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THE MYSTERY AT CHILLERY

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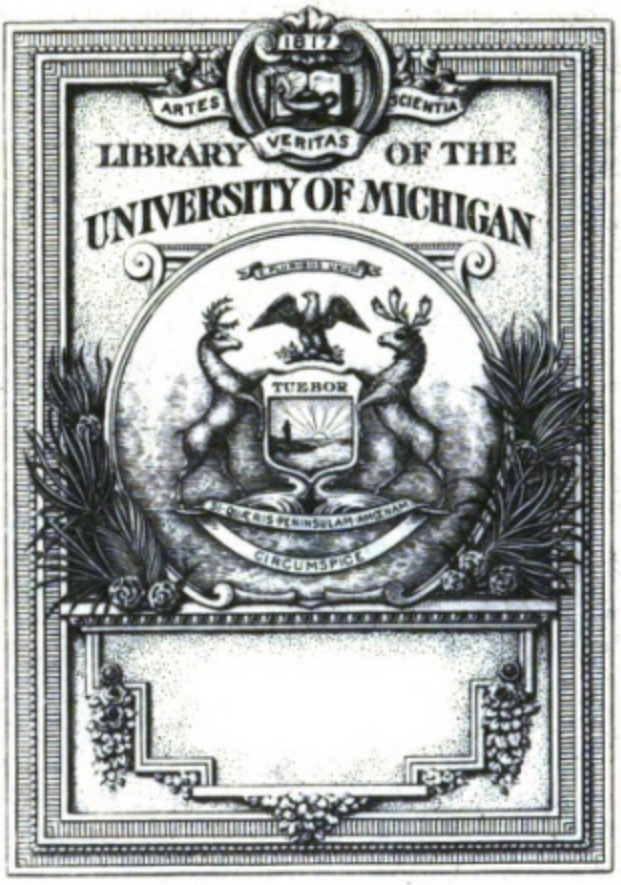

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The Missing Gate
The Lift Murder
Confession
The Dark Night
The Music Gallery Murder
The Moat House Mystery
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Murder From Beyond

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THE MYSTERY AT CHILLERY

By

R. FRANCIS FOSTER

THE FICTION LEAGUE
61 East 11th Street, New York

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C. F. BUTLER
BEQUEST
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THE MYSTERY AT CHILLERY

CHAPTER I

ONLY ONE RETURNED

THERE was something wrong at Chillery Court. Captain Trevor Hawkesbridge, late of His Majesty's Indian Army, stood at his bedroom window and, looking out into the August night, wondered what it was that had roused in him the sense of danger that obsessed him. He had been but seven hours in the place, he reflected, yet here he was, tense with apprehension.

He could not ascribe his feeling to imagination, for he was not an imaginative man. Moreover, when he had been so afflicted before it was with good reason. There was that time when he had been tiger shooting in Burma and dacoits had stolen on his little camp at night: for two hours previous to the attack he had waited, warned by his instinct that danger threatened, so that when finally it had come he was ready with his gun. There was that time, too, when in the last Waziristan campaign his company had been raided by Mahsuds in the early morning. He had awakened at two o'clock conscious that something was wrong. The night was still. No sound but the restless movement of a sentry had broken the silence, yet he knew that danger impended.

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At three o'clock he stole out of his tent to investigate. Everything seemed normal. The four sentries had nothing to report and the Indian officer in charge of the night pickets was confident that all was well. Despite that, however, Hawkesbridge had ordered the defences silently to be manned—and an hour before dawn the attack came. It was during that miniature battle that he had been shot in the leg by a dum-dum bullet and incapacitated for further service. That was why he was in England now, retired at the early age of thirty-five.

How could he, in the circumstances, ignore the danger signals that were flying now? His old Colonel whom he had met again but a week ago in London had asked him to come down and stay with him in his Sussex house, and Hawkesbridge had taken the invitation to be a gesture of friendship, for he and the Colonel had always been great friends despite the disparity in their ages; but he wondered now whether——

Hawkesbridge checked the flow of his thoughts. He mustn't imagine things, he told himself. There was certainly something wrong, and that being the case he must assemble the little evidence that he had and, in military parlance, make out an "appreciation of the situation."

He sat down by the window and slowly filled his pipe. The room was in darkness—he had switched out the light the better to enjoy the quiet beauty of the moonlit garden—and the house was silent. The hour was late, and his host and his wife and daughter were abed and probably asleep. Hawkesbridge settled himself comfortably in his chair, drew luxuriously at his pipe and stared at the waning moon through the cedar

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at the bottom of the garden as he began to think in earnest.

It was, he told himself, at the Club that he had accidentally met the Colonel. A new member, he was sure that the Colonel had not known that he would be there, so that the possibility that he had been intentionally sought was ruled out. The Colonel had shown the greatest surprise at seeing him there and in a perfectly natural way just before they parted he had invited him to spend a week at Chillery Court—"Nothing much doing there in August," he had said, "but it'll appeal to you if you love old houses and unspoiled countryside."

Nothing unusual in the invitation at all, Hawkesbridge considered. He had accepted it at once and here he was on Friday night, the 22nd of August—he looked at the illuminated dial of his wrist watch and smiled —no; Saturday morning the 23rd of August, in his room at Chillery Court and already convinced, though nothing particularly out of the ordinary had happened, that all was not well in his host's house. There was certainly no domestic trouble. Mrs. Merrow was a level-headed woman who was obviously fond of her husband; and Osyth, their daughter——

He let his thoughts dwell on her. She was a woman now and very different from the girl she had been in India several years ago. He remembered seeing her at Lahore.

That would be in '24, he reflected.

Yes: she had changed a great deal. She was a good-looker, level-headed like her mother who treated her as a sister rather than a daughter. Osyth wrote, he understood. He must find out to-morrow what she'd

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done. He couldn't remember having heard of her as a writer.

He returned to his "appreciation of the situation." The Colonel had met him at North Grinstead station that afternoon and brought him to Chillery in the big open Singer car—Hawkesbridge, as a soldier, knew the value of details and he was careful to recall everything. Mrs. Merrow and Osyth were at tea in the drawing-room with Mrs.—what was her name?—Mrs. Story, the Rector's wife, when he arrived. Mrs. Merrow had greeted him warmly, as always,—and Osyth with the restraint and shyness which was natural in the circumstances. He had had a cup of tea after he had washed and then Osyth had shown him the garden, afterwards playing tennis with him.

Dinner had been at half past seven, and afterwards he had played bridge with the family until at nine o'clock Mrs. Merrow, pleading a headache, had gone to her room. Osyth had retired to hers, to finish some work she was doing, she said, and he and the Colonel had gone to the library for a smoke and a yarn.

Then something out of the ordinary had occurred. The Colonel became distrait after a short time. Once Hawkesbridge, who had been staring dreamily through the open window, glanced at him and saw that the other was regarding him in an appraising manner. The older man looked undecided and worried, and Hawkesbridge had the impression that his host was considering the advisability of revealing something to him. There was no evidence of that, of course: it was merely an impression.

Hawkesbridge had looked out of the window again just in time to glimpse a flutter of white against the

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box hedge. Osyth had been wearing white at dinner, he remembered.

Well, there was nothing particularly unusual in that, he told himself. Probably Osyth had gone out to seek inspiration in the garden. Besides, it was a hot night.

Then when the Colonel had apparently abandoned the idea of confiding in him, and when he yawned rather ostentatiously, Hawkesbridge had suggested bed. After a whisky and soda he had bidden the Colonel good-night, and at the early hour of ten-fifteen had gone to his room. Ten minutes later the Colonel had visited him there—"to see if everything is all right," he had explained. But Hawkesbridge, noting his hesitating manner, again had the impression that the Colonel wanted to tell him something important, but was doubtful of the advisability of doing it. Finally the Colonel left.

Hawkesbridge felt too wakeful to go to bed. In any case, that queer sense of apprehension had already started to function, though until now there was no reason for it as far as he could tell. He decided to descend to the library to get a book.

The passage outside was in darkness so he returned for an electric torch, and feeling unhappily like a thief he tip-toed to the staircase. As he passed his host's room he heard voices and quite plainly Mrs. Merrow said:

". . . trust him all right. Tell him first thing in the morning."

The remark so linked up with his earlier impression of the Colonel's desire to make a *confidant* of him that unconsciously he halted. The Colonel said something in his deep rumble that was unintelligible, and Hawkesbridge became aware of the fact that he was

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evesdropping. He started to move on again when there came to him the distinct sound of a woman's sob followed by the words, plainly if tearfully uttered:

"I can't bear it, Austin! We shall all go mad if——"

The Colonel broke in with a swift "Hush!" of caution, and Hawkesbridge guiltily hurried on. In the library he took a book without looking at the title. The desire for reading was gone yet he felt uncomfortably that he must take a book of some sort since, after all, that was what he had come for. At the back of his mind was a dread lest he should be discovered and thought to have overheard the Merrows' conversation.

He saw that the window had been closed but not shuttered and supposed that presently Carlin, the butler, would go round the house locking up. Did he know that Osyth was outside?

He went to the window and looked out. The garden lay flooded in moonlight and the lawn was glistening with dew. Diagonally across it lay a trail of footprints—Osyth's, of course.

Should he warn Carlin that the girl was out? It was not his place to do that. Doubtless Osyth was in the habit of going into the garden at night and she had arranged not to be shut out. Hawkesbridge turned and went to the door, intending to return to his room despite the strength of the uncanny force that told him that something was wrong and that that something was in the garden. Man of action that he was, his whole nature rebelled against the convention that demanded that he return to his room and stay there till morning. Instinct told him to investigate; but breeding forced him upstairs.

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Upstairs he went, but he compromised by not switching on the light and by going at once to his window which looked out on the same part of the garden from above the library window. There he gained the first tangible evidence that something unusual had happened and was still happening. Down below he had noticed but one line of footprints on the dew-drenched grass of the lawn: the brilliance of the moonlight had enabled him to see that trail quite clearly. Now a second trail lay across the lawn intermingling in places with the first as though the person who made it had gone uncertainly, not directly, across from corner to corner.

Apprehension grew, yet again Hawkesbridge was restrained from investigating by the thought that he did not know the habits of the household and that probably everything was normal. It was possible that, knowing Osyth was out, the butler had gone to tell her that he was about to lock up—No; he would hardly do that. He might have gone to tell her that her parents had gone to bed. That was more likely, perhaps. The trouble was, Hawkesbridge realised, that he knew nothing of the family's habits. More and more as he convinced himself that he must not trespass, he decided to do nothing. He would just sit here at the open window and watch and wait.

The moon was setting. It sank behind the massive yew tree and the lawn now lay in darkness. The trails of footprints could no longer be seen.

So much for Hawkesbridge's "appreciation of the situation." The hour was now past one o'clock and he had seen and heard nothing since then but the plaintive call of an owl in the dark cedar. Should he wait

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longer? Instinct said "Yes"; reason said "No," and because despite the proved value of his instinct he hated appearing to be in any way abnormal, even to himself, he sensed that his apprehension was mere foolishness and, undressing, went to bed.

But he did not sleep. For an hour he lay uncomfortably trying to school his mind to quietness, but whenever he closed his eyes he saw the moon-flooded lawn with its two trails of footprints. His senses were so alert that he could even hear the steady tick-tock of the big grandfather clock in the hall below—a clock that was not allowed to chime because Mrs. Merrow was such a light sleeper.

He must have dozed at last. He opened his eyes to find the gray light of the summer's early dawn filling the room. The window curtains fluttered in the cool wind.

He glanced at his watch, conscious that apprehension was still with him. It was half past four. Sleep left his brain at once. He pushed back the single sheet that covered him and got out of bed, going at once to the window. The lawn was white with heavy dew and last night's two trails were blurred. Alongside was a single new trail, with the toemarks towards the house. There were two people abroad last night and only one returned.

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CHAPTER II

THE BODY IN THE TRAIN

WHAT was the significance of the third trail? Plainly it had been made hours after the other two. And whose was it, Osyth's or that of the person who had followed her? From the window Hawkesbridge could not answer that question.

He began hastily to don his clothes. Now was the time for investigation before the servants were astir. If he were seen at most he would be thought but eccentric for rising so early.

As he put on his jacket he paused. Osyth might have a lover, and that second trail—— He put the thought out of his mind at once. Osyth was not that sort.

His leg worried him this morning. Doubtless the heavy dew made the air damp—he didn't understand meteorological matters, but he knew that damp always caused his old wound to be troublesome. He limped across to the door and opened it cautiously. Silence, but for the tick-tock of the clock in the hall.

In a few minutes he was at the front door. It was bolted. He opened it easily and silently, and going outside pulled it to behind him without shutting it completely. Then he went to the corner of the lawn where the outgoing footprints started. The old trails were too blurred to be distinguished one from another, but the

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new trail, that which returned to where he stood, was plain. The footprints were a man's. Osyth then had not returned—at least, not by the way she had gone out.

Hawkesbridge straightened himself and looked across the lawn. Beyond the diagonally opposite corner to which the earlier trails led, and from which the third trail came, was a path between hedges of box. He had been along there last evening with Osyth, but he did not remember where it went.

He glanced round the deserted garden. A blackbird and a couple of starlings sought breakfast on the lawn, and in the cedar a thrush was singing. A rook went by overhead, cawing lustily. Hawkesbridge quickly made up his mind, and going round the lawn he entered the box lined alley. The flagged path showed no footprints, but it was certain that the two who had been abroad in the night had gone along it. He limped to the far end and came to a wicket gate. Beyond was a meadow.

He paused to orientate himself. The sun had not yet risen, but he knew he was facing almost due west. The house was immediately behind him, and the road to North Grinstead was over to the southward connected with the house by a two hundred yard drive as he could see as he looked across the meadow on his left. The gate interrupted a path crossing a field to an iron fence by a thicket a hundred and fifty yards away.

He turned round and looked back. Yes; undoubtedly Osyth had meant to make for the path across the meadow, otherwise she would not have crossed the lawn diagonally. The inference was that she had gone

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to the wood. It was useless to wonder why. In any case, it was none of his business. He was concerned with the person who had followed her and who had returned not very long ago—if that latest unblurred trail meant anything.

Hawkesbridge turned again and walked slowly along the path towards the wood, studying the ground as he went. He came to the wood and found a stile in the hedge that separated it from the meadow. On the edge of the step were several small pieces of grass, sharp cut at one end. Undoubtedly they were from the lawn—the cut ends denoted a lawn mower. He was on the right track.

Laboriously, because of his stiff leg, he got over the stile. The wood beyond was dense with undergrowth, but the path he had just traversed continued on through it—probably to the road, he decided, noticing its leftward tendency. He began to walk along it and then stopped. The moist ground held footprints—a jumble of them. They were unblurred except where they mingled. Examination confirmed what he had already discovered on the lawn: one pair was a woman's and one a man's, and the man's went in both directions.

Instinct caused him to step on one side of the path so that he should not leave a trail himself in the soft ground. Walking now with difficulty, because he was no longer on the path, he pushed on. Sometimes when the ground was harder the footprints disappeared. But he did not bother about the trail now: he knew that he was going right.

He came to a fork in the path. The ground was hard at the junction, but he cast along each track until

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he found the trail again, leading to the left and in the direction of the road. A hundred yards further on he halted. Before him was a treeless hollow, and in the centre stood a rude hut.

For some minutes he kept in the shelter of the trees. The hut might be tenanted, and he did not want to be discovered. The path itself ended at the edge of the hollow, but across the short grass was a blurred trail, and at the beginning of it, showing plainly on the soft ground, was the print of a small heel. Of the man's tracks he could see nothing.

Slowly he circled the hollow until he reached a point opposite the doorway.

What now? Undoubtedly this was the place to which Osyth had gone last night. The blurred footprints across the grass proved that. And it was obvious that either she was still there or she had returned by another route. Why then had the man gone back by the way he had come? Evidently he had done what he intended to do, or seen what he wanted to see and—Wait a bit, though! He must have been out here some hours.

A fear that was not nameless was growing in the soldier's mind. So far as he could see the man had not gone to the hut, why then had he followed Osyth so far and stayed here some hours afterwards? It wasn't possible that Osyth had had an assignation with him! Altogether impossible!

The fear grew, but he mastered it. He must not act precipitately. Probably the path he had just left was continued through the wood beyond the hut. He edged round the hollow. A trail again—no, two! He went

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round a little further. The grass was all trampled down as though several people had passed that way.

Understanding came. Someone had gone to the hut from the opposite direction, had met Osyth there, and the two had gone in the direction from which that person had come. Yes; there was the continuation of the path.

He hurried towards it and was rewarded at once. In the damp soil he read the story without difficulty. A woman had approached the hut from the west, Osyth had come from the east, met Osyth at or in the hut, and had gone off with her to the westward.

But what of the man? Search as he might, Hawkesbridge could find no evidence of him anywhere. Was he then just a Paul Pry who had followed Osyth thinking that she was going to meet a man? Had he hidden in the wood watching? And had he, when he found that the assignation was with a woman, returned to the house?

But that didn't fit in with the evidence. It was plain from the blurred trail that the woman had come early in the night, just before or just after Osyth had arrived, about ten o'clock; whereas the man had not returned until some hours later.

Hawkesbridge looked at the hut again. Osyth was obviously not there, but he felt he ought to examine the inside.

He did so, crossing the grass where it had been trampled down on the west side of it. There was no reason, he told himself, why he should be careful to avoid leaving tracks: his caution was just habit.

Save for a tree log the hut was empty. The dry ground held no footprints.

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Hawkesbridge looked at his watch. Half past five. He had been out longer than he had thought. He went back to where the path continued on through the wood and made his way along it, treading cautiously on the side. Except for a robin piping thinly, and his own heavy breathing, there was no sound. Twice he came upon the footprints again, but he told himself that he had no need to look for them.

Then through the trees he saw a stile, and the path began to circle round to it. A minute more and he had gained the road. He sat on the step of the stile and filled his pipe. He could not follow the trail on the hard road, and in any case it was unnecessary to do so. The two women might have parted here or—no; North Grinstead from which the stranger had probably, but not necessarily, come lay to the left, as did also the entrance to the drive of Chillery Court. The two, most likely, had gone together to the entrance to the drive where they had parted.

Yes; that was it. If the stranger had gone to the right, Osyth, after leaving her, would have taken the short cut back to Chillery Court through the wood, whereas, it was obvious, because there was no trail, that she had not done that.

Hawkesbridge lighted his pipe, pleased with his detective work, and rose to his feet. He would return to Chillery by way of the road: a brisk walk would do him good.

He arrived back at the house to find the servants up. Explaining to Carlin, the butler, that he had been out for exercise, he went up to his room. An hour later, tubbed and shaved, he descended and greeted his host. The Colonel, he decided, looked livery this

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morning, but Merrow showed himself anxious to be affable and insisted on showing Hawkesbridge the stables before breakfast. He had a couple of hunters that were "eating their heads off," he complained, and if Hawkesbridge wanted a mount, well, the gray mare would suit him down to the ground. But Hawkesbridge pointed out that he had a game leg, whereat the Colonel apologised and told him to take the car whenever he was at a loose end.

"I want you to make yourself at home, my boy," he said. "Do exactly as you wish, you know. I'm not so young as I was."

And Hawkesbridge, watching him as he fed the gray with a lump of sugar, thought he was looking much older than he should do at sixty. Those deep lines round the mouth were not the ravages of time.

The two had breakfast alone together. Mrs. Merrow, the Colonel explained, did not come down till late, and Osyth, he supposed, had worked half the night and was still asleep.

About half past nine the morning papers came. Hawkesbridge took *The North Sussex Argus* and went out into the garden. On a seat on the sunny side of the greenhouse he settled down to read.

In a few minutes his head began to nod. He roused himself, but nature, outraged by his wakeful night, insisted on recompense, and in a few minutes he was fast asleep.

The sun rose higher and beat on his bare head, but he did not notice it. Nor did he notice Osyth as she came along the path. She caught sight of him and half stopped. Then she smiled and went softly to the seat

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on which he slumbered and sat down. Picking up the discarded newspaper she started to turn its pages idly.

Hawkesbridge was startled into wakefulness by a scream. He sat up and saw Osyth beside him, one hand holding a newspaper, the other pressed against her mouth. Her face was horror-stricken.

"Why, what's—what's wrong?" he asked her, surprised and anxious.

But her only answer was a little moan. Then, dropping the paper, she jumped to her feet and ran swiftly towards the house. Wonderingly he gazed after her; then he stooped and recovered the paper. He scanned the headlines of the open sheet. Nothing to frighten or startle her there. He looked again. The right hand column was labelled "STOP PRESS" and under it was the caption:

"DEAD IN A TRAIN"

He read the brief paragraph beneath it:

"The body of a well-dressed young woman was found in a third-class compartment of the 10.35 train from Horsham to Brighton at Shoreham. Evidence points to her having been strangled. In her purse was a motor coach ticket which indicates that the woman travelled by road from Brighton to North Grinstead the same day, but no railway ticket was found on her. The body has not yet been identified."

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CHAPTER III

OSYTH REFUSES TO SPEAK

HAWKESBRIDGE was wide awake now. Inevitably he connected up the brief report he had read with his earlier discoveries in the wood: the woman, he told himself, must be the person whom Osyth had met at the hut in the clearing. Would she have had time, though, to catch that train?

He did a rapid mental calculation. Yes: even if she had stayed some time with Osyth she could have caught it. It had started at 10.35 from Horsham; it would probably be a slow train and might take anything over half an hour to get to North Grinstead.

He must not jump to conclusions, the soldier in him insisted; but the circumstantial evidence was strong even if motivation was apparently absent. He recalled his last night's impression, that impression which had resulted in his keeping watch at his window until a late hour, and his going out at dawn to elucidate the mystery of the missing trail of footprints. He had told himself, warned not only by his sixth sense but by the Colonel's manner, that there was something wrong at Chillery, and here was a death that was linked with the night's happenings and which definitely proved his apprehension to be right.

Was that logical? No; he could see that it was not—

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not altogether, that is. His reasoning was based on hypothesis, and even though intermediate developments supported that hypothesis (that there was something wrong at Chillery) he must not accept those developments as proof that his impression was right.

What now? He had discovered Osyth's visit to the wood by an act that might be considered low-down: he had been spying. Useless to plead a friendly concern for the family. He had acted entirely on hypothesis, and even if he had worked on definite data he had no right to do so. It wasn't done, he told himself with a touch of cynicism.

But Osyth, startled out of composure, had revealed fear. Something was wrong at Chillery, and he had now more than mere impressions to guide him. True, if the dead woman was Osyth's friend it was scarcely to be expected that his presence would prevent her from betraying her—her——

He wondered what Osyth's feelings really were. Awakened from sleep as he had been he had had no chance to discover properly. But there was no mistaking that look in the girl's face. It was one of stark fear.

Slowly the soldier rose to his feet, folding up the newspaper as he did so and putting it in his jacket pocket. He looked towards the house, trying to make up his mind what he should do. He realised that he was in a difficult predicament, for he knew nothing and he dared not presume.

But the Colonel was his friend. That made a difference. And Osyth? Poor Osyth! She had looked like a terror-stricken child when her scream had awakened him. She needed help, and perhaps it was help that her father could not supply; or did he and his wife

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know all about it? There was that brief conversation that he had overheard last night. Mrs. Merrow had obviously been urging her husband to confide in someone—probably himself.

There was something wrong at Chillery which the Colonel and his wife and Osyth all knew of; and that something was connected with the reported death in the night train. Convention be hanged! He mustn't let ridiculous scruples and good form prevent him from lending a hand where it was needed.

Then a sudden chill came as he remembered that the person who had returned across the lawn last night was the unknown man, not the girl—not Osyth. Suppose that his earlier reasoning were wrong, that Osyth had not parted from her friend at the entrance to the drive but had gone to the station with her, had travelled with her——

He thrust the ugly thought away, cursing himself impatiently for having entertained it. Whatever the evidence said, Osyth was innocent.

Who was the man, anyhow? He had apparently gone from, and returned to, the house. The going from there meant little, since he might have been hiding, awaiting Osyth's appearance. Undoubtedly he had known somehow about the intended meeting, but the return suggested that he actually belonged to the house.

The Colonel? Hardly. Had he not gone straight to his room? Hawkesbridge had heard him talking to his wife afterwards. Who else, then? There were but two other men in the place, Carlin, the butler, and Lyall, the chauffeur-gardener.

Useless to speculate now. He must keep to facts—

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the very few facts he knew. One thing he could do though. The trails across the lawn, of course, were gone by now, for the hot sun had since dried up the dew, heavy thought it had been; but the footprints in the wood would probably still be visible.

Hawkesbridge acted at once. Glancing again at the house, he made his way along to the gate by which he had left the garden that morning. There was no one in sight. He crossed the meadow, and entering the wood, went as fast as his lame leg would allow to the place where he had first seen the soft impressions in the earth. Yes; they were still visible. The man's footprints were large—larger than the Colonel's, he thought, comparing them with his own.

Training kept him from adding to the footprints. He went along the narrow path with no particular object in view, reached the hut and then halted. There was no purpose in his search: he was wasting time. The track could tell him no more than it had already revealed.

He made his way back. He must find Osyth, he told himself. Whatever she might think of him he must reveal what he knew and put her on her guard. Someone was aware that she had been out, and was probably the last person who had spoken to the woman who had been killed in the train last night. There was motive in the man's following her. He was an enemy, without doubt.

Hawkesbridge was glad of the sunlight which greeted him as he left the gloomy wood and began to climb the stile. Then his nerves leapt as he heard a movement behind him: he swung round.

A glimpse of white in the bushes caught his eye. He

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could see nothing else, but he knew instinctively who was there.

"Osyth!" he called quietly, not realising that he had used her Christian name.

He heard her give a little gasp.

"Come here," he commanded. Then in gentler tones: "I know all about it. Don't be afraid."

She came then, her face white and strained.

"Suppose you sit here," he said, patting the top bar of the stile. She looked so pathetic that he was unconsciously treating her as a small child.

"Why did you hide?" he went on as she automatically obeyed him. "You were going to the hut, weren't you? Come on, now; let me help."

He hated himself for imposing an inquisition, but he had to make her explain. Instead of replying she asked a question in a small constricted voice.

"Captain Hawkesbridge, what are you doing here?"

This was a poser. To steady them both he deliberately took out his cigarette case and offered it to her. She shook her head.

"Come, it will do us both good to have a smoke," he said. Then, "Very well—but you won't mind if I do, will you?" He stopped for a moment to find and light a match. "As a matter of fact, I was trying to help you. Does your father know?" he added carelessly, but he watched her face as he did so.

"What do you mean?" she demanded in stronger tones, though her lips quivered.

"You're in a bit of a mess, I take it." He looked away across the meadow as he spoke, and his tone became more serious. "It's beyond me altogether, but look here—I knew you when you had pigtails, and

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I'm a friend. It's no good pretending to me that there's nothing wrong because it won't wash. There's a lot wrong and—here, steady, old girl!"

She had suddenly buried her face in her hands and her shoulders shook. He patted her head gently and let her cry. Presently, as she grew quieter, he began to speak again.

"I expect that's done you good. Now, let's have it out together. Who was the girl in the train?"

She looked at him then with fear-stricken eyes. "What do you mean?" she whispered. "How should I know?"

Hawkesbridge saw that he would have to be firm. "Look here, it's no good going on like this. I'd better tell you what I know. I know, for instance, that you left the house about ten last night; that you went across the lawn, up the box alley, across the meadow and through the wood to the hut where you met a woman. Don't look at me as though I'd killed you. After that you went with her to the main road, and then——"

"My God!" Osyth breathed.

"I know," he went on. "It is 'My God!' but we've got to straighten out the matter somehow. After that I'm not quite certain, but I suspect that you parted from her at the entrance to the drive. Who was she?"

"I can't tell you anything about it. You've got it all wrong."

He sighed. "I think not," he contradicted. "You are not helping me at all. Anyhow, you suspect that the woman who was killed in the train last night was a friend of yours. Isn't that so?"

She nodded miserably.

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"And we both suspect—murder."

Osyth wrung her hands. "But why should anyone want to murder her? Why should——?"

"What did you meet her for?" He must force her confidence somehow.

"Can't I meet a friend and——?"

"Osyth!"

"Well, I don't see——"

"Damn it! I'm sorry. But when a murder has been committed you can't play hanky-panky this way. Do you think I haven't seen that there's something wrong at Chillery? It's not my business, perhaps, but——"

"But you've found out a lot." Osyth's tones were bitter. "I suppose you were spying on me and——"

Hawkesbridge winced. "Steady! If I've made it my business to find out certain things it was only because something happened last night after you left the house that showed me you were in danger."

"Me!" she exclaimed incredulously. Her surprise seemed genuine enough, and Hawkesbridge was puzzled for a moment, but continued: "As a matter of fact your father wanted to tell me, but he——"

"But he doesn't know anything about it!" she exclaimed, apparently even more astonished. Then, seeing that she had made a slip, she hastened to add, "What I mean is, what should he want to tell you about?"

"I don't know," Hawkesbridge answered truthfully, "but anyone with half an eye can see there's something wrong, and—well—no one wants to butt in, but as I knew there was something unusual going on——" He stopped.

"Go on," said Osyth faintly.

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"Well, if you will have it—some one followed you last night and I wanted to find out who it was, so I——"

Again he broke off. The look of horror had returned to her face.

"My God!" she whispered again.

"He followed you to the hut and stayed there some hours."

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"The tracks were clear enough this morning."

She looked down at the ground. "And you don't know who it was?"

He shook his head. "Do you?"-

She rose to her feet. "I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry, but—I can't. I can only say you've got it all wrong."

She left him sitting on the stile. Once he saw her hesitate, as she crossed the meadow, and hoped that she had changed her mind. But she continued on her way. Hawkesbridge took the cigarette from his mouth and jabbed the lighted end viciously on the bar of the stile.

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CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE POACHER SAW

WHAT now? As a citizen Hawkesbridge told himself that it was his plain duty to inform the police of what he knew. Yet, he reflected, it was by no means certain that the murdered woman —no doubt that she was murdered—was Osyth's friend. It was by no means certain, either, that her death was connected with the meeting in the wood. Besides, there were times when one's duty as a citizen conflicted with what was right. Men lived together in communities, and the law was a matter of convenience which, generally speaking, must for the common weal be subscribed to by each individual; but there must be times when the common weal was of little importance.

He shook his head impatiently. There was no time to argue out the ethics of the matter. He was Merrow's guest and a friend of the family; moreover they were in trouble of some kind and obviously needed help. More than ever it seemed that he had been invited to Chillery in order that he might give that help. Was he to betray them? The matter was probably too delicate for ordinary investigation by the police, otherwise the Colonel would have sought the aid of the law.

Who was the man who had followed Osyth? That seemed to be the first question to be answered. That

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he had apparently come from the house was not conclusive evidence that he belonged to Chillery, but that he had returned to it was significant—unless, knowing that he had laid a trail he had returned with the intention of making himself appear to belong to the place.

Not so fast. One thing at a time. If he belonged to Chillery he must be either the Colonel, Carlin the butler, Lyall the chauffeur-gardener, or himself. Himself he could rule out, the Colonel likewise. There remained the two servants.

No; that line of reasoning took him nowhere. But it wouldn't be a bad idea to sound Carlin. After all, it was quite possible that the butler, wanting to lock up and privileged by long service, had gone out to seek Osyth and had spied unintentionally.

All conjecture! There was no definite line of reasoning that could be followed. Hawkesbridge rose from the stile, wondering what he should do next, when he remembered that as a newly-arrived guest he should be more or less at the disposal of his host despite the Colonel's invitation to him to do as he liked.

Slowly he returned to the house. Colonel Merrow, he learnt, had ridden over to Chillery village to see a tenant. Hawkesbridge thought that he might also go to the village. He might, after all, learn something there. Perhaps Osyth would go with him.

But Osyth was nowhere to be found. Hawkesbridge walked slowly up the drive and gained the main road. Chillery, as he knew, lay to the right. He glanced at the sun in order to orientate himself. The road ran east and west at that point.

The sun was very hot. He took off his cap and walked bareheaded enjoying the warmth. He rounded

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a bend in the road. Then involuntarily he halted. Ten yards ahead were an inspector of police, a well-dressed young man and a middle-aged villager. And they were standing alongside a wood which, he told himself, must certainly be the wood which he had explored earlier.

The young man was looking at him interestedly. Cursing the apprehension that had made him halt, Hawkesbridge began to walk on.

The inspector swung round, and the villager to whom he had been talking followed his gaze.

"Good-morning," Hawkesbridge greeted them, and added woodenly, "It's a lovely day."

"Good morning, sir," the Inspector returned. "Yes; it's a fine morning."

The young man said nothing. Hawkesbridge had an impression of an unusually intelligent face and a pair of gray eyes which challenged his own.

"Is anything wrong?" Hawkesbridge asked, striving hard to appear nonchalant.

"Well——" the Inspector began doubtfully and broke off. "Who are you, Sir? Excuse me asking. I have to make it my business to know every one, and if I'm not mistaken you're a stranger here."

"Quite right, Inspector," smiled the soldier. "I'm Captain Hawkesbridge—a visitor at Chillery Court."

He glanced at the young man, but the other was watching a sparrowhawk hovering above the trees. His sole concern seemed to be whether the bird would swoop or not.

"I'm Inspector Newstead, of the County Police," the policeman introduced himself.

A movement further up the road in the shadow of the trees arrested Hawkesbridge's attention. A police-

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man: and he must be somewhere near the stile that terminated the path through the wood! Apprehension seized Hawkesbridge at once, but his voice was under control when he spoke again.

"Is anything wrong?" he repeated, aware that the young man was watching him covertly.

"It's the train murder," answered the Inspector, "though of course we can't call it a murder till the verdict's given."

"But what are you—I mean," Hawkesbridge corrected himself, "did she belong here?"

"No; she's a Brighton girl. She came here from Brighton yesterday and went back by the last train, as we see it."

"I see," Hawkesbridge said with as much indifference as he could manage. "I suppose you're just making enquiries about her?"

"That's it." The Inspector would vouchsafe no more. "You'll excuse me, Sir," he finished, and turned again to the villager.

"This wood is part of the Chillery estate, isn't it?" the young man asked, speaking for the first time.

Instinctively Hawkesbridge was hostile. The soldier in him was annoyed at the man's slight build. A detective, he supposed. Looked clever enough. An enemy, anyway, and to be treated with distrust.

"Yes," he answered briefly, and waited.

The Inspector was talking in low tones to the villager. A poacher, if ever there was one, was Hawkesbridge's opinion.

"I tell 'ee I doänt know," the man said stubbornly. "I see'd 'er just by the crossroads there," he pointed towards the constable higher up the road, "about 'arf

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past ten. That's all I knows, and it aint no good you trying to——"

"Are you going towards Chillery?" the young man asked Hawkesbridge.

The soldier hesitated. "Well, I was going to the village—to Chillery," he replied. "I suppose——"

"I'm going that way," the other broke in. "Perhaps you'd—I'll see you later, Inspector," he called to the policeman.

Hawkesbridge found himself walking with the stranger.

"Now, Captain Hawkesbridge," the young man began as soon as they were out of hearing, "suppose we have a talk."

Hawkesbridge looked sideways at the fellow and frowned, disliking his confidential and self-possessed manner.

"You'd better introduce yourself," he suggested primly.

The young man laughed. "Sorry," he said in such a way that Hawkesbridge had perforce to grin. "I'm Ravenhill."

"Never heard of you." The soldier was laughing now himself.

"Oh, yes, you have," retorted the young man confidently, yet Hawkesbridge, rapidly revising his opinion of him, could not take offence. "Ravenhill of *The Planet*, you know."

The soldier stopped short. Despite the way in which the young man had introduced himself he gave no impression of being conceited. He was just Ravenhill of *The Planet*, as he said, but so much meant a great deal.

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"I'm delighted to meet you," Hawkesbridge exclaimed with genuine warmth and held out his hand. "I've often read your stuff. Of course I know you by name very well."

So this was Ravenhill, *The Planet's* notorious 'crime reporter!' So this was the man who, by his extraordinary skill as a detective, had made his name a household word! Hawkesbridge looked at him with new interest. Yes; his face was clever enough, but one would hardly suppose his interests were crime and criminals: he looked more like—like——. The soldier couldn't 'place' him at all. He looked too absurdly young for anything.

But—a reporter! He was dangerous then. If the murder in the train was in any way connected with affairs at Chillery Court a reporter on the scene must inevitably mean publicity. Hawkesbridge frowned, and then, aware that Ravenhill was looking at him curiously, he smiled again.

"I suppose you've solved the mystery by this time," he said banteringly.

There was no malice in his remark, and the reporter apparently saw none, for he laughed lightly.

"Not yet," he answered. "I haven't been here long." He laughed again.

"Well, what's happened so far?" queried the soldier with more interest than he betrayed.

They had reached the cross-roads now and were turning to the left towards Chillery. Before they left the main road, Hawkesbridge scanned it to see whether the constable were actually at the stile, but the man had disappeared.

"Nothing much," replied Ravenhill. "The girl's

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been identified. She was Myrtle Ferribee. Unusual name, isn't it? Lived in Brighton."

"Since you and the police are investigating here," said Hawkesbridge, "I take it that she was travelling between here and Brighton when she was killed?"

"Correct," answered Ravenhill. "She came here by the afternoon coach to visit her aunt at North Grinstead, an old lady who lives on the far side of the village. The girl left by the last train." He stopped.

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. She said good-bye to her aunt at nine o'clock and caught the train at eleven-ten. There's a gap of two hours to account for."

"Perhaps she has other friends here."

The reporter shook his head. "We haven't discovered any so far. She's more or less unknown in North Grinstead, but I'm going to make enquiries at Chillery too."

"You mean Chillery Village? But why there?" asked the soldier, remembering what the man who looked like a poacher had said, and already knowing the answer.

"That fellow you saw us talking to—his name's Joyce and he's a poacher or I'm a Dutchman—says he saw her at about ten-thirty at the cross-roads we've just left. It's queer she should come right out here when the station's actually in North Grinstead village. Incidentally, she told her aunt she was catching the nine-fifteen train."

"Perhaps she missed it and went for a walk to fill in time?"

"Hardly likely. The nine-fifteen was ten minutes late."

"I suppose the poacher's to be trusted?"

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"He knows her aunt and has seen the girl before. There's no reason why he should lie about her. The trouble is, is he telling the whole truth?"

"What made you say that?"

"Well, what was he doing alongside Colonel Merrow's wood at ten-thirty?"

"Going home from the inn," ventured the soldier. "I suppose there's one hereabouts?"

"There's the Hanging Gate Inn at Chillery," answered Ravenhill. "But the man lives at North Grinstead. Why should he go all the way to Chillery for a drink?"

"Wanted a walk perhaps."

"Most people who're on their legs all day and half the night like walking for pleasure, don't they?" retorted Ravenhill scathingly. "Anyhow, we shall soon find out. There's the inn if I'm not mistaken. Let's go in and have a glass of beer."

He led the way into the bar, and when the landlord answered his summons, called for two glasses of ale.

"I've just been having a chat with a friend of yours," Ravenhill told the landlord. "He says he had a bit of an argument with you last night."

"If you mean Jack Others, sir, you're right entirely," answered the landlord, grinning. "We——"

"No; I mean Joyce."

The landlord's forehead creased. "I didn't have no argument with that Joyce larst night."

"I must have misunderstood him then," Ravenhill said. "He must have meant some one else. He was here though, wasn't he?"

"Yes, 'e were 'ere, but 'e didn't stay long. Said 'e 'ad a job on," winking heavily.

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"What time did he leave then?"

"Oh, 'bout nine, I suppose. He——" Then the landlord frowned again and looked from Ravenhill to Hawkesbridge and back again.

"It's all right, landlord," smiled the reporter. "Will you have a drink with me?"

When the man had gone Ravenhill turned to his companion. "You see?" he observed. "It's going to be damned difficult to make Joyce talk if he was poaching last night, as he must have been else he wouldn't have lied about his movements. Ten to one he was in the Colonel's wood when he saw Miss Ferribee."

In the Colonel's wood! Hawkesbridge was suddenly apprehensive. Of course he would be in the wood after the Colonel's game. Then he had probably seen Osyth. A new thought came to him. Could Joyce be the man who had followed Osyth?

"What's wrong?" he heard Ravenhill ask.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking of what you said," he answered, inwardly cursing himself for his abstraction. "It's all very mysterious," he added futilely, helplessly.

Ravenhill drank, regarding him the while over the top of his glass.

"Interesting place, that wood," he said finally.

Hawkesbridge stilled his thoughts. If he had to hide his knowledge from the reporter he must not make surmises as to what the fellow was hinting at. Maybe he was being led into a trap.

"Very," he agreed indifferently. "I was there this morning."

"You had to keep to the path because of the game, I suppose?" queried Ravenhill.

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"Of course." Hawkesbridge inwardly writhed. What *was* the fellow getting at?

The landlord reappeared before Ravenhill could speak again. He raised his glass to toast his customers and then drank deeply. He began to talk, but some one at the end of the bar demanded his attention and he finished his drink apologetically and went.

"You're a careful walker, Captain Hawkesbridge," observed the reporter, beginning to fill his pipe.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the soldier.

"Only that you didn't add your footprints to the others." Ravenhill struck a match and lighted his pipe.

To gain time Hawkesbridge finished his ale. "Have another?" he invited.

Ravenhill grinned. "I shouldn't bother about thinking out the reply," he advised. "You aren't, I imagine, an adept at—distortion. And I will have another drink, thank you."

The soldier's sudden anger died. He grinned good-naturedly at the other, and called for more ale. When it had been set on the table and the landlord had withdrawn he had his answer ready.

"No," he said, "I won't distort the truth. There's no reason why I should. But I am Colonel Merrow's guest, and since I can't——"

He stopped short. Damn it! In trying to avoid an indiscretion he had fallen into a trap after all. The clever devil! Oh, the clever devil!

But he had to finish somehow. He must get out of that trap.

"—since I'm Colonel Merrow's guest——"

"Don't try it," Ravenhill grinned.

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"Damnation!" swore the soldier. "What the blazes are you getting at?"

"Steady on!" admonished the reporter in mock disapproval. "We shall be thrown out if you disgrace the house like that. But what are you worrying about? I'm not a policeman."

"A reporter may be worse in some ways," Hawkesbridge said more quietly.

"Meaning——?" The reporter had flushed. The soldier saw it.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Didn't mean that. But damn it! Can't you see that you're a reporter and the —and I don't want to be dragged into the limelight?"

That was a clever move, he thought.

The reporter sighed and drank from his glass. "Let's sit down," he said, and drank again. "Dunno why we've been standing all this time."

Hawkesbridge sat down on the table edge. The reporter relighted his pipe with elaborate care, throwing his spent match expertly into the fireplace, and took a chair.

"Of course you don't want publicity," he said gravely. "If you have read my stuff in *The Planet* you will realise that I'm not exactly indiscreet. I never intentionally——"

"I know you don't," interrupted the soldier, striving to make amends. "But if you were in my position you'd dislike being questioned as much as I do. What's the connection, anyhow, between the Colonel's wood and Miss Ferribee?"

"You probably know better than I do," said Ravenhill. "I don't imagine you went along that path with such care because it's your habit to walk like that."

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"You're talking in riddles. How do you know that I——?"

"I'm not talking in riddles. And it was you who told me you had been in that wood and had walked that path, and since it's physically impossible not to leave footprints in that damp soil unless you deliberately avoid doing so, the inference is that you walked with care. Why?"

Hawkesbridge was silent.

"The question is," Ravenhill went on mercilessly, "whether you investigated the path to the hut before or after you heard of the murder."

"Tell me what you know," demanded Hawkesbridge.

"Why should I? But I don't mind. It's little enough so far." He held up a hand and tapped the little finger. "Point one, Miss Myrtle Ferribee was murdered last night in the Brighton train which she caught at a late hour at North Grinstead; point two, Joyce saw her by the wood at ten-thirty when she was apparently making for the station."

"Is that all?"

"All the facts, yes. But there's a deal of evidence still to be sifted. I inferred that since the girl was going east towards North Grinstead the reason for her late stay here and her lie to her aunt was to be found somewhere to the west from which she was returning when Joyce saw her. Naturally I investigated. Naturally I found the stile, and before going further up the road I went over and examined the path and almost immediately found footprints which were undoubtedly Miss Ferribee's."

"How the devil do you know that?"

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Ravenhill sighed patiently. "I was at *The Planet* office in Fleet Street when the local correspondent at Brighton 'phoned the news of the murder through, and because a train murder's always good 'copy' I came down by car at once. I was in Brighton by dawn and had seen the body by breakfast time. You don't suppose I neglected such an obvious precaution as to measure shoes and notice their peculiarities, do you? Why, even a local constable would not omit that."

"Well, whose were the other footprints?"

"You *are* clumsy. I never said there were others."

Hawkesbridge grinned. "Pardon. But it's you who are clumsy this time. I haven't concealed from you the fact that I have been to the wood this morning. You know, therefore, that I know there are two pairs of footprints, and——"

"Three," interrupted the reporter.

"Three, then," conceded Hawkesbridge. "and I know that you know I was there."

"You win! All right. The other lady was the lady you spoke to at the stile."

Hawkesbridge was too amazed to conceal his feelings. "How the deuce do you know——?" he began.

"Because you forgot yourself at the stile," returned the reporter. "The ground there is not so soft as further in the wood, but it tells a tale all right. So does the rough wood of the stile where threads of your and her clothing were caught. So does the spent match and the half smoked cigarette with its stubbed end. You even showed where you had stubbed it. Further—" He stopped, his gaze fixed on the soldier's jacket by the left shoulder.

Instinctively Hawkesbridge knew what he had dis-

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covered, but he glanced across at the mirror over the fireplace. On his shoulder was a faint patch of white —Osyth's face powder smudged on to his coat when she had cried and he had tried to soothe her. She had, he remembered, brushed her face against him when she had drawn away. Of course the fellow thought that he was her lover.

"Well?" he asked coldly.

"Am I right?"

"Perfectly."

"And you're going to let me draw my own conclusions?"

"Obviously I can't do anything else." Hawkesbridge finished his drink and stood up.

"I'm sorry," said Ravenhill simply. "I can only repeat that I'm not a policeman, and even if I'm a reporter I'm not a cad, you know."

"I know that," the soldier said awkwardly, "but—oh, damn it! I've nothing to tell you. I know no more than you—except," he added, "that there was a man present last night too. But I expect you——"

"Yes; I know that," Ravenhill agreed. "You've no idea who he was?"

"Not the foggiest," answered Hawkesbridge truthfully. "Unless it was Joyce."

Ravenhill shook his head. "Prints are too small," he said. "Well, I suppose——"

He broke off as the door opened, and a well dressed man of middle height and abnormally thin entered the room followed by the landlord.

"'Morning, Mr. Bentham," the landlord greeted him.

"'Morning, Sawyer," returned the stranger in a quiet

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voice. "I suppose you've heard about Mrs. Ferribee's niece?"

"Ah, then you 'aven't 'eard the latest, Sir," said the landlord. "P.C. Homer's just told me. Mrs. Ferribee's dead too!"

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CHAPTER V

THE FRUSTRATED MEETING

"DEAD!" exclaimed Ravenhill. "What did she die of?"

But the landlord did not know. The reporter frowned and gave Hawkesbridge the impression that he disbelieved the news. Then his face brightened.

"Possibly she died of shock," he said so that only Hawkesbridge could hear. "It can't have been——" He glanced at the other two and stopped. Bentham ordered a whisky and soda, and the landlord left.

"Did you know the girl?" Ravenhill asked.

The man shook his head. "I don't think so," he answered. "I didn't know her by name, anyhow. Possibly I have seen her if she was a frequent visitor here."

Ravenhill nodded abstractedly. Bentham glanced at the empty glasses on the table and invited the two to accompany him in a drink. The soldier declined: the reporter had evidently not heard for he said nothing. Hawkesbridge noticed that the stranger was appraising him.

"Are you Captain Hawkesbridge?" he enquired. "No; it's not clever of me really." He smiled. "I've just met Colonel Merrow, and he told me you were staying with him. You are a stranger here and you are evidently a soldier, so it was easy for me to put two and

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two together. My name's Bentham," he introduced himself.

The landlord brought his drink and set it on the table. It was evident that Bentham wanted to know who Ravenhill was, but Hawkesbridge, guessing that the reporter would prefer anonymity, was discreetly silent.

"Well, I must get along." Ravenhill broke into the desultory talk. "Are you coming?" he asked Hawkesbridge.

The soldier rose.

"I expect I shall see you later," Bentham said. "Merrow wants to show me his new sunken garden, and I'm thinking of coming along this afternoon."

Outside Ravenhill paused. "I'm going back to North Grinstead," he said. "What about you?"

Hawkesbridge didn't know. He hadn't got a destination, he said. Then he looked at his watch. "I must be back at one," he observed. "Damn! The thing's stopped. What time is it?"

Ravenhill chuckled. "I expect you forgot to wind it in the excitement last night," he said slily.

Hawkesbridge, annoyed with himself, scowled. "Oh, drop it!" he snapped. "What's the time?"

"Nearly twelve," the reporter said, glancing at his wrist.

The clip-clop of horses' hooves sounded on the road. Hawkesbridge turned.

"Here's Colonel Merrow," he announced. "Want me to introduce you?"

"If you don't mind," Ravenhill replied.

The Colonel reined in his horse alongside and

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greeted his guest. "Exploring?" he asked. Then he glanced at the reporter.

"This is Mr. Ravenhill," Hawkesbridge introduced his companion perfunctorily.

"How do you do, Sir?" The reporter gave a slight bow.

It was evident that the name conveyed nothing to the Colonel. He returned the young man's greeting.

"I've just met a friend of yours, Sir," Hawkesbridge said. "Said his name was Bentham."

"Oh, Tom Bentham," smiled the Colonel. "Tom's a good chap. I'm glad you've met him."

"He says he's coming up to see your new sunken garden this afternoon," Hawkesbridge went on.

"Oh, did he?" The Colonel looked vague. Hawkesbridge was aware that he was preoccupied. "Did I tell him about it then? I suppose—but of course I did! I'm getting dithery in my old age." He laughed self-consciously. "Well, I must be getting along," he went on. "Can't offer you a lift, I'm afraid." He laughed more naturally this time and nodded to Ravenhill and chirruped to his mount.

"India," opined the reporter when the Colonel had gone.

"Easy," retorted Hawkesbridge. "Even I could have reasoned that out."

"You ought to be able to," Ravenhill chuckled, "considering you were in his regiment."

"Was that easy too?"

"How did you know?"

"I didn't. It was largely a guess. But you helped me. You're both retired now, I should imagine, yet you

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couldn't help treating him as your C.O. You almost stood at attention."

"Rot!" Hawkesbridge said.

"Perhaps you're right, but it was a legitimate guess. You're both soldiers, and you're his guest. Come on; we've stood here long enough.

They went back towards the cross-roads. Under the sign-post the soldier halted.

"Do the police know about those footprints?" he asked his companion, looking in the direction of the stile.

"I shouldn't think so," was the reply. "I don't know why they should."

"But if you found them why——?"

"That's not complimentary," Ravenhill reproved him. "Still, you're right. I really don't know whether they do or not."

"There was a constable posted somewhere along here." Hawkesbridge remarked tentatively. "I thought he was keeping people off the path."

Ravenhill shook his head. "No," he said; "the fellow was just hanging about in case the Inspector should want him." He looked at Hawkesbridge interrogatively. "I wish you'd be more open," he complained. "Won't you tell me about last night?"

Hawkesbridge was silent.

"You know," Ravenhill went on gently. "I don't write up everything I discover."

"Your job's to get a 'story'," Hawkesbridge pointed out.

"Yes; but I tell it in my own way. I wouldn't, for instance recount my recent conversation with you. I'm not writing a book."

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The soldier pondered.

"You see," the reporter went on, following up his advantage. "What the public wants is not the account of all the details of the investigation—they'll get that in the report of the trial if there is one—and even if I wanted to I daren't say too much. *The Planet* wants to be able to say that its brilliant representative, Mr. Anthony Ravenhill, was able to solve the mystery at Chillery and hand the murderer over to the police. You don't object to that, do you?"

Hawkesbridge grinned.

"Is there any reason why you don't want the murderer handed over?" demanded Ravenhill, half humourously.

"Of course not. But I can't tell you much, you know." The soldier's resistance was broken down. He could not help liking the little reporter. "You see——"

But what could he say? If he had not been a guest at Chillery he would have learnt nothing about the affair, and he obviously could not betray irregularities in the family. Still, he argued with himself, he might be helping the Colonel by making Ravenhill a *confidant*. Even so he could not speak without the Colonel's permission, and to gain that permission he would first have to reveal the fact that he had been spying.

An awkward position. Perhaps Ravenhill understood the predicament, for he suddenly squeezed the soldier's arm.

"I think I understand," he said. "If I were you, though, I wouldn't keep it to myself."

Sound advice! Hawkesbridge was already conscious that he was overburdened with unwelcome knowledge. But when he recalled Osyth's behaviour earlier that

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morning and her distress, his resolve to say nothing was strengthened. When you doubted what was the best thing to do, do nothing.

"Let's get along," the reporter broke into his thoughts. He looked at his watch. "Perhaps you'd better go straight back to the Court," he said. "It's getting late."

They parted at the entrance to the drive, and Hawkesbridge made his way to the house. As he came to the bend in the road, he met Joyce, the poacher. The man greeted him respectfully, but did not stop. Wondering, Hawkesbridge continued on his way.

Both Mrs. Merrow and Osyth were present at lunch. The Colonel had heard the news about Mrs. Ferribee and her niece, and gave a lurid outline of the tragedy. It appeared, he said, that the old lady had died of shock when told of the death of Myrtle.

"It's a funny business," he went on. "I was talking to the Inspector from Horsham, and he says that Joyce, that poacher fellow," he explained, turning to his wife, "saw the girl alongside the wood about half past ten."

"What, our wood?" exclaimed Mrs. Merrow.

"Chillery Wood," replied the Colonel soberly. "It's queer, isn't it? What was she doing up there? She was supposed to have gone straight to the station from Mrs. Ferribee's place."

Hawkesbridge, listening attentively, was aware that Osyth was even more alert.

"Did he say she was alone?" she asked.

Apparently neither her father nor her mother noticed the catch in the girl's voice.

"Yes," answered the Colonel. "Says he said 'Goodnight' to her and she answered him."

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Osyth's face was very white. The soldier, in the light of what the footprints had told him, guessed that Myrtle had not been alone when Joyce had met her. Osyth had been with her. Hence Osyth's present distress. And Joyce had just been at the house. To see Osyth? To tell her he had not told all the truth? Why then Osyth's last question? Perhaps she distrusted the man and was testing the truth of what he had told her. Or perhaps she had not seen him after all.

When lunch was over he went out into the garden to think. The Colonel and Mrs. Merrow, he guessed, would, India-fashion, want to take a siesta and he was certain that Osyth would avoid him. But in that he was wrong. She came to him as he sat in the shade of the yew tree.

"Did you know about the police?" she asked him breathlessly when he rose to greet her.

"Sit down," he replied. "I'll tell you all I know."

She hesitated a moment, then obeyed him. He seated himself beside her.

"Has Joyce told you?" he demanded. "I saw him coming away from the house."

"I didn't see him," she confessed. "I knew he was here, but I didn't know what he wanted, and so——"

"That was foolish," he admonished her gently.

She closed her eyes wearily. Compassion filled him. Poor girl! She was 'up against it' badly.

"But how could I know what he wanted?" she protested.

"You saw him last night?"

"No: perhaps he saw me though. Oh, do you think he'll tell? I mean——"

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"I don't know. Look here, Osyth! Can't you make a clean breast of it all? It's much safer than——"

"Oh, you don't understand!" she exclaimed passionately. She turned towards him and beat her clenched hands together.

"Do *you?*" he asked gently. "If you do, isn't it rather foolish to fight this out alone when I could help you if I knew what it was all about?"

For a full minute she was silent. Watching her covertly and fearful that a word more from him might destroy the impression that his last sentence had provoked, he waited.

"Yes," she said at last; "I'll tell you." She leaned forward so that he could not see her face. "Some time ago—last May, to be exact—I was coming back late at night from North Grinstead when a man jumped out of the hedge and—and tried to get hold of me." She paused and looked at him swiftly. Hawkesbridge was frowning at the ground.

"He fought with me and—and tripped me up. Well, just then I heard some one running and he took to his heels."

She paused and looked at him again.

"It was a girl who had come up, Myrtle Ferribee," she continued. "She chased him a short distance, then came back to me." She stopped again.

The story was unconvincing, and Osyth's way of looking at her audience at every few words suggested that she realised that.

"She was a brave girl," Hawkesbridge helped her out.

"She was as brave as she could be," Osyth main-

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tained. "I expect the man thought she was a man because she was above medium height and big with it."

"And he got away?"

"Yes. I was on my feet by the time she came back and——"

"Was that the first time you met her?"

"Yes; she said she'd been visiting her aunt and was just going home to Brighton. That was what started our friendship."

"I see. But how is that incident connected with——?"

"You don't believe me!" she exclaimed. "Why should you doubt me?"

"Suppose you tell me everything," he suggested. "I can't see the connection yet. Here, have a cigarette."

He proffered his case and then produced a box of matches.

"Now, go ahead," he bade her. "You told your people, I suppose?"

"I told my mother."

"Not your father? Why not?"

"He was very worried about something or other at the time, so Mother and I thought we'd keep it to ourselves."

"I see. Well, what happened next?"

"Nothing happened for about a month, then one night as I was coming back from the station—I'd been to Horsham—I was attacked again."

"At the same place?"

"No, at the entrance to the drive."

"By the same person?"

"I suppose so, but I didn't see him either time. He came up from behind, and in both places it was so

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dark I couldn't see his face. All I know is that he was fairly tall. I was more ready for him this time, and besides I had a stick. I ran as hard as I could towards the house and escaped him."

"I suppose you told your father this time?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't even tell Mother."

"But, good heavens! Why not?"

"Because Father had just had a heart attack and Mother was worried to death about him. Besides, what was the use of telling her?"

"Use? Why, you ought to have told the police. Surely you understand how dangerous——" He broke off. It seemed futile to argue with her. "The man's a menace to society," he added lamely.

"Myrtle said it was me he was after, no one else," Osyth said in a small voice. "You see, he attacked me twice, and on the second occasion, if he didn't on the first, he must have known that I was out alone."

"There's something in that," Hawkesbridge conceded.

"Myrtle said that if we kept quiet about it we might discover who it was and——"

"And has anything happened since?"

"No; nothing."

"Well, what about last night?" he asked.

"I got a letter from Myrtle the day before saying that she'd accidentally met the man in Brighton and recognised him, and that she was coming to North Grinstead to try to identify him. She suggested our meeting at the hut in the wood at ten o'clock."

"But why on earth did she suggest such a place?" demanded the soldier.

"I don't know," the girl confessed.

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"Well, you met her, didn't you? What happened?"

Osyth had been talking latterly with apparent calmness. Now to the soldier's consternation, she burst into tears.

"Nothing happened," she sobbed distractedly, "You see, she—she didn't come."

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CHAPTER VI

THE BUTLER DISAPPEARS

"DIDN'T come?" echoed Hawkesbridge in amazement. Osyth had buried her face in her hands and was sobbing uncontrollably. He frowned, and his mouth set grimly. Of course she was lying. The footprints that he had seen that morning demonstrated beyond doubt that she had met a woman at the hut in the wood and had walked back along the path with her to the main road. She didn't trust him and had lied.

Despite his conviction, however, he could not believe that of Osyth. Her tears were genuine enough, he could see. No one could act so consummately. But that tale of hers that had preceded her revelation—it was more than he could swallow. Too melodramatic altogether. Of course she would have told her father had a man tried to assault her—especially if he had made the attempt twice.

She had uncovered her face and was looking at him as though she sensed his doubt. He turned away his head.

"I don't understand," he said feebly, torn with mistrust. "I suppose you——" He stopped.

"You don't believe me," she sobbed. "I can see you don't." Her distress changed to anger and her tears

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stopped. "Why should you disbelieve me?" she demanded.

"Look here, Osyth!" He looked at her steadily. "You and I have got to be utterly frank with each other. No, wait a moment. Hear what I've got to say first. A murder's been committed: the girl's been traced to Chillery, and if the police don't know about the affair in the wood some one else does!"

"Who?"

"A man named Ravenhill—a *Planet* reporter."

She gasped.

"You see how dangerous it is? He was pumping me all the morning. He's a clever devil! He seems to know as much as I do about it. He even knew that you and I had talked matters over by the stile this morning—never mind how: I'll tell you later. The point is that if you're not careful you're going to be dragged into this business. What are you going to tell the police if they ask you why you met——?"

"Captain Hawkesbridge," she interrupted quietly, looking at him with a new dignity, "for the last time, I did *not* meet Myrtle Ferribee at the hut. I went to meet her because she asked me to, but she wasn't there. I can't say anything more than that."

His eyes held hers, but she did not falter.

"All right," he said at length. "I don't understand, but I believe you. How do you explain the footprints to the main road?"

"I can explain my own," she answered readily enough. "I waited at the hut for some minutes, then I went along the path to the road to see if I could see her. I knew she would come from the direction of North Grinstead where her aunt lives, or lived, and so

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I went slowly along the road as far as the entrance to the drive. I waited there about a quarter of an hour."

"Did you meet anyone at all?" he asked, remembering the poacher.

"No one," she replied.

"And when Myrtle didn't come you came back to the house?"

"Yes."

Then he remembered something important. "How did you get in?" he asked. "Wasn't the place locked up?"

"No, I told Carlin to leave the back door unbolted."

"Did he see you when you returned?"

"No, there was nobody about. I bolted the door and went up to bed."

"Well, it's a queer business," Hawkesbridge said. "There's no doubt that Myrtle went to the hut and there's only one explanation—she must have gone there before you arrived and without waiting for you, returned. That would explain the two sets of footprints between the hut and the road."

He lapsed into silence. She regarded him anxiously. "Perhaps I was a bit late," she said at last, "and she thought she wouldn't catch the train so she didn't wait."

"I don't know," he sighed. "She had plenty of time. Still, she may not have known it. I mean her watch may have been fast. You've got to take every possibility into consideration."

"Perhaps they were old footprints," Osyth suggested. "Hers, I mean."

"They were freshly made. And they were Myrtle's right enough. Ravenhill measured them." He looked

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at Osyth again. "Look here," he said, "are you going to help me all you can?"

"But what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "But I do know that there's something big under all this—something to do with Chillery Court."

"You mean?" she began, gazing at him with startled eyes.

"There's some sort of mystery," he said, conscious of the futility of the remark. "Your——" He broke off and looked at her. "Do you know why I was asked down here? It's an odd question, I know, but I'm trying to see daylight."

"I don't understand," she said. Her puzzlement was obviously genuine. "Daddy said he'd invited you—that's all I know."

He nodded. "There was no motive behind it, I mean?"

"Only the obvious one. But what are you getting at?"

"I wondered. That was all. You see, Osyth, there's—Your father wanted to tell me something last night. He's troubled about something."

"It's money, I think," she answered frankly. "We're not very well off, you know."

He could scarcely believe that, but perhaps she judged by a different standard.

"There's been something on his mind for months," she volunteered, "and I'm certain it's money."

"I don't think so," he said. "The Colonel'd scarcely want to tell me about that, would he? No; it's something else, Osyth. He thinks I can help him in some way only he doesn't like to ask me. I sensed there was

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something wrong here immediately I came. And I'm convinced it's connected with this murder."

"But how awful!" she exclaimed. Then she shook her head. "It can't be," she said decidedly. "I'll tell you what I think. Myrtle discovered who the man was who attacked me and he killed her to prevent her from telling me."

"That sounds plausible," he admitted, "but there's a flaw in it. How did he know he had been discovered? And how did he know she was going to tell you? There are dozens of questions like that one could ask. For all the man knew—if he even knew that he'd been discovered—she might already have told you by letter, you know."

"I still think——" she began stubbornly.

"You may be right," he interrupted, "but I can't understand why she was murdered in the train miles from here, unless he followed her. But why didn't he kill her here? And why should he kill her at all? I don't think the motive was strong enough."

For some minutes there was silence. Then:

"Well, we've got to do something," he said desperately, "otherwise you'll be dragged into it. I wish that fellow Ravenhill hadn't——" He broke off. "Osyth," he went on, changing his tone, "I like that fellow, and I believe one can trust him. Will you let me tell him everything?"

"But a reporter!" she exclaimed. "It'd be in all the papers to-morrow morning."

He shook his head. Then he told her all that he knew about Ravenhill.

"He's a sahib," he finished. "Damned clever he is, too. Let me tell him."

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"Oh, I can't," she cried. "It'd be awful if——"

"Supposing he gives me his word that——?"

"But how do you know you can trust him?"

"I'm sure we can. We've got to take a chance anyhow. I'm not much good at this sort of thing, you know. Let me tell him."

She was silent for some time. "If you're sure of him," she said at last, "but please be careful."

"Don't worry, Osyth," he bade her. "Now listen, will you promise me that if anything happens you will tell me at once?"

"I promise."

"And, Osyth—my first name's Trevor."

She coloured a little. "All right, Trevor," she said. "I'll remember."

She got up from the seat and looked across the lawn. Over the box hedge two heads could be seen.

"Hullo!" she said. "There's a visitor."

"It's Mr. Bentham," Hawkesbridge told her, standing up. "He said he was coming over to see the sunken garden. It's new, isn't it?"

"Yes; Daddy's just had it done."

Hawkesbridge looked about him. "By the way," he said suddenly. "What sort of fellow is the gardener?"

"Lyall? Oh, he's all right. An ex-Service man. Looks after the car too."

"It's a lot of ground for one man, isn't it?"

"He has help when he wants it."

"Does Lyall live in the house?"

She looked at him questioningly. "Not exactly in the house," she answered. "He has a couple of rooms over the garage at the back. But what——?"

"Nothing much," Hawkesbridge said; "only—well,

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you know, the man who followed you last night seemed to come from the house and seemed to return here."

She frowned. "I'd thought of that, too," she said at length, "but it couldn't be Lyall—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Nothing," she answered shortly.

"Osyth! You promised!"

"But there's nothing to say—truthfully."

"What about Carlin? Is he all right?"

"I don't like him," she confessed, "but there's nothing wrong with him. You don't suspect him, do you?"

"I'm still thinking of those footprints. I——"

He stopped, his attention distracted by footsteps on the drive. Ravenhill came into view.

"There's that reporter," Hawkesbridge said. "Wonder what he wants."

Osyth was suddenly agitated. "I'll go," she said. "You will be careful, won't you, Captain—won't you, Trevor?"

"Don't worry, my dear," said the soldier.

Osyth went towards the box alley and disappeared. Hawkesbridge beckoned to the reporter and went towards him.

"Anything happened?" he asked Ravenhill when they met half-way.

"Can I see Miss Merrow?" The reporter ignored the question almost rudely.

" 'Fraid not," said the soldier. "What's happened?"

"Want to test a theory," replied Ravenhill. "Could you get me a sheet of notepaper from the house?"

Hawkesbridge stared. "Why from the house?"

"I'll tell you afterwards. Hullo! Is that the Colonel?" nodding towards the two heads. "If I'm not mistaken

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that's our friend of the morning with him. Well, will you get me that notepaper?"

"I suppose so," Hawkesbridge agreed reluctantly. "I wish you wouldn't be so damned mysterious though."

"On the contrary," retorted Ravenhill. "I am being very open."

"Only in so far as you have to be in order to get the paper," grinned Hawkesbridge, his good humour restored immediately.

He left the reporter sitting on the bench and entered the house. Going to the library he took a sheet of notepaper from the writing table and returned with it. When he gave it to the reporter Ravenhill put it on the seat, and taking his notecase from his pocket, extracted an old envelope. From the envelope he took out what looked like a pellet of paper which, unwrapped, revealed an ordinary drawing pin, attached to which was a tiny piece of paper. Ravenhill held it by the paper.

"This is most important," he said quietly. "The pin ought to have a splendid thumb print on it."

"I don't understand," murmured Hawkesbridge.

Ravenhill was comparing the piece of paper attached to the pin with the notepaper from the library. "Not the same," he announced at last. "It doesn't prove much, however."

"Would you mind explaining?" the soldier asked.

"This," said the reporter, "was stuck into the jamb of the doorway of the hut in the wood."

"Well?"

"It's rather important, don't you think?"

"I—yes; I suppose it is. It's unrusted——"

"—which means that it wasn't there long. The damp

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atmosphere of the wood would soon rust it. Good for you! Can you carry it further?"

Hawkesbridge shook his head. "Only that a notice was apparently pinned up on the door jamb, and apparently last night."

"Ask yourself why. Who would want to pin a notice there?"

"Well, it's a private wood, but the footpath is open to anyone. One fork of it is a short cut to the Bewdle Mills, north of here."

"I know, but notices to the public are not pinned on door jambs. This was a notice to some one in particular."

Hawkesbridge uttered a sudden exclamation.

"I thought maybe you could help," Ravenhill said. "What is it?"

"I'm not quite sure. Wait a bit." He looked straight at the reporter. "It's your job to get news," he said evenly, "and it's mine, at present, to prevent scandal. Do you understand?"

"Much more than you think," replied Ravenhill. "You want me to promise not to divulge——"

"Exactly."

"Well, I can't do so. I will, however, give you my word not to live up to your conception of a pressman. I'm not being nasty. What I want to say is: I work my own way, and I've never betrayed a confidence yet."

Hawkesbridge coloured slightly. "I believe you," he said. "All right; I'll tell you. I've got permission to do so."

He related all that Osyth had told him earlier and then gave a faithful account of his own investigation.

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"Well, I can't say you've added to my knowledge," Ravenhill commented at last.

"You mean you knew that the two girls did not meet last night?"

"I guessed it. That was where the note came in," pointing to the drawing pin. "Some one knew of the intended meeting and prevented it. Remember, there was a bright moon last night, and fair-sized writing could be read without much difficulty in the clearing. The door of the hut is on the south side and so had the moonlight full on it."

"Yes, but——"

"Wait a bit. The unknown, let's call him X, wanted to prevent the meeting, presumably because he didn't want Myrtle Ferribee to identify him to Miss Merrow. He wrote a note—possibly in block letters to overcome the difficulty of handwriting being recognised, and pinned it in the hut——"

"—taking a chance that Miss Ferribee would arrive before Miss Merrow."

"He had to take some chances, naturally, and this, after all, was an even one. It didn't matter which girl arrived first provided that the note was vague enough as regards authorship. Anyhow, we'll assume that X aimed at Miss Ferribee's reading the note first. It would obviously be to the effect that the other could not keep the assignation. It probably read something like *'Can't come. Writing.'* Miss Ferribee, reading it, left at once, and X pulled off the notice, but he'd pressed the pin in too hard to get that out easily so he left it, intent on following Miss Ferribee. Then Miss Merrow arrived, waited some time and went up the path to the road, thus leaving a trail that gave the

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