil the entire evening for me."

"Do you find us so alluring then, Mr. Challoner?" The question came from Mary Considine and as she spoke Peter thought that the answer would have come very easily if it had been demanded from him. He found himself wishing fervently that it had been.

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"Not I only, Miss Considine, I am but one of a battalion," replied Challoner, "and as a champion of your own sex you yourself are irresistible. Besides, look round the table! What do you see? Each one of us is enslaved to one of you, at least. Who would have it otherwise?" He smiled and proceeded to amplify his statement. "Consider my proofs. Lorrimer is hopelessly in love with Molly. You've only got to glance at him to see that. Jane, my own little Jane whom I have ardently and openly worshipped from her cot upwards, has flagrantly entrapped Jack Raikes. Henceforward I walk in the shadows."

"Go on," said Mary, "I find this distinctly daring and decidedly interesting. I had no idea you would be so personal."

"I knew that you would at once be interested if I were. A woman always is. To the *average* woman these suggestions are like the scent of the earth to the husbandman. What must they be to you therefore? But where was I—how far had I travelled round the table?" He looked round and found his bearings again. "Christine will dangle poor old Streatfeild's scalp from her belt considerably before midnight—Anne will—by Jove—I believe the hussy's listening."

"You bet I am," interposed that lady, "and everything I hear you say about me in that connection will be used as evidence against you. And in the near future at that. If Mr. Mordaunt ——"

Challoner waved her remark away lightly. "Anne, Miss Considine, as I have often stated to

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my most favored friends, is very probably definitely and unashamedly polyandrous. Make out a list, will you? You can put down Francis, Peter Daventry ——"

"You beast," flamed Miss Ebbisham, "of all the ——" He dodged something that she threw dexterously at him.

"I'm next, Mr. Challoner—what about me?" It was Olive Mordaunt who spoke.

Challoner's eyes met hers and he spoke a little cynically. "Your husband is your slave, Mrs. Mordaunt, as he should be. *Now.*" It is doubtful whether the last word carried to her ears for even Mary Considine and Peter Daventry, who were leaning nearer to the speaker than she was, scarcely caught it.

"I come after Mrs. Mordaunt," Mary smiled the statement at Challoner.

"You, Miss Considine?"

"Yes."

"Surely it is obvious whom you have enslaved—count *me your* eternally faithful servant." He inclined towards her with a gesture of irreproachable courtesy and simulated homage. As he did so Lorimer rose from his seat bending down for a second or so to whisper to his mother.

The likeness between mother and son as their two heads ranged side by side was strikingly apparent to everybody who watched them. They were of equal height. There was the same clean-cut profile, the same raven hair and large, dark eyes, the same laughing charm of countenance. Mrs.

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Lorrimer, proud of her son and perhaps prouder of his success, patted him encouragingly on the arm as he bent down to her, almost as it were challenging Molly Mordaunt for the prior right of possession. The gesture of the ages!

Lorrimer, as she did so, stroked his thick, almost turbulent hair, and faced the company. Adrian Challoner found himself inwardly complimenting Molly Mordaunt upon the soundness of her matrimonial choice. Lorrimer's forehead was broad and intellectual and his eyes held alertness and steadiness in addition to their other qualities. Challoner discovered in him unusual combinations. There were vigor and some refinement of taste, he thought, and the more usual alliance of intellect and character. But at the same time also a strong hint of sensuality. Looking more closely he considered that he could see besides both knowledge and capacity. Distinctly out of place in the House of Commons, thought the actor-manager.

Lorrimer commenced to speak.

"Mr. and Mrs. Mordaunt," he said, "and friends. You have heard what Mr. Mordaunt has said this evening about Molly—how he has wished her all the luck possible now that she has reached the age of twenty-one and how he has coupled my name with hers and formally announced our engagement. I am both gratified and honored. I want to thank him both on behalf of Molly and myself. The chief thought uppermost in my mind as I speak to you is that I'm a wonderfully lucky dog. At the moment I wouldn't change places with any man in

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England—or in any other country of the world—come to that. At the same time I am going to ask you to be witnesses to a little ceremony, a ceremony that has fallen into comparative disuse. I refer to the ceremony of betrothal. Stand up, Molly, please." Molly—radiantly beautiful—obeyed the request of her lover with sunshine in her smile. "The ring I'm giving Molly for her engagement," continued Captain Lorrimer, "is the famous Lorrimer sapphire that is known all over the world, and I'm perfectly certain that you will all agree with me when I say that I couldn't possibly find a more lovely hand upon which to place it." He turned to his fiancée and slipped the ring on her finger. "And thereto I plight thee my troth," he quoted gallantly. "Show them, Molly," he said, "let them see the sapphire—next to you and my mother I would rather lose anything in the world than that."

Molly Mordaunt held up her left hand upon which was the great gleaming sapphire and a burst of clapping from the table immediately greeted her action.

"Thank you, Cyril," she said very prettily and daintily, and then turning to the company. "It's perfectly sweet of you all to have come to wish me luck and it only adds enormously to my happiness to see you here. I am sure Cyril feels the same." She resumed her seat, but her lover remained standing.

"Before I sit down," he proceeded, "I want to tell you something else. Something that is doubt-

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less unknown to most of you. It may seem a strange thing for me to say but in a way the Lorrimer sapphire has come home. Mr. Mordaunt knows full well to what I refer."

The speaker paused for a moment to glance at his host at the head of the table and during that fleeting second of time Adrian Challoner, exercising his usual habit of retrospection, took stock of the faces of the various people upon whom his eyes rested. Olive Mordaunt at her end of the table looked troubled—her eyes were heavy with an undoubted apprehension as they flickered from her husband to Molly and subsequently from Molly to Jane. Molly and her father were listening to and watching Lorrimer with eager rapture and keen interest, respectively—each giving Challoner the suggestion of hanging upon the speaker's words. On Jane's strong and determined face there was the usual air of quiet resolution to be seen even more plainly than normally. Anne Ebbisham's eyes still held the dancing lights of mischief, but Mary and Christine had their features in admirable control. Each was listening intently. He heard Lorrimer's voice again.

"To us, gathered here to-night the history of the Lorrimer sapphire is more than interesting. For the Lorrimer sapphire has a distant connection with the Throne of England and must be at least three hundred and fifty years old. Although it is not known how she came by it, it belonged to Queen Elizabeth and was given by her as a mark of appreciation to Sir Gervaise Mordaunte, the famous

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ancestor of the gentleman at whose table we are privileged to sit to-night. But Sir Gervaise of the wild and wayward spirit during a carousal one evening diced it away to a certain schemingly avaricious Gregory Lorrimer who happened to be an ancestor of mine. For him, ladies and gentlemen, I make no apology. My father, who told me the story when I was a lad, told me also how the loss of the great sapphire in these circumstances had rankled down the years in the Mordaunt family and how they had attempted many times, by both fair means and foul, to get it back. But they always failed. We Lorrimers, direct descendants of the grasping Gregory, nurture a habit of holding fast to what we have and we kept the great sapphire. Ladies and gentlemen, once again a Lorrimer has taken from a Mordaunt a most valuable possession. But neither by dice nor daring." Captain Lorrimer gestured gracefully towards the girl seated next to him. He went on. "And let me say—I do not think that I can find a better way of expressing what has happened than by saying that the Mordaunts have got the sapphire in exchange. They have got it back at last. By *fair* means! By the fairest means in all the world!" He placed his hand on Molly Mordaunt's shoulder.

As he took his seat to the accompaniment of uncontrolled enthusiasm he passed an arm round his mother and slipped the other into Molly's.

"Lucky young beggar," whispered Adrian Challoner to Bertha Raikes on his left, "two women like that at his feet."

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Mrs. Raikes nodded but threw out a defensive prophecy. "My John will prove just as successful as Cyril Lorrimer when the time and chance come, Mr. Challoner, and if they don't come he'll make them. You mark my motherly words."

Challoner laughed and was about to reply to the lady when Henry Mordaunt rose with a curious expression on his face and began to speak. The famous K. C. used the cold, incisive, almost passionless tone that was inseparable from him whenever he spoke to a number of people. It might be described as his "*coram publico*" voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is now my turn. Captain Lorrimer, my future son-in-law, has told you something of the history of the Lorrimer sapphire. That history it was already my privilege to know. To me and to all loyal members of my family, true descendants of Sir Gervaise—which name by the way I prefer to Gregory—it has always been known not as the Lorrimer sapphire but as the Mordaunt sapphire." He smiled. "We must regard, therefore, Molly's engagement as singularly felicitous. But what I have to say to you now touches more upon the present than the past. There is a fashion, nowadays, to deride the present, sometimes at the expense of the future, more often perhaps at the expense of the past. But its importance to my mind can never be overestimated—because it is real—it is always *certain*—it is *with us!* So apparently is 'Creeping Jenny.'"

The silence that followed the anti-climax of his last remark was definitely cold in its intensity. Mor-

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daunt, as though keenly appreciative of the fact and of its influence on the situation, lost no time in proceeding with what he had to say. He was always a keen judge of the possibilities of a situation and the talent had contributed largely to his success. Taking a square piece of paper from the inside pocket of his dress coat he startled the company with his next statement even more than he had done with his previous one.

"I make that assertion," he said, "with the utmost confidence, for on this occasion the lady to whom I have just referred has been kind and considerate enough to notify me of her intentions in advance. I received this communication about an hour ago through the usual channel of the post. I will read it to you. 'The announcement in the papers concerning the Lorrimer sapphire fascinates me tremendously. I find myself dwelling on the subject to the exclusion of all other interests. So much so in fact that I have decided to honor your house with a visit in my professional capacity. Expect me some time after eleven o'clock to-night. Creeping Jenny.'"

Mordaunt replaced the paper in his pocket with a grave air and turned to his younger daughter and her fiancé. "My boy," he declared, addressing Lorrimer, "we are warned. And forewarned is forearmed. Shall I take the necessary precautions to guard the ring on behalf of Molly, or are you content that I should leave them to you?"

Captain Lorrimer raised his hand with a gesture of defiance. "I am quite content that you should

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leave the matter in my hands, sir," he cried. "We Lorrimers have kept the sapphire for three hundred and fifty years. I think I can be trusted to keep it a bit longer, 'Creeping Jenny' or no 'Creeping Jenny.'"

The buzz of conversation prevented him saying any more but suddenly Adrian Challoner's voice could be distinctly heard above the rest.

"Well," he cried, "whoever she is—or perhaps whoever 'he' is—for you never know in these cases—'Creeping Jenny's' a good plucked 'un and a rare sport, say what you like about her. 'Pon my soul I wouldn't be greatly surprised if she successfully carried out her threat."

"Not she," cried Lorrimer, "not she, nor anybody else while I hold the sapphire."

As he looked at the faces of the people facing him Challoner saw Jane, Christine and Francis shake their heads doubtfully and almost in unison in consideration of the opinion that he had expressed.

"You think not?" he cried, with a seemingly sudden impulse. "Well then, I wouldn't mind betting a level hundred that 'Jenny' pulls it off."

Anne Ebbisham leaned across the table with outstretched hand, her eyes aflame with excitement.

"Done," she exclaimed, "done! That's a bet. Book it with me. I'll call on you for the hundred in the morning."

Peter Daventry couldn't help noticing the expression on Russell Streatfeild's face as he watched her fascinatedly.

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CHAPTER IV

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When Jane Mordaunt opened her eyes on the following morning, it was with a dim and vague sense of foreboding. The morning in question held the first touches of autumn that the year had so far given, but although Jane noticed the fact, the impression that it made upon her mind was but an ephemeral one. She would have found it utterly impossible to explain how she felt had she been interrogated, but the feeling had first come to her perhaps at the dinner-table on the previous evening when, following upon her father's sensational statement and Captain Lorrimer's subsequent challenge, Anne Ebbisham had made that somewhat fantastic wager concerning the Lorrimer sapphire with her father's old friend Adrian Challoner. She herself had known Challoner since the earliest days of her childhood-remembrance and something had told her when he gaily flung out the suggestion of the bet in his usual cavalier manner that he would be successful and not Anne Ebbisham. It was a mystic, shadowy and indefinable something, perhaps, but nevertheless she had had it and had known that it was there and John Raikes, at her side with his hand on her arm and his eyes looking into hers, was equally conscious that she was engulfed temporarily by a wave of emotion. When he had first noticed it

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he had pressed her, half-seriously and half-laughingly, for an explanation but she had shaken her pretty and determined little head and successfully evaded the issue of a direct answer. As she propped herself up in bed upon her right elbow the events of the previous evening came racing back to her one by one—at first nebulously—and, after that, with a distinct measure of clarity. What had Russell Streatfeild meant when he had whispered to her a few minutes after Anne had held out her hand across the table to —— The flowing current of her thoughts was checked suddenly, almost precipitately. There was a knocking upon the door of the room next to hers and when she heard it Jane Mordaunt sat straight up in her bed. The knocking was repeated—once, twice, thrice, and grew in the nature of its attack. Then she heard her father's voice in the corridor and its tone held for her an unusual petulance.

"What is it, Rayner?" she heard him say. "What is it? If you knock any louder you'll disturb everybody. Show a little common sense; do! What is it?"

Rayner's voice came in immediate reply and the maid's voice contained a note of agitation that Jane even from the recesses of her bedroom detected at once.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't wake the mistress. This is the third time I've tried, sir, and I can't get any answer from her at all. I don't mean the third time I've knocked, sir; I mean the third time I've come upstairs, sir. I must 'ave knocked a

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dozen times all told. I don't like it, sir, truth, I don't. It seems to me that something must be wrong.".

"What on earth do you mean, Rayner? How can anything be wrong? Your mistress is asleep; she was very tired last night. I know that because she told me so before we came to bed. The time was only a quarter to twelve." Mordaunt was contemptuous towards the maid's pessimism. But Rayner stuck obstinately to her point.

"I've never known the mistress not to be awake a good hour before this time, sir! Besides, there's another thing that's not quite usual."

"What's that?" Jane heard her father ask sharply.

"Her bedroom's closed, sir. I can't get in. The door's locked, and that's not an ordinary thing for the mistress. I always take her tea straight in to her, sir, long before this time."

If it failed to impress Henry Mordaunt, Jane realized the truth of the remark and slipped on her dressing-gown.

"I will go into your mistress's room to satisfy you, Rayner," said Mordaunt, with the air of a man who is settling a vexed question for all time. He returned to his own apartment which evidently he had recently left somewhat hastily to interrogate the maid and passing quickly through the door that connected the two bedrooms entered the one ordinarily occupied by his wife. A moment's glance around it was enough to assure him that the room was empty. The door leading out on to the cor-

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ridor had no key in the lock on the inside as he had half-expected to find. He tried it; it was locked. Then his eyes travelled instinctively to the bed. Here again he was puzzled, and it must be confessed somewhat shocked—the bed had not been slept in. It was—to all intents and purposes—untouched. He walked right up to it and save for a slight depression on one side as though some object had lain there for some little time it was as tidy and trim as though newly made. Where in the name of goodness, he asked himself, could Olive be? He turned to find his daughter Jane behind him.

"I heard Rayner knocking, Father. I heard what she said to you. I came out of my room at once. Where's Olive? What does it mean?" She was breathless as she asked the two questions.

Mordaunt shook his head blankly and the puzzled expression on his face became even more pronounced.

"I can't make it out at all, Jane. I can't understand it. I last saw Olive about a quarter to twelve last night. She came up about twenty minutes or so before I did—she was tired and had a bit of a head, she told me. She also intimated that she wouldn't require her maid. As to this position this morning and her absence from this room, I can't make the slightest ——" He stopped and shook his head as though to emphasize his complete inability to understand the situation with which he found himself confronted.

"What do you propose we do?" queried the practical Jane.

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"Suppose we must have a look all round; she may have been taken queer in some way. Perhaps she's downstairs somewhere. Tell Francis—but try to keep it from the others—including Molly. For goodness sake don't let us disturb the guests if we can possibly help it. Don't tell Francis *all* we know either when you go to him—just let him see that I want him for something that's pretty important. Don't particularize."

Jane disappeared immediately upon her errand. It was quickly executed and very soon Mordaunt had his son and elder daughter at his side in Mrs. Mordaunt's bedroom.

"I had to tell Rayner," he announced, "that Olive wasn't here. I had to—it was imperative—there was no alternative. I've also told her to keep her mouth shut." He spoke to Jane and looked from her to his son at the same time with a suggestion of inquiry.

"I just told him that you wanted him, Father, and that it was urgent—no more," explained his daughter, dutifully anticipating the remark that Henry Mordaunt was about to make.

"We can't find Olive," Mordaunt informed his son, coming to the point at once, "and what is much more significant as I see it, is the alarming fact that her bed has not been slept in. I tell you frankly, Francis, I am at a complete loss what to make of it. I thought I had better send for you."

Francis frowned as he digested the information. "Are her clothes gone?" he asked.

His father stared at him for a second or two.

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"There are no clothes to be seen in the room—if that's what you mean. You can see that for yourself, surely?" He gestured impatiently round the room to point his remarks.

"I mean outdoor clothes, Father, in case she's had to go out somewhere. Have you looked in her wardrobe?"

Mordaunt favored him with another stare. "What could she have wanted to go out for, Francis—and where? Be sensible, my boy, please! I'm afraid I'm in no mood at the moment to listen to moonshine and exaggerated theories like ——"

Francis quietly intervened. "I'm sorry, Father—but you'll pardon me pointing it out to you, I'm sure, but you never know, do you? It's a pretty clear thing she has gone *somewhere*, isn't it? For instance, I've an idea! Goodness knows why, but it's just come to me. Supposing she got on the track of 'Creeping Jenny'—and followed her—or 'him' as Challoner said—for all we know. Eh? How about that for a possibility? Supposing too ——"

Mordaunt's face paled, and his hand shook a little as he grasped his son's theory and all that it might mean.

"Don't suggest that, my boy, whatever you do. The position as we know it is quite bad enough. For Heaven's sake don't make it any worse. Don't put ideas like that into my head."

"Let's get to work then," exclaimed Francis. "Standing here arguing amongst ourselves won't find her—there's nothing more certain than that. What about the grounds?"

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Mordaunt reluctantly concurred. "Yes, I suppose we'd better have a look round. You're quite right, Francis. Get Bennett at once; tell him we think that Olive may have been taken ill somewhere. Don't tell him any more than that. I'll be down and join you in a few moments. Get back to your room, Jane, and don't let Molly get wind of anything being wrong."

He turned quickly away and his son and daughter did as he had directed them. Within the space of a few moments Mordaunt joined Francis and Bennett, the gardener, at the door of the garage and heard his son tell the latter that Mrs. Mordaunt was not in her bedroom. Beyond the mere statement of that fact he said nothing.

"My father and I think we ought to have a squint round outside, Bennett, in case anything's wrong. So come along with us, will you?"

The gardener, who was a quiet, undemonstrative and uncommunicative man, lifted his cap to the elder Mordaunt and gestured an assent.

"Have you been all round the garden this morning, Bennett?"

"No, Mr. Mordaunt. I haven't been a step farther than the hothouse. There's been several jobs to see to in there for some time now and I never moved out of there till Mr. Francis here come along just now and told me as how you wanted me. So I've not been anything like round, sir—not yet, not by any manner of means."

The tour of the garden of "The Crossways" yielded nothing of any importance, and the sugges-

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tion to return was already being considered when Francis Mordaunt had another idea.

"What about the old well?" he exclaimed. "We haven't thought about that? Could Olive have ——?"

His father interrupted him sharply. "What are you talking about, Francis? Do you realize what you are saying? How could she possibly have gone down there? It will be a terrible thing if she has ——"

Francis saw immediately what his father was thinking. "Of course I don't mean anything like that, Father. It was only the idea of searching everywhere that came to me and made me say what I did. I'm sorry if I upset you."

The gardener looked at the elder man and shook his head as though in remonstrance. "After all, sir, look at it how you will, Mr. Francis is quite right. The old well's a right-down dangerous place, there's no gainsayin' that fact. Many a time I've said to folk round here that it ought to be covered up. In fact, I as good as said so to Mitchell only the other afternoon. Perhaps the mistress has had a fall or something. If so we ought to go and see."

"I suppose you're right, Bennett. Anyhow, you and Mr. Francis between you have persuaded me that we ought to go to have a look. So don't let's waste any more time but get along there as quickly as possible."

The well to which reference had been made was situated beyond the orchard at the extreme eastern

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edge of the grounds belonging to "The Crossways." It was old and disused as Bennett had stated, and was a good ten minutes' walk from the house itself. As the three men made their way towards it over the grass, heavy with the autumnal dew, passing the apple trees with their windfalls at their feet each felt, although in a different way, that something had happened at "The Crossways" during the last few hours that would have the inevitable effect of changing it for evermore. None of the three by some strange sense of anticipation as they more nearly approached the old well, entertained any doubt whatever that it was going to afford them some explanation of Olive Mordaunt's extraordinary absence. Each felt the strange certainty that this last errand would not turn out to be fruitless. As they turned the last twist in the path that eventually brought the well into actual view there appeared to be nothing visible that could be termed in any way out of the ordinary. The grass all round sparkled with the sheen of the sun on the dew as it slowly triumphed over the curling wisps of mist that heralded chill October and the quick coming of autumn. Francis Mordaunt, unable to restrain his impatience, broke into a run for the last hundred yards or so and came first to the destination. If there were anything dreadful lying ahead he desired to face it first and be able on that account as it were to assume the greater part of its responsibility. When he came to the edge of the well and looked down into its depth, he was grateful for the few seconds' grace that his speed had given to him. The

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body of his stepmother lay there at the bottom of the well in a huddled heap of horror, and Francis Mordaunt knew beyond any powers of contradiction that she was dead. But he kept his head and in a second his common sense asserted itself. He waved his father and the gardener back a few paces and cried to them sharply.

"She's here. She's fallen down in some way. Perhaps she's only injured. We must get back to the house for help. We must have ropes and a hurdle."

But Henry Mordaunt faced the shock that he knew the sight would give him before he turned with them upon the journey back to the house. Like his son before him he knew too that his wife was dead. He fell to worrying and wondering in the transient moments of his sorrow as to how her death had been encompassed, for it was grotesque and not in the order of things; she was years younger than he. When after considerable labor and difficulty the body was raised and brought back to the house and his son entered the library where he himself had retreated during the carrying out of the unhappy task, he put the question to him that had agitated his mind from the first moments of the discovery.

"How did she die, Francis? From the fall only?"

Francis Mordaunt shook his head gravely. "I'm afraid not, sir—although, of course, I can't say definitely till a doctor has seen her. I've sent Bennett along for one—also for the police. But to all

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appearances she has been murdered—stabbed—through the heart."

"Good God!" cried Mordaunt, "what does it all mean? What can it mean?" He paused and turned over in his mind another aspect of the matter that had occasioned him some anxiety. "Tell me, Francis," he said eventually, "how was she dressed —was it her evening cloak that I saw as I ——"

"Yes, Father. She had her ermine cloak over her evening dress. She must have put it on on purpose to go out. Apparently she took her hand-bag as well, for we have found that also." He looked at his father and then quickly went on once more. "Have you thought of what I said, Father, when you first called me into the bedroom this morning? I can't help referring to it again. About 'Creeping Jenny,' I mean—don't you think this affair all points that way? Supposing Olive *did* hear something? And then ——"

Mordaunt bit his lip before shrugging his shoulders. "It hardly seems to me likely or even possible that Olive would—still ——"

A tap sounded on the door and there was also to be heard the buzz of voices.

"Come in," he called. The door opened.

"Good morning, Mr. Mordaunt," said the man who entered, "you sent for me, I believe?"

It was Inspector Baddeley.

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CHAPTER V

❖

"I DID, Inspector, or rather my son here did. We are in serious trouble. My wife, I fear, has been murdered." Mordaunt's voice broke as he made the announcement. "Did you bring a doctor with you, Inspector?"

"Doctor Elliott will be here in a few moments, Mr. Mordaunt. I telephoned to him directly I received the message that your man brought. But tell me all you can, please, as quickly as possible. What are the circumstances of Mrs. Mordaunt's death?"

Mordaunt told the story in detail as he knew it—from the moment that Rayner had first sounded the alarm, to the finding of the body in the well. He also mentioned when he had last seen his wife.

Baddeley listened with the keenest attention. "Stabbed through the heart you think, sir," he said, addressing Francis. "Have you found the weapon that was used, by any chance?"

Francis Mordaunt shook his head. "No. Haven't looked for it, Inspector. Haven't had time to look for it. It isn't half-an-hour since we got the body out of the well. My father and I have just waited for you to come. We haven't really had any time to do anything else."

"I see." Baddeley rubbed his chin with his

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thumb and forefinger. "Any trouble that you know of during the night? Any alarm, for instance, that might have disturbed Mrs. Mordaunt and caused her to dress herself, lock her bedroom door, and go out of the house?"

Father and son shook their heads in simultaneous denial of the Inspector's suggestion.

"Neither of us heard anything, Inspector. I have asked my son about it," answered the elder man, "and my bedroom is, of course, connected with my wife's. If it were so, why should she take the key with her? Anything that might have happened to upset or disturb her should most certainly have affected me in precisely the same way. And as it happened I was particularly on the *qui vive* last night."

Baddeley noted the last remark but for the time being tried another tack. "Had Mrs. Mordaunt any personal trouble that you are aware of, sir?"

"No, Baddeley, none whatever as far as I know. Certainly nothing that she has confided to me or that—provided that were not the case—I have ever observed."

"Been in good spirits lately?"

"Yes, I think so, Inspector. Much as usual I should say. Certainly there was nothing noticeable the other way. Of course we've been pretty busy for the last few days over the arrangements in respect of my younger daughter's engagement. But I should say that—making allowances for excitement and pressure of household responsibility—my wife's spirits had been quite normal."

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"No!" The interruption came from Francis. His tone was sharp and short. His father turned to him with surprise.

"No? What do you mean, Francis? That Olive was not in good spirits? If what you hint at is true it's news to me."

Baddeley turned to the young man. "Tell me what you want to tell me—I shall be pleased to hear it. Perhaps it will assist me a great deal."

Henry Mordaunt looked curiously at his son. "Surely, Francis, you aren't referring to that 'Creeping Jenny' business that I mentioned last night at dinner? Because if you are, I can tell you candidly ——"

"No, Father, I'm not. I made up my mind to leave that to you to tell the Inspector later on. What I am about to say has nothing whatever to do with that. It is something quite different. But Olive was not herself all day yesterday. I am able to make that statement without fear of contradiction and with no reservations whatever. I noticed the fact on several occasions and I'm perfectly certain that if you taxed them about it and told them what I have said that my sisters would confirm it—especially Molly. Because they noticed it, too."

"How was the lady then, Mr. Mordaunt, *prior* to yesterday—all right?"

Francis considered the question for a minute. "As far as I can judge, yes. That is to say that I didn't notice anything untoward or abnormal about her then like I did yesterday. But at the same time, Inspector, I should like to warn you that

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that evidence of mine isn't worth very much. For I was out in the car nearly all Saturday and Sunday, so that I didn't see very much of her on those two days."

"H'm, I see." Baddeley turned to the elder man. "And you noticed nothing of what your son has mentioned, Mr. Mordaunt?"

"Nothing, Inspector. But what he says has rather disturbed me. It has made me even more worried than I was."

Before Baddeley could develop the question, however, a knock on the door heralded the entrance of Doctor Elliott. He intimated to the Inspector that he desired to see the body of the dead woman immediately.

"Where is it, Baddeley?"

"In the garage, Doctor. Young Mr. Mordaunt here gave orders for it to be taken in there. I quite see his point that the body had to be taken from the well to make sure that she was past help, but all the same I wish I had been on the spot when they did it. You had better come with us, Mr. Mordaunt," he added addressing the K. C. "I'll have a chat with you later on about what you were on the point of telling me." As Mordaunt raised his eyebrows at the remark, Baddeley continued in explanation, "About 'Creeping Jenny,' I mean."

The four men entered the garage where the body of Olive Mordaunt lay. Doctor Elliott's inspection was quickly made.

"A clear case of murder, in my opinion," he said

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after a comparatively brief examination of the body. "And death, I should say, must have been almost instantaneous."

"Stabbed through the heart, Doctor?" inquired Baddeley.

"There is a deepish wound above the heart," replied the doctor. "The dagger or knife that has been used has been driven in with a good deal of force by the assailant. It has entered close to the breast-bone between the second and third ribs. The left lung has been punctured and the aortic arch almost divided. So great was the force of the blow, the pulmonary artery has also suffered severely. It would have been impossible for the victim to have lived more than a few seconds."

Henry Mordaunt's face was colorless. He looked like a man who had seen a ghost.

"One question, Doctor Elliott. Is it possible from what you have seen for my poor wife to have laid violent hands on herself?"

The doctor rubbed his forehead. "Yes, just possible I think, perhaps—but highly improbable. Very, very highly improbable. So much so that you can rule out the bare possibility. It is quite true that the wound *might*, judging solely from its position, have been self-inflicted—but all my medical knowledge and experience prompt me to say that in my opinion it was *not*. For instance death would come to the victim so quickly—almost as I said just now—instantaneously, that I think the weapon that had been used would be found, of a certainty, either clasped in the hand or at least lying close beside the

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