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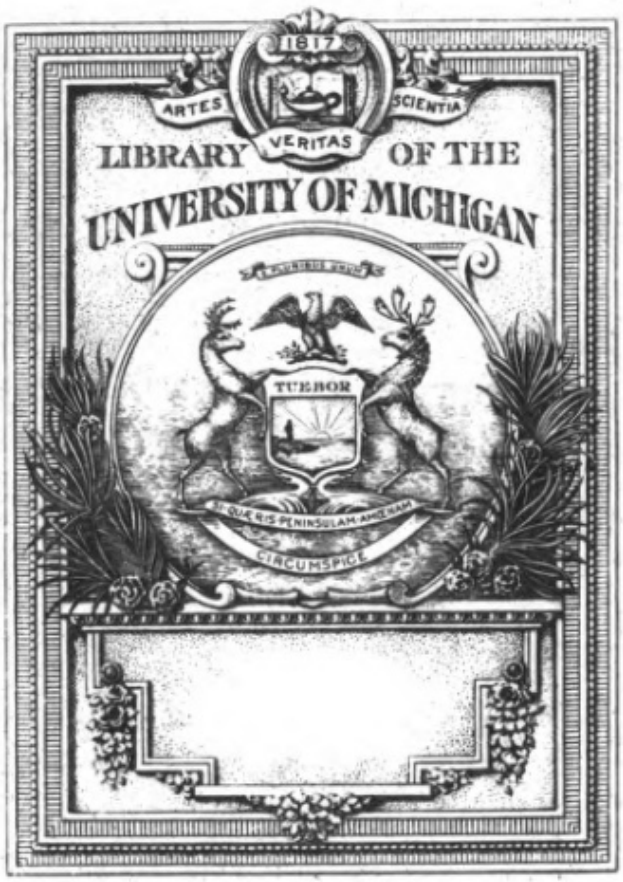

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THE CHARTERIS MYSTERY

THE EAMES-ERSKINE CASE

THE FOOTSTEPS THAT STOPPED

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THE CLIFFORD AFFAIR

BY A. FIELDING

NEW YORK
ALFRED · A · KNOPF
1927

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CHAPTER I

THE Assistant Commissioner of New Scotland Yard listened for a moment at one of his telephones, told the man at the other end, it happened to be Superintendent Maybrick of Hampstead, to hold on a moment, and sent one of his constable-clerks in search of Chief Inspector Pointer.

It was then just a little before nine of a Tuesday morning. A tall, lithe, lean young man came in with a step that suggested the kilt and the springing heather.

"Look here, Pointer. Suppose you hand over the reins of that case you're on to Clark. He can carry on all right now. Superintendent Maybrick of Hampstead wants help. Or rather, I think he needs it. He's just been called in to a horrid mess, a murder, in one of the flats in his district. From certain things he thinks it's an anarchist plot gone wrong. 'biter bit' sort of thing," Major Pelham said vaguely; "he's got into touch with the Foreign Office already. So by this time there's sure to be some F.O. man sprinting along to have a first look. Go and see what you think of it, will you? If it isn't a foreign spy job, then it should be a fine problem for you to solve. Here's the address." He handed a chit to the Chief Inspector, who left the room with his swift, unhurried stride that covered such an amazing amount of ground.

Pointer drove to the place mentioned—a large block of flats with a view over Hampstead Heath.

The head porter, after a keen glance at the Chief Inspector when the latter asked for "Mr. Maybrick," saluted, and took

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him up in the lift. The only information which he volunteered was that none of the residents had an idea of what had happened.

"These are all service flats, sir, and news gets around terrible fast unless one's very careful. As a rule illnesses are 'maternity cases' when possible. Deaths are 'measles,' to account for the body being took away, but murder—the owners haven't given instructions about that. Not yet." The porter stopped the lift at the third floor, and stepped forward to ring the bell of a flat marked fourteen, which had no card in the little glass case beside the door. Pointer stopped him.

"A moment!" His eye ran over the door and mat and landing, as well as up and down the staircases. Then he nodded. The porter rang. The door opened an inch. The Superintendent inside, in plain clothes too, inspected them both cautiously, then he stood back and Pointer entered.

Maybrick saluted. He was one of Pointer's many police-man admirers. What a pity, he thought, that there was nothing here for the Chief Inspector to get his teeth into, those teeth that never let go.

"A moment!" Pointer said again, as he switched on the light and gave one swift glance around the square hall, a glance that nothing visible escaped. Then he nodded.

"Now lead the way."

"Shall I tell you first what I know, sir?"

"Not if any one from the Foreign Office is on the trail," Pointer said promptly. "They're quick workers. And I like to have my clues untouched, as far as may be."

"No one's come yet, sir. Not even the doctor. And the clues aren't ones that can be disarranged." Maybrick was about to expand into detail, but Pointer stopped him.

"Then this way, sir." Maybrick led down to a door at the farther end of a little passage. Pointer stepped into a tiled

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bathroom. In the bath-tub—it was not a pleasant sight—lay a man's body, stripped and headless.

"Where's his head?"

"Not on the premises, sir. Gone. Like his clothes. All gone."

Pointer knelt down in the doorway and looked sideways across the floor.

"Rubber-soled shoes. Man's heel marks. Apparently only one pair. What's that?" He advanced now, and bent to a tiny splash of something white on the tiles under the raised china bath.

"Powder they use to clean the tub, sir. Shall I tell you what the head porter——"

Again Pointer stopped him.

"Has the body been touched by any one, as far as you know?"

"No, sir. Not the kind of thing to get touched by any sensible man."

"Have you photographed it?"

"Films are being developed at the station now."

Pointer lifted each of the hands in turn.

They were slender, beautiful hands, that looked as though they would be clever at whatever they did. Hard work had never been asked of them.

"Wore a ring on the middle finger of the right hand. Broad, thick ring. Signet ring very likely. Cigarette smoker. Gentleman certainly from the care of the whole body."

There were no marks of blood-stained hands either on the bath, or on the fitted basin beside it, or on any of the taps, nor finger prints of any kind.

Pointer stepped on into a bedroom opening out of the bathroom. Then he returned to Maybrick.

"We can wash our hands in the bedroom. The basin in

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there's not even been dusted. This one has been used."

A ring came at the door. Maybrick answered it. A small, quick-stepping, alert-eyed, gray-bearded man stepped into the flat. He was of the type to pass easily for English in England, French in France, Spanish, or Eastern, according to where he was met. "Many-tongued Tindall," a great international sleuth or sleuther of sleuths, was an amateur. A man of means attached to the Foreign Office, when he was not on loan to the Home Office. In manner he was very quiet, in speech very direct.

"I've come to see if the dead man's one of our birds," he said, after shaking hands with Pointer. "But you here?" He eyed the Chief Inspector with mock distrust. "No poaching, you know!"

For a second Tindall too stood looking about him with swift, piercing glances.

"Now for the story"—he turned to the Superintendent. First eyes, then ears, was Pointer's way. But Tindall was as high in his branch as Pointer was in the C.I.D., and was, moreover, a much older man. So Maybrick led them into the drawing-room, where the dust lay thick, and where the blinds still shut out the daylight.

The story, as known to Maybrick, was exceedingly simple. The flat belonged to a Mr. Marshall, a senior clerk at Lloyds, who, as usual, wished to let it furnished while he was away on a four weeks' holiday. He had left last Thursday. On Friday, about six, a man had presented himself to the head porter with a view card from the house agents, which gave his name as a Monsieur Tourcoin. The flat was shown him, and a little later the head porter was informed over the telephone by the agents that Mr. Tourcoin had taken the flat for a friend, a Captain Brown. Captain Brown would "take possession" on Tuesday or Wednesday.

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On Monday evening something went wrong with the lock of an upstairs flat. The porter thought it a good opportunity, when the locksmith arrived this morning, to have him run his eye over the front door of Number Fourteen as well. Mr. Marshall had complained of its not always catching properly when hastily shut. He also remembered a difficulty with Marshall's bathroom bolt, and took the man in there first. He had his own pass-key, of course.

"They didn't stay to look at any bolts," Maybrick said dryly. "Nasty sight that body in there. They rushed to the telephone and called us in."

"What body in where?" Tindall asked impatiently. He was taken to see it. His face paled as he looked carefully at it and at the room.

"Horrible!" he muttered. "Horrible!"

He turned to Maybrick.

"What made you 'phone to us—made you think the crime political?"

"This, sir." Maybrick passed into a sitting-room, which, like the bedroom, opened out of the bathroom. He pointed to a newspaper on the table. It was a *Times* of Friday, heavily scored at a few passages. Maybrick pointed to these. Tindall read aloud:—

"*Anti-royalist plot suspected in Madrid.* I see he's underscored that *'suspected.'* What's this next? *King Alfonso's yacht Esmeralda to be ready by a certain date.* A question mark is pencilled beside the date. Indeed! Indeed! And here's something about King Boris's coming trip to Sofia heavily marked at the side. Except for that last, the items are only Spanish. . . ." Tindall perched on a chair in a way that suggested flight rather than rest.

"Man's clothes missing. . . . Papers in them gone too, of course. . . . Head taken away. . . . Identity to be concealed,

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or— Anything else made you think the murder political beyond the marked paper, Superintendent?"

"These." Maybrick lifted up the waste-paper basket. "I screwed them up as nearly as possible as I found them. They're funny reading together with those bits in the paper and that dead body!"

In the basket lay what looked like two crinkly eggs. They were wads of paper that had been crushed into little balls. Opened out, they showed as two sheets of plain letter-paper, headed with the address of the flat. On each were some lines of writing in a pointed, very sloping, foreign hand. The first ran:—

"You have betrayed the change in the crew of the *Esmeralda*. But I give you one chance to explain. Come here to-night and clear yourself if you can. If not——"

The rest of the sheet was blank. Apparently this draft had not pleased the writer. It had been screwed up and tossed away. The second was a complete note. It ran:—

"You are a traitor, but I give you one more chance to explain why you have not carried out the orders I gave you at *Iguski Aldé*. Take it. Or it will be the end. Come to this address to-night. If you do not come you know the penalty. Expect it without mercy."

The last two sentences had been scratched out. There was no signature, but a little drawing of the outline of a house with a V inside.

"That scratched out bit about the penalty is why he copied out the note and threw this away," Maybrick explained like a showman.

Tindall's eyes were shining. He stroked his beard with a hand that quivered a little.

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"These settle it." He spoke calmly but with the calm of one who forces a layer of composure over a seething mass of red-hot feeling.

"It *was* a political crime! Or an act of justice, if you will."

"You know what that signature stands for?" The Chief Inspector's tone made the remark a statement, not a question.

"The V within the outline of a house? Etcheverrey, Pointer. Yes. Etcheverrey, the great anarchist. Or rather anti-royalist agitator."

Pointer said nothing. Maybrick gave a cluck of delighted amazement. The police of every country knew, and were on the hunt for that name, that man.

"That's his secret signature," Tindall went on. "Only used to his own men. Only known to us at the F.O. And *Iguski Aldé!*—'Sunny Corner'! That's Etcheverrey's well-hidden Basque refuge, deep in the heart of some Pyrenees ravine, not yet located. The mere name is only known to a chosen and picked few among his followers. We at the F.O. have only just—only *just* learnt it."

"He's French, isn't he?" Maybrick asked.

"Officially, yes. But there's not a drop of French blood in his veins. Basque father. Catalan mother. Speaks all languages. Brains of the devil. And up till now his luck."

"Do you think Etcheverrey's the killer, or the killed here, sir?" Maybrick asked again.

"The killed. The dead man," Tindall said, after a moment's deep thought. "Etcheverrey would have taken those scraps of paper away. His slayer is not identified by them. I think that the tables were turned on the Basque for the first—and last—time in his life, by the man he summoned here. And I can make a good guess at that man's name. You know my slogan." He turned to Pointer. "What the brain can't see, the eyes can't either. Eyes won't solve this problem. Not even

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yours. Now what has cost Etcheverrey his head, literally is, I think, his last break."

"His attempt on the Shah of Persia?" Maybrick knew every one of Etcheverrey's unsuccessful efforts by heart. "Pretty near thing for the Shah!"

"And for Etcheverrey," Tindall threw in grimly. "He was all but caught. As it was, they got a good view of him. The only time he's been really seen. And since then there's a fine price on his head at Ispahan. On the real, solid head. Duly delivered. That's why the descriptions we get from there are so vague. All we know of his appearance is that he has unusually small feet, and really beautiful hands."

"First thing I noticed about the corpse." Maybrick was sorting his notes. "Here it is. Par seven."

"Yes," Tindall was talking half under his breath, "Mirza Khan is over here, we know. He's the Shah's secret agent. It's his head or Etcheverrey's, I understand. We know that Etcheverrey is in London again. Sir Edward Clifford rather inclines to the belief that he's been here for years, carefully hidden in some commonplace identity, and that he only leaves London for some swift flight and one of his lightning efforts, and then comes back again and takes up his seemingly everyday existence. I don't agree with him, but that's Sir Edward's view."

Sir Edward Clifford was Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

"Every man jack of us has been living on a volcano, with the King of Spain on his way here next month." Maybrick drew a deep breath. "Etcheverrey nearly got him in Spain last year," Tindall went on, "just as he had a hard try for our Prince of Wales in South America." He was examining the room carefully as he talked. There was little to discover. A smallish, still damp splotch of blood on the thick carpet

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near a little table on which stood a reading-lamp. A few drops of blood had dried on the wooden edge of the table. Smaller ones yet were found on the parchment lamp-shade, and a hint of a trickle down one leg of the arm-chair standing near.

"There's been no struggle?" Tindall looked at Pointer.

"No sign of any," Pointer said cautiously.

"Just so. Yet the man summoned by such a letter as that would have been on the alert and would have struggled. Etcheverrey, on the other hand, would not dream that the tables could be turned on him. He was either shot, or more probably slogged on the head. Dragged to the tub, beheaded, and the head's now on its way to distant Ispahan in the care of that good old hater, Mirza Khan. But all that's for me to find out."

"Well, sir," Maybrick slipped a band over his bulging note-book, "as you're quite sure that the murder was political, I hand it over to you."

The Superintendent was aware that he had done very well. But he knew when he was out of his depth. Nor had he any intention of wasting his time over a case of which the honours would all go to the Foreign Office. They had their own men. It was all very well for the Chief Inspector, who had already, young though he was, risen so high, but he, Maybrick, had more paying matters from the point of view of promotion waiting for him at his police station. And so with a salute, he passed from the scene—to his never dying regret.

"Now for the porters," Tindall continued, when the two were alone. They learnt nothing which could explain the crime itself from them, though they gained a clear idea of how the flat could have been entered and left by any one unobserved. The building had several lifts, the corner ones being automatic and worked by the residents. There were many staircases. There was a restaurant on the ground floor

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open to the public. There were billiard rooms and reading rooms.

The estate agent for whom they telephoned repeated in fuller detail what Maybrick had already told them about the taking of the flat. Monsieur Tourcoin had paid for the four weeks in twenty-four one-pound notes, and the transaction had been completed on the spot.

"No references asked for?"

"Not in a case of this kind. A furnished flat let for a month. The porters here keep their eyes open. And undesirable people would be asked to leave at once. We find that simpler and better than bothering with references," the house-agent explained.

"Now as to this Mr. Marshall——"

"We know all about Mr. Marshall. Our firm has known him and his parents, they lived in one of our houses, for twenty years. Just as we've known the head porter here about that long. There's nothing wrong with Mr. Marshall, I'll go bail, any more than there is with Soulyby, the head porter."

"How did this Mr. Tourcoin learn of the flat?" Pointer asked.

"Saw our advertisement in the paper, I suppose."

"When was it advertised?"

"Friday morning for the first time."

"And the paper?"

"*The Times.*"

"And he spoke broken English," Tindall murmured.

The agent laughed. "Rather!" He gave them a very good copy of the man's accent.

"On leaving he nipped into a taxi which some one was just paying off, and called to the chauffeur. 'To the station at Charing Cross. Arrest yourself there for one little minute while I learn what time train for Paris he start.' The driver

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winked, and said he'd arrest himself all right if need be."

"What clothes was the man wearing?" Pointer asked.

"Motor cap—he apologised very civilly for keeping it on, but he had a bad attack of head neuralgia—big brown and orange check motoring coat. That's all I remember."

"Young man?"

The agent thought so, but as he had seen many men yesterday afternoon he could not be quite sure. The whole affair was so small compared with most of their business that he had not paid much attention.

"Do you remember his hands, when he signed those papers," Pointer went on, "were they large hands?"

The estate agent could not remember anything about them. More details of the conversation were asked, and as far as possible, given. Then the agent took his leave—a very agitated leave.

The head porter had not noticed the appearance of the M. Tourcoin to whom he had shown the flat, except that the man wore a motoring ulster of orange and brown tweed, and a brown silk scarf. He had an impression of a young man, but as he had already on Friday afternoon shown the flat to several friends of Mr. Marshall's, he could not even be sure of that.

The man had barely glanced over the flat.

"I never thought he meant what he said about taking it, but within half an hour the agents phoned up to me that the flat was gone. Taken by the monseer for a month. As to seeing him again—not unless that's him in there. But the chap I showed the flat to, looked a bigger chap. Bigger and brawnier, though I never saw his face. Not to *see* it."

"Was he smoking?" Pointer asked.

"Yes, sir. Briarwood pipe. One of these new comfort pipes."

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"What kind of tobacco? Any kind you knew?"

"Yes, sir." It was a kind that the head porter particularly liked when he could afford it. A well-known British make. "I says to myself," the man went on, "France is all very well for wines, but when it comes to pipes and baccy—there's nothing like Us!"

"Umph," Tindall murmured, when the two were alone. "Tourcoin takes the flat for a Captain Brown. He or this captain Brown can be seen in it therefore. If need be. One of the two is Etcheverrey. Almost certainly he would be Brown. The Unseen. Now is Tourcoin the man to whom the summoning letters were sent? Is he the man who killed Etcheverrey? Is he, in fact, Mirza Khan, who speaks French—and English too for that matter—like a Frenchman?" There was a short silence broken by the Chief Inspector, who had been standing looking down at the toes of his shoes, hands loosely clasped behind him. He looked up now.

"Those papers found in the basket"—he spoke thoughtfully—"are they in Etcheverrey's writing?"

"He had some thirty different kinds of writing."

"And on the blotter," Pointer went on musingly, "there are no marks except from the two notes we found torn up. . . ."

"None. Why should there be?" Tindall asked, with a faint smile. "You police always want so much for your money."

There was another pause. Tindall eyed Pointer whimsically. Pointer looked back at him with his tranquil, steady gaze. The detective officer had fine dark gray eyes, pleasant, though at times rather enigmatic in expression.

"To stake the effect of a political crime would be a capital red herring, wouldn't it, to drag across the trail of a private murder."

Tindall smiled still more. A smile of real amusement at this

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doubt on his own reading of the case from a man young enough to be his son.

"We're like two Harley Street specialists, Pointer," he said good-humouredly, "each reading a case according to his own special lines. I say heart. You say liver. You're welcome to treat the case for liver, of course. But it's a heart case. Believe me, it's heart. In other words, I've been studying Etcheverrey so long that I have no hesitation in saying that this murder belongs to me. Don't waste your valuable time in hunting for this poor chap's head. I see that search being organised already."

Pointer laughed a little. Tindall was right. He was already charting his course.

"It's on its way to distant Ispahan," Tindall continued. "Pity Mirza Khan has such a start. Well, he knows my methods. They're lazy, compared with yours, but they're quick."

"They often lead to splendid results," Pointer said honestly. In what might be called society crimes, thefts, stolen letters, the finer shade of blackmail, Tindall had done wonders, besides winning many a triumph in his own field—the political field.

"I leave the details of the flat to you." Tindall despised hunting for clues. "The exact spot where the murder was committed . . . which way the man faced . . . and so on."

Pointer nodded, let him out of the flat, telephoned to Scotland Yard for their expert locksmith, and then rang for the head porter. That worthy was asked to institute a sort of house-clearing. Fortunately he was at one with the Scotland Yard officer in wanting to make sure that the missing head was not hidden somewhere on any premises for which he was responsible.

"I'll see to my part of it. Every nook shall be turned out.

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Every cupboard moved, or I'll know the reason why," Soulyby promised, "and every parcel opened."

"As soon as the doctor has examined the body we shall have a rough idea of about what time the murder was committed. As it is, we know that it must have taken place between seven on Friday evening, and eight this morning. Ask cautiously about whether any one was seen coming into, or going out of, this flat during that time."

Pointer dismissed him and telephoned to Lloyds. Marshall had been with them for fifteen years, he learnt. Came straight from London University. His present address was Bastia in Corsica. But as he had spoken of mules and guides. . . . Yes, the man answering the telephone was a friend of his and quite willing to act as his reference if necessary. The firm would act as another. But he believed the flat was taken. The inquiry was about Marshall's furnished flat, of course?

"Just so," Pointer murmured, as he turned away. "Of course!"

He now began his own patient investigations. The bath-tubs, he had learnt, were cleaned with Sapolio. The little smear of white under this one seemed to him to be plaster. He scraped it into a stoppered bottle and labelled it before putting it into his attaché case. Then he bent over some marks on the tiled floor—marks such as a dull lead pencil might make if it had been rubbed with a broad, circular motion over the spot. Pointer decided that a tin had been placed there, and been pressed hard down while it was moved round and round.

Then he turned his attention to the fitted basin beside the bath. The taps had been turned off and on with a towel, he thought. Unfortunately the hall porter could not say, nor could the housekeeper, how many towels had been left in the warm cupboard just by the basin. Pointer looked about him

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for a pail. But failing that, he took a bronze jar from the living-room and set it beneath the basin. With a spanner he unscrewed the trap in the outflow pipe, and let the contents run into his receptacle. A thickish, reddish mixture came out. Ammonia told him that the reddish colour was blood, the whitish part he took to be more plaster. It looked to him as though the murderer or murderers had washed their hands here. He bottled some of this mixture too, and turned away after replacing the fixture. He started on the bedroom. Here he found nothing except proofs that the room had not been used last night. He passed on to the sitting-room. At that moment the doctor arrived.

"Going to have your work cut out this time, Chief Inspector," he grunted. "Even you must be up a tree with this body."

"Any help to give me?"

"The man was probably about forty. Good condition. Nails show he's had no operations, is no victim of any chronic disease. A gentleman, I take it."

"And the head was severed?"

"With two or three hard, downward blows." He gave some medical details. "As to whether the man was dead or alive first—can't be sure till I've examined the lungs, but probably dead."

"Had the man who cut off the head any knowledge of anatomy?"

"None whatever. A sixteenth of an inch lower would have made the job half as easy again. Tremendous violence was used. Must have been a strong chap, and used something on which he got a good purchase which had a very firm edge."

"How long would it have taken, do you think?"

"To cut off the head?" The doctor meditated. "About fifteen minutes, I should say."

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"And the death occurred, at a rough guess?"

"Some time last night, I should judge. That cut's about twelve hours old. Certainly not more."

He left at that, and Pointer went on with his work. There were no signs of any bullet having entered a wall or piece of furniture. Nor did the man seem to have been shot in a line with any of the windows, supposing him to have been shot—as Pointer did, partly from the size of the blood stain, chiefly from the fact that the chair down which a rivulet of blood had run was the only one in the room that had a very high, spreading back. It was the last kind of a chair to choose had a blow been intended.

Feeling the carpet, going by the stain, Pointer replaced the chair as it had probably stood. The bedroom door was to one side and a little behind it—an ideal position for a shot. This bedroom door had odd pin-marks in the wood near the handle, two on one side, two on the other, about the same distance apart.

Pointer finally decided that a strip of some thin but strong material such as tape had been fastened with drawing pins taut across the tongue, so as to prevent the rather noisy latch from acting, and let the door be opened by a touch, though it might looked closed.

He drew the curtains and switched on the lights. The side of the door that interested him was then thrown into deep shadow by a Chinese lacquer cabinet. So that, provided that the strip had been white, for the door was white, it might pass undetected by a casual glance, or by a short-sighted person. Pointer thought this last idea very probable. It explained the otherwise venturesome silencing of the door, it was borne out by the position of the reading-lamp that had been drawn to the extreme edge of the little table, and close against the left side of the chair.

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Pointer stared at the pin marks. To him they were a very odd detail, one that was quite out of keeping with the rest of the crime as known so far. Primarily they showed that the man who had been murdered was evidently not hard of hearing, since they spelled care that no snap of the catch could be heard. But they meant more than that. Those pin-pricks meant a quick job. Just as they showed that probably there had been no sounds—music, talk—during which the cautious opening of the door could pass unnoticed. It looked as though the victim had been alone. But alone or not. Etcheverrey must be always on the alert, ever suspicious. A man wanted by the police of all the world, a man with a price on his head, a man who had never yet been caught, would not have let any door pass uninvestigated, let alone one that stood half in shadow. Incongruous in any case, the tape seemed to Pointer doubly so in connection with the much sought-for, wily Basque.

It came to this, he thought, if Etcheverrey had been the man in the flat, he could have taken sufficient time to silence that door in some better way than by means of a hastily fastened-on strip. If the man was not Etcheverrey, then the anarchist would have noticed it.

A search found a bath mat in a hall cupboard. Where, apparently, a loop of tape had been sewn on, now only an end dangled; a roughly cut-off end, cut with a knife, not scissors. The piece that remained was the width indicated by the pin pricks. So the murderer had not come provided with tape. He found a few drawing-pins in a drawer which left just such marks as those on the door. Pointer again tested each object in the room. But still only the carpet, the chair, the table edge, and the lamp-shade showed marks of blood. On none of these, moreover, had there been any effort to clean away the marks. As for the crumpled papers in the waste-paper basket, of which, each promising the other a

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photographic copy, Tindall had kept one, and Pointer one, the Chief Inspector found a few more sheets in a drawer. It looked as though they had been left there by Marshall. The writing had been done with a pointed fountain pen, which, like the ink—Pointer intended to have the latter tested at the Yard—seemed of quite an ordinary kind.

The lock expert arrived from the Yard at this point. A close scrutiny of the Yale lock now taken off the front door told him that though it was old and badly in need of new springs—failing entirely to catch now and then—yet it had not been forced, or picked, or opened with any other but its own rightful key. The house agent had said that he had handed Marshall's two keys to Monsieur Tourcoin.

The ambulance arrived and the body was taken away. Pointer went back to the bath and scrutinised the bottom. With what had those two deep gashes been made? The flat had no kitchen. No suitable knife or weapon hung on any of its walls.

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CHAPTER II

POINTER strolled down all the stairs and let himself up and down in all the lifts. Finally he stopped beside a couple of workmen who were doing some plastering on the ground floor, near the foot of the stairs that led up to Number Fourteen. He had noticed the bags and the tools when he arrived just now.

"I borrowed some of your plaster last night," he said pleasantly, "how much do I owe you for what I used?"

"That's all right, sir," one of the men said civilly, "me and my mate was just saying that one of the porters must have done it. Quarter of a bag, wasn't it, sir. If you like to call it a shilling, that'll be all right."

Pointer liked a half-crown better, and so apparently did the men.

"Hope I cleaned the spade off all right," Pointer chatted on, lighting a cigarette. A cigarette which he took care not to inhale.

"Lord, sir, there wasn't no call to clean it that-away! Staggered Jim here it did to see it cleaned up. We only uses it for mixin'. Why, you sharpened the thing, didn't you?"

"No. Not beyond cleaning it." Pointer's cigarette was in his hand. He flicked its ash over the handle and stood looking down at it while talking. The ash, "finger-print cigarette" ash, showed no marks except those of a gloved hand. The workmen had not touched it. So some one had scraped it and cleaned it since they had used it last.

And, according to the men, some one had sharpened it as

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well. It certainly was quite sharp enough now to have done what Pointer believed it had done. A couple of blows from it would account for the marks on the bottom of the tub. The murderer must have found his grisly task lightened unexpectedly by the implements left in the building. Or had "Tourcoin" noticed them, and laid his plan accordingly?

"I think I put everything back as it was," he said again; "messy work, plastering. When you aren't used to it. Miss anything else?"

"Nothing, sir."

But Pointer seemed still uncertain.

"Let me see . . . didn't I take a tin?" He was thinking of the marks on the bathroom tiles.

"That old tin isn't no loss, sir. You're more than welcome to it. We found it on the dust-bin, and was going to throw it out again when we was finished."

"Still," Pointer reminded them, "a tin comes in handy, I expect. What size is it? I borrowed another from one of the po[redacted]rs."

"Seven pound biscuit tin, sir. Stove in a bit at one side. It comes in handy for plaster we've sieved and don't want to use immediate, as you say, sir. But there's no hurry!"

"I'll send it down. Did I take its lid too?" he asked, peering about him.

He was told that he must have, as the lid was kept on the box.

Pointer tipped them, "in case the tin shouldn't turn up," and went slowly out of the building, an hour after he had first entered it.

If Tindall was right, and the body found was that of Etcheverrey, then, as far as he was concerned, the case was over. Some Special Branch man at the Yard would be told off to assist the Foreign Office, and Pointer would take up

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another tangle. But was it Etcheverrey? Was it "political" at all?

Very great care had been taken to dispose of all personal effects. Nothing but those scraps of paper in the basket had been left to tell who the man was. And, supposing the scraps of paper to have been faked, then no clew whatever had been left. For the flat was a furnished flat, shedding no light on the character of its present occupier. As far as identity went, if the papers in the basket were what the Force calls "offers," a trail laid to deceive, then it was as if the police had found a body stripped, and without a head, lying in an empty room.

Each great case, and Pointer nowadays was concerned only with great cases, groups its facts in such a different way from any other, that it becomes an entirely new problem. Pointer had never had one like this before, where all the usual means of identification of murdered man and missile used had been taken away. Of course Tindall might be right. Probably he was. But supposing he were not, how the dickens was he, Pointer, to find out who the man had been? And above all, who the murderer had been? Somewhere there was a weak spot in the crime. There always was. There always would be. Where was it in this case?

The detective officer's every nerve tautened at the idea of a murderer escaping. Pointer never saw his work as a game of brains against brains, where, provided only that the one move was cleverer than the other, it ought to win. He was a soldier, fighting a ceaseless battle where no quarter could be asked or given. The battle of light against darkness. Right against Wrong. If the other side won, it would be all up with the world. Pointer had never failed the side of justice yet. He would not fail it now, if he could help it.

But could he help it? Tindall was working at the case from his end. Pointer was not sure that he wanted to follow the

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other's track. He must make his own path therefore. If Tindall were right, the Chief Inspector's road and that of the F.O. man would meet in due course, like the two ends of a well-dug tunnel.

He went up to his rooms at Scotland Yard and did some telephoning. By that time the analyst's report on the bottles which had been sent in was ready. One contained nothing but plaster mixed with water. The plaster was a very coarse kind used by plumbers for certain face-work. The other contained the same plaster, some water, and a mixture of blood.

Pointer walked up and down his room. He was not the Chief Inspector now, but a man who had committed a murder; a man to whom it was absolutely vital that the corpse should not be recognised, or that the weapon used should not be identified. Pointer had an open mind as to which of the two reasons compelled the taking away of the head. The clothes might have been taken for the purpose of confusing the issue.

"Yes," he murmured to himself, "I've put the head in a biscuit tin, mixed and poured in plaster to keep it from rolling around, and now what?"

In the absence of all known hiding-places, he finally, after a short chat over the wire with the Home Office, sent a coded message to every post office throughout the United Kingdom that all wrongly-addressed or uncalled-for parcels were to be reported to him at once. He thought it very possible that the murdered man's clothes, and the towels used by his murderer, had been made into small, convenient parcels, and sent to various fictitious names and non-existent streets in some home-town. Abroad would be out of the question.

All omnibus headquarters, taxi stands, garages, and railway stations were warned to keep an eye out for similar but unmarked parcels which either had been left in vehicles some time last night or might be left in the near future.

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Similar instructions reached the L.C.C. dustmen and all parcel deposit offices. The river police were not forgotten. They had found nothing so far which could interest Pointer, but they promised to be even more on the alert than usual, if possible. Then he telephoned to the police surgeon who had first seen the body. He learnt that nothing had been found to explain the cause of death. There were no signs of a struggle. Death had been absolutely instantaneous. The doctor thought that a bullet through the head would account for the facts. "But, of course, as Mr. Tindall suggests, a blow might be equally swift." At any rate, the head had been certainly severed after death. But not long after it. The death itself had taken place somewhere around midnight on Monday night. Pointer put down the telephone and went to the mortuary chapel, a grimly sanitary place.

The finger prints had already been taken, and definitely *not* identified at Scotland Yard, as those of any known criminal. Flashed by wireless photographs to the continent, the same answer had come from each capital in turn. So the body was still nameless. And as long as it remained so, the murderer was safe.

Pointer looked the body over very carefully yet once again. Especially the beautifully shaped hands. Hands that in life must surely have done many things well. In whose life? What things had they done?

As he studied them, he remembered their quick examination by the doctor. He knew that on the arrival of an unconscious patient at any hospital, the medical men run their eyes over the nails for any trace of recent operations, illnesses, chronic complaints, or even nerve shocks. Pointer, calling in a constable to help him, scraped the inside of each well-kept nail with his penknife on to a small glass slide. Having carefully covered and marked each slide, he took them back with

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him to the Yard. There the slides were examined. The result was handed to him almost immediately.

Both hands showed fluff of white paper made from esparto grass of a kind that is usually only sold for very superior typewriting purposes. One nail had lightly scraped a sheet of carbon paper. One—the first of the right hand—showed traces of sugar.

In other words, the dead man was almost certainly a writer, or a typist. But probably a writer who was only in occasional contact with sheets of carbon paper. He might be a secretary. He might be a clerk. But the nails of the feet showed that he had last worn black socks of a most expensive silk. That suggested not a clerk. The sugar on the right hand suggested an investigating finger among lumps in the sugar bowl, which in its turn suggested the free and easy ways of a man's own home. Probably his after-dinner coffee. No china had been used in the flat where the body was found. No sugar-basin filled there. The complete picture as filled in by the police surgeon's and the analyst's reports and Pointer's own reading of the room in which he believed the murder to have taken place, was that of a well-to-do author, possibly a journalist, one used to sudden alarms, who, after his dinner at home, had gone out unsuspectingly to meet his terrible death. A writer of about forty years of age, in good health and circumstances. Not blind, for he had probably drawn that reading lamp towards him, but very likely short-sighted, for he had drawn it close. Not deaf, as the muffled door showed.

Pointer took a turn around his room. It was a step forward. But it looked like being the last step for the moment. Unless— Pointer stared at his shoe-tips. Then he went back to the mortuary chapel.

There was a tiny scar on the sole of one foot, such as might clinch an identification but not suggest one. He studied it

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afresh. No, that would not help him. There was nothing peculiar about that tiny mark. Again he picked up the hands, looked at the uncalloused palms. The man was no sportsman. Not a hard spot anywhere. Surely there was more to be learned. But how? The hands were the only chance. The only possible chance. . . .

The lines on the palms were singularly clear, and not at all like his own. Apart from palmistry in the sense of prophecy, of charlatanry, some people claimed that you could tell a person's character, even their profession, from the lines in their hands.

Pointer thought of Astra. The police knew all about her.

Astra was the professional name of an American, a Mrs. Jansen, who had amazed London by her skill in reading the character of men and women from their hands. She was no teller of fortunes. But she did tell what lay dormant, or wrongly applied. Parents brought her their children in large numbers, and Astra would examine the little palms, and then give the parents a very truthful, sometimes appallingly truthful, list of their drawbacks and their talents. She would proceed to point out that this must be encouraged, that repressed. In what the child should succeed, in what he was bound to fail. With elder people she was as forthright. "Your gifts are these—your bad qualities this and that." Astra was amazingly honest, and amazingly right. She was no pessimist. "Change your life, use your gifts, keep under the evil in you, and the lines will surely change," was her sermon. "Each of us is our own enemy. Fight that enemy." And she would give clear particulars as to where and how that fight should begin.

The two police inspectors who had been sent to test her, for you must not prophesy for money in England, had come back genuinely impressed. She had not prophesied, but she had hit off each man's character very neatly. Pointer had not

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much hope in the issue of any interview with her, but she might classify these hands still more narrowly than the microscope had done, and the microscope's testimony would serve to check her statements, if indeed she made any.

He took very careful imprints of the palms on tablets of thick, warmed, modelling wax, brushing a little red powder over them to bring out the lines. He wrapped each tablet in paraffin paper and fastened them side by side in his case. Then he telephoned from a call office for an appointment in the name of Yardly, an immediate appointment. As it was not yet twelve, he was successful. He drove to a house in Sloane Street, and was shown into a cubicle. Mrs. Jansen's clients did not see each other. After a few minutes waiting he was taken into a cheerful room, where, in a window sat a well-dressed woman with a thick mop of curly gray hair held back by combs. A pleasant, keen pair of eyes looked up. A pleasant, firm hand shook his.

Pointer took a seat facing the light, laying his lean brown fingers on two black velvet cushions. He would try her first with his own hands. Her reading of them might end the interview—probably would.

With a magnifying glass the American bent over them, turning them now and then. She nodded her head finally as if satisfied.

"I wish all the hands that have lain there were as pleasant reading," she said, slipping the glass back into its case. "They are the hands of one who, in any walk of life, would go to the top. Your chief characteristic is love of justice. Your dominant quality, penetration."

She went on to give an extraordinary accurate analysis of the Chief Inspector's character. Pointer, who was a thoroughly nice fellow, and very unassuming, actually blushed at the flattering picture drawn.

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"Police! And since your hands show that you are a man doing work that thoroughly suits your talents, I should say some big man at Scotland Yard. How about the C.I.D.?"

She leant back and looked up inquiringly. Pointer gave a nod.

"You've hit it, and very clever of you indeed! You did that so neatly that I wonder what you'll make of the owner of these hands." He laid down his tablets. "It's to be paid for as a separate visit, of course. Do your best with them, won't you."

She glanced at the tablets. Then she looked a little vexed.

"Really, Mr.—eh—" She paused. "I know the Assistant Commissioner by sight. Are you the Commissioner?"

"No, no! I'm from the ranks. But you were saying?"

"If you take the trouble to glance through my book on Practical Cheirography, you'll see those palms analysed in Chapter Ten. Mr. Julian Clifford kindly let me use his hands in my chapter on authors."

Pointer felt as though he had had a severe punch. For Julian Clifford was England's greatest living author.

"Are you quite sure these tablets are imprints of Julian Clifford's hands?" he asked tranquilly.

"Oh, quite! His are as unforgettable, as unmistakable, as Sarah Bernhardt's. See. Here they are!" She drew a book from under the table and opened it at a couple of plates. Pointer's head was all astir. But he scrutinised them through her magnifying glass. The illustrations seemed identical with his tablets, even to a slight enlargement of the top joint of the left forefinger.

He thanked her and prepared to go. She stopped him with an exclamation. She was bending over his tablets with her glass.

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"These were not taken from the hands of a living man! Julian Clifford must be dead!"

"What an idea!" he scoffed.

"A true one! There's a lack of spring, of elasticity about them that's unmistakable. Julian Clifford dead! What a loss to the world! Was it in some accident?"

There was a pause. Mrs. Jansen's reputation was that of an absolutely trustworthy woman. Besides, her face vouched for her. Or rather, her aura. That immense, impalpable Something, woven of our thoughts, our desires, that surrounds each one of us, that never leaves us, that perhaps is most truly "us"—*En nefss,* as the Arabs call it—having its own way of making itself felt, its own warnings, its own dislikes, attractions, and guarantees.

"I wanted you to help us identify a body," he said simply. "Apparently you have. I wonder if there is anything more you can tell me—about Mr. Clifford, I mean."

She interrupted him.

"That's no good with me,—I've seen your palms, remember—I mean that air of a child asking to be helped over the crossing. Besides, why are you here? You weren't in the least interested in your own character. You were keenly interested in those tablets. I don't think it's merely the identification"—her eyes widened—"has something—something criminal—happened to Mr. Clifford? Has he been—killed?" she asked in a low, horrified voice.

"And supposing something 'wrong' has happened to him, Mrs. Jansen?" He gave her back a long, steady stare. "Mind you, all this is in strictest confidence. I'm Chief Inspector Pointer of New Scotland Yard. Of the C.I.D. The whole of this conversation, of my inquiries, must be kept absolutely to yourself, just as the Yard will treat anything you tell me

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about Mr. Clifford as confidential. Why did the idea come so quickly to you that his death may be due to a crime? You have more to go on than merely my coming to see you."

She looked at him over her horn spectacles for all the world like a modern witch.

"Mr. Clifford came to see me himself a week ago last Thursday," she said finally. "He wanted to know whether I would look in his hands and tell him if any danger threatened him. He was kind enough to say that I had impressed him as truthful when I took the photographs of his hands for my book two years ago. I had only seen him that once before. In Cannes."

"And you?"

"I told him that that was out of my line. Nor could any one have answered that question for him. His hands only showed character and talents. . . . That sort of thing. There are people whose hands do record events. . . . His didn't. Events outside him didn't enter into Julian Clifford. What mattered to him came always from within. Death, for instance, wasn't marked on his palms. Death means very little to him. His personality was quite distinct from his body. With some people it is bound up in it. Even a toothache is marked on their palms."

"What did you tell him? May I know?"

"I told him just that. He seemed rather disappointed. He asked me to look again. 'I'm on the eve of something—well—important.' He hesitated before using that word. I thought he chose it finally rather as a cloak. I don't think 'important' was the word he would have used in writing."

"You think Clifford the man was not so honest as Clifford the writer?"

She did not reply for a moment. Then:—

"I have an idea that he was undecided about something.

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Or perhaps hesitating before doing something would be a better word."

Again there was a silence.

"Is that all you can tell me about him?"

"Everything," she said, with a frank look into the detective-officer's face.

Pointer stared at his shoes.

"Mrs. Jansen, I wish you'd tell me Mr. Clifford's weak points—as you see them. Suppose something untoward has happened to him. Something that needs investigation. As a rule a man's good qualities don't lead to that necessity. Was there anything in Julian Clifford's character—as shown in his hands—that could have brought about, or led to, or explain—sudden death? Mind you, I ask this in strictest confidence."

She nodded gravely.

"In strictest confidence," she repeated, "nothing in his hands could explain any end other than a happy and honoured one. His was a fine character, noble and generous. He had faults, of course. There was a certain ruthlessness where his work was concerned. He would have sacrificed his all on that altar . . . unconsciously or even consciously."

Still Pointer looked at his shoes.

"Was he a man of high morality, would you say?"

"I don't think he had ever been tempted. He was fastidious by temperament, and his wealth made high standards fairly easy." Mrs. Jansen rose. "And that, Mr. Chief Inspector, is all I can tell you. Mr. Clifford sat a moment there in that chair you're in, peering at his own palms. He was very short-sighted. Then he looked at me half in vexation as he got up. 'What did the ancients do when the oracle wouldn't oracle?' And with that he said good-bye."

"Can I call upon you, in case of need, to identify the hands

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from which I took these wax impressions as those of Julian Clifford?" Pointer asked, rising.

"I will identify them any time, any where, as his. Hands are to me what faces are to most people—the things I go by."

Pointer paid the moderate fees and drove off. His whole being was in a turmoil under his quiet exterior. Julian Clifford, the great author, younger brother of Sir Edward Clifford of the Foreign Office, to be that headless trunk!

Back at Scotland Yard, within half an hour, the plates in Mrs. Jansen's book were enlarged and compared with quickly-taken photographs of the dead man's palms. Again they seemed to be identical. Every whorl and loop, which showed in both tallied.

Pointer meanwhile looked up Clifford's town address. It was given as Thornbush, Hampstead. A moment more, and he was asking over the telephone if he could speak to Mr. Clifford—Mr. Julian Clifford.

"Mr. Clifford is away, sir," a servant's voice answered.

"Away!" Pointer's tone marked incredulous surprise. "But he had an appointment with the Home Secretary at eleven!"

"He's not here, sir."

"But surely he gave you a message, or a letter when he left? It's Mr. Marbury of the Home Office who is speaking."

Pointer's tone suggested that Mr. Marbury was not accustomed to be slighted.

"I'll inquire, sir," a crushed voice replied.

There was a pause, then the voice came again, very apologetically.

"No, sir. No message was left. Mr. Clifford left early this morning before any one was up."

"Most extraordinary!" Mr. Marbury said stiffly. "I think I'll call and see some one about the matter." He hung up.

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So Julian Clifford was supposed to have left his home before any one was up. That probably meant that he had not been seen since last night. Since last night, when a murder had been committed in Heath Mansions.

What about Julian Clifford's brother! He might have some information. But an inquiry at the Foreign Office for Sir Edward told Pointer that the brother was not in town. A few questions to his valet in Pont Street added the information that Sir Edward had left town yesterday, Monday, evening after dining with his brother, Mr. Julian Clifford, at the latter's house. He had gone to his cottage in Surrey, a peaceful spot where the telephone was not.

Pointer opened his *Who's Who*. He reviewed the well-known facts of the novelist and playwright's life. Clifford was a little under forty-five, the younger son of the late Sir James Clifford of Clifford's Bank, long since incorporated in one of the big general banks; he had had a brilliant career at Eton and Oxford, and was the author of an imposing array of novels, poetry, plays, and serious works. He had been twice married, the first time to Catherine Haslar, daughter of Sir William Haslar, High Commissioner of Australia, and, some years after her death, to Alison Willoughby, daughter of Mr. Willoughby of Sefton Park. Clifford had no children.

That was all very well as far as it went. But again it did not go far.

Pointer smoothed his crisp hair which always looked as though it would curl if it dared. Then he pressed a bell. Could Mr. Ward come to his room at once? Apparently Mr. Ward could, for in another moment there appeared in the door a vision to delight a tailor's eye. Ward, sartorially speaking, was It, even in a royal group. His quaint pen-name adorned many a weekly paper. Always up-to-date, invariably correct in

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all his reports, for two hours of every week-day Ward occupied a small room in one wing next to the Assistant Commissioner's.

"About Julian Clifford—not his literary side, I suppose? Just so. A description of his appearance? Especially of his face?"

Ward gave a very good pen-picture of the great man, after which he repeated briefly what Pointer already knew about Clifford's family.

"Present wife had intended to become a Pusey Sister. Changed her mind and took to divining rods and crystal balls instead. Is on the committees of all the spook societies. People say she's a wonderful clairvoyante. But then they always do say that if the person concerned talks enough to enough people. She usually carries a crystal ball around with her in her bag."

"Supposing," Pointer began, lighting his pipe—that beloved pipe of his which he always denied himself while on the scene of a crime—it might blot out other scents. "Supposing, Mr. Ward, that Julian Clifford had suddenly disappeared from his circle, where would you look for him first?"

"I hardly know. Clifford does this sort of thing every now and then, you know, when he wants some new material for a book. But he always returns to the surface within a week or a month."

"But supposing you had reason to think that something had happened to him—that something was wrong with his disappearance this time?"

"Good God!" Ward's light manner dropped from him. "You don't mean to tell me, Chief Inspector, that anything serious has happened to Julian Clifford?"

Pointer nodded. "I do." He did not insult Scotland Yard,

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nor Ward, by asking him to regard that as confidential. Everything that was said within these walls was always confidential to the men considered sufficiently trustworthy to be consulted there.

"You mean that he's—dead?" Ward asked in a hushed voice. "You think there's been foul play?" He spoke in the tone of a man who asks a monstrous question.

"I'm sorry to say that I'm sure of it. And so, I want you to think whether you've ever heard any talk, any hint, anything that could explain his murder." Pointer gave the few terrible facts. Ward felt that headless body as an additional horror.

"Incredible!" he murmured. "No I know nothing whatever that can explain this crime. It must have been the work of a maniac."

"He was a wealthy man, I always understood?" Pointer asked.

"A very wealthy man apart from his literary work. And a quite sufficiently wealthy man apart from his private fortune."

"Who are the inmates of his household, not counting servants, do you know?" was the next question.

Ward had often been the guest of the Cliffords.

"All of them beyond suspicion. First there's Adrian Hobbs. He's Mrs. Clifford's cousin, and acts as Clifford's literary agent. Clever chap. Thoroughly good business man. Really he's wasted in his present surroundings. Hobbs ought to 've started life with half a crown and a huckster's barrow."

"Straightforward?"

"Perfectly, I should say. That is—eh, well—of course, he's a good business man, as I told you."

Both smiled.

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"What's he like to look at?"

"Big, powerful build. Heavyweight." Ward described Hobbs' looks. "Then there's Clifford's regular secretary. A poor fellow who lost his memory during the war. Blown up once too often. Just at the end too. Hard lines, eh? Name of Newman. Clifford ran across him at a base hospital, and gave him a try. He's very good indeed, I believe."

Again, at Pointer's request, he gave a snapshot of the secretary's appearance. Slim, but very strong, he thought him.

"How do these two men and Mrs. Clifford get on? You say they both live with the Cliffords?"

"She bores her cousin, Hobbs, stiff. And I think she secretly bores Newman too. Though he's a chap of whom it's very difficult to know what he thinks."

"Were the Cliffords attached to each other?"

"As far as I know, very much so. But of course—there's that talk about Mrs. Orr, the Merry Widow."

"Widow? Grass or sod, as the Americans say."

Ward laughed. "Oh, a genuine widow. As though you hadn't heard of the beautiful Mrs. Orr. As beautiful and far swifter than the latest eight-cylinder. Julian Clifford is supposed to be—was supposed to be—putting her in his next novel. All I know is he's been haunting her society lately. In season and out of season."

"And what does Mrs. Clifford say to the hauntings? Hasn't she tried to lay the spirit?"

"Mrs. Clifford is quite unperturbed, apparently. She goes on smiling her faint smiles and dreaming her dreams, and hearing her voices and seeing her visions in her crystal. She's one of the few women who haven't begun to cold-shoulder Mrs. Orr of late. Rather the other way."

"More friendly than usual?"

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"I saw them driving in the park together only last Friday. Never saw that before."

Pointer hurried off. It was one o'clock. Gossip, even very revelant gossip, must wait until he knew whether it were really wanted or not.

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CHAPTER III

An elderly-looking, round-shouldered man, whose stoop took from his real height, walked up to the gates of Thornbush half an hour later.

Pointer had looked out the hours of postal deliveries. He had timed himself so as to be on the drive when a postman overtook him. He turned.

"Any letters for me—Marbury?" he asked pleasantly. "And I'll take on any for the household at the same time."

The postman thanked him, told him there were none for him, and handed him four for the house.

Though Pointer looked a typical civil servant from his neatly-trimmed beard to his neatly-adjusted spats, he knocked at the front door with the four letters—three for Julian Clifford, Esq., and one for Mrs. Clifford—in his pocket. He might re-post them after the briefest of delays—or he might not.

"I telephoned to Mr. Clifford just now, and was told that he is not at his home." The very way in which Pointer felt for his card-case suggested near sight and a certain precise fussiness.

"Mr. Clifford is away, sir. But will you see Mr. Hobbs? Mr. Hobbs said he particularly wanted to see you, sir." The butler led the caller into a room near by. A young man rose civilly.

"Mr. Marbury? From the Home Office?"

"I called to inquire why Mr. Clifford failed to keep an

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appointment he had this morning with the Home Secretary. Can I see him a moment? The matter is connected with the Metropolitan Special Constabulary Reserve, and is very urgent. We are drawing up our lists."

Hobbs seemed puzzled. "Did Mr. Clifford have an appointment? I think there's some mistake."

"Exactly!" Pointer broke in. "I'm sure there is. Kindly let me know where I can reach him on the 'phone."

Hobbs stroked his smooth black hair. Then he stroked his smooth blue chin.

The Chief Inspector was by nature and training a remarkably astute reader of faces, but he was looking at one now which—like his own—hid completely the character behind it. Like himself, Adrian Hobbs looked about thirty, more or less. Like himself, too, he suggested an out-of-door man. Like himself, Hobbs was exceedingly neat in appearance. From his hair to his well-shod feet he satisfied the most fastidious eye. His mind, again like Pointer's, was clearly a tidy mind. But beyond that even Pointer could not size him up. The eyes were large and wide apart. Were they frank or merely bold? The nose was long. Was it predatory or merely self-assertive? Was the large mouth frank? Or was there something just a shade sinister to it when he smiled?

"I really can't understand it," Hobbs said finally. "I had no idea that Mr. Clifford took any interest in the matter——"

"That is precisely why I must trouble you for his address. Or a telephone number that will reach him," Pointer again put in swiftly.

"Sorry," Hobbs smiled slightly, "impossible to give you either. Mr. Clifford has gone off in search of local colour, and where he gets it is always his own closely-kept secret. He left no address. He never does. In good time—a day, a week, two weeks—he'll be back."

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"But a man doesn't make an appointment a week ahead with the Home Secretary and not keep it!" Pointer ejaculated, in the tone of a man whose patience is wearing thin.

The truism seemed to worry Hobbs. He nodded, but said nothing.

"I feel sure that he has left some word with some one. He must have!" Pointer urged.

"Mr. Clifford's engagement-book shows nothing for this morning," Hobbs said finally.

"When did he leave?"

"This morning. I got down to breakfast to find that he was gone. There was a note for me to say that he had left to explore some Chinese haunts. Liverpool rather than London, I fancy."

"Incredible!" Pointer murmured. "But"—an idea seemed to strike him—"would you ask Mrs. Clifford to spare me a few minutes? I must try and get this straightened out."

"Do you mind seeing if Mrs. Clifford's in the garden?" Hobbs turned to another man who was writing at the farther end of the large room where he and Pointer were talking. A man whom Pointer knew, by Ward's description, to be Newman, Julian Clifford's private secretary, and whom he had been secretly watching. The Chief Inspector had purposely lowered his voice so that what he was saying should only be partly audible to Newman. He noticed the intent look on the secretary's face, not when he entered the room, but when he spoke of Julian Clifford in a purposely raised voice. The look that came then, was that of a man straining his ears. Ordinary curiosity might explain this with many men. But Pointer did not think that curiosity was a trait of the dark young man with the close-shut mouth, and the deep-set, reserved eyes. Newman's ordinary interest, or he misread him greatly, was concentrated in some inner life of his own. A life so inter-

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esting in its close seclusion that he lived there almost exclusively. True, he would, he must, come out into some other court for business purposes, to buy and sell. The many who penetrated thus far, might indeed think that they had the run of all that there was to the man. But Pointer felt sure that there would be walled courtyard within walled courtyard and lock after lock behind which the real man stood on guard.

"Perhaps I'd better go myself," Hobbs said, after a second.

Alone in the room, Pointer thought over the two men, especially the secretary. There were great potentialities in that face. Newman had lost his memory in the last year of the war, Ward had said. But was the face at which the detective officer had just glanced, so apparently casually, the face of one with no memory reaching back beyond 1918?

Pointer had seen men who had lost all recollection of their lives up to a certain point. In the eyes of each had been a look impossible to forget or mistake. A piteous, searching look. The look of those who feel that they are the consequences of days that they cannot remember, that in their characters they are reaping what, as far as their surface intelligence is concerned, they have not sown. But Newman, strange though the effect was that he produced on Pointer's keen scrutiny, had not that look. Those watchful eyes . . . the iron reserve of the face. . . . Nothing could give that last but year on year of rigorous self-control. A self-control that was never set aside for a moment. Great business men sometimes have it, statesmen occasionally. Pointer had invariably seen it on those privileged to attend on royalties.

His thoughts passed on to the effect which his questions about Clifford had had on the men. Hobbs, Clifford's literary agent, had shown no emotion. But Newman? Newman was startled. Pointer knew that as well as though he had been one

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of these modern instruments which record heart beats. The man's rigid, sudden immobility had but one cause.

Yet, though Pointer could jump to conclusions when he could alter them, he was a very wary man when, as here, his conclusions were fundamental—were the basis on which he must build.

At that moment the door opened. Though Pointer did not know it, it was Julian Clifford's librarian who now looked in. A young man called Richard Straight, who, wandering rather aimlessly about the house, collecting missing volumes from library sets, had just met Hobbs. He had turned and stared after the literary agent. Hobbs' face was strangely set. Straight promptly popped his head into the room which the other had just left. He saw nothing to explain Hobbs' look. A stout, elderly man was trying to disentangle his glasses from his watch-chain. At sight of the librarian, the elderly caller rose.

"Mr. Newman, isn't it?"

"No." Straight came on into the room. "No, but can I be of any use? I'm the new librarian here. Very new, I'm afraid. I only arrived yesterday—from Melbourne."

"I called," Pointer explained wearily, "on a very urgent matter. I must get into touch with Mr. Clifford. I'm from the Home Office, I should mention, and Mr. Clifford was due at a meeting to discuss the lists of the Metropolitan Special Reserve Constabulary. We want him on the committee." He looked questioningly at Straight, who looked questioningly back at him. "Mr. Clifford is absent, it seems. The Home Secretary is waiting!" Pointer's tone was inimitable as he pronounced those five words.

"Where is Mr. Clifford?" Pointer went on irritably, "kindly let me have his address, and I will do what I can to straighten out this most deplorable mistake."

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"I haven't it," Straight said promptly. "Mr. Clifford apparently never leaves it when he goes off to collect new material for his work. He only left this morning."

"This morning!" Pointer's tone suggested that here was indeed the last straw. "Why, the appointment was for today!"

Straight merely smiled and shook his head, as though to say that he was not responsible for his employer's habits.

Hobbs returned. He shot a swift glance from Straight to Pointer. An inquiring glance.

"Mrs. Clifford knows no more than I do, but if you feel that you would like to see her, she is willing to give you a few moments, Mr. Marbury."

Hobbs showed Pointer into a large quiet room with bookshelves shoulder-high running around it. A big writing table stood by one window. A Koran stand, various old carved reading-desks, and lecterns, and broad tables such as architects use, were here and there. It was Clifford's own room, and admirably suited to its purpose of writing. The men stood desultorily talking of the weather, which, after having given a selection of winter airs for the past week, had remembered that July was the tune which it was booked to play, and seemed at last endeavouring to provide something suitable.

After a minute or two the door opened. Pointer had never seen any one quite like Alison Clifford. He had expected beauty, for Julian Clifford had written of many a lovely heroine. But this was not beauty as he understood it.

She was very tall, very slender, and very pale. Lint-white the short, soft hair, so fine that, as she turned to shut the door, it stirred above her head like thistledown. With every movement, with her very breathing, it seemed to rise and fall like the hair of a spirit. Her skin was white too. White and smooth, with a sheen as of a lily's petals. Even her lips

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were but a hint of colour. Her eyes were a clear aquamarine, veiled by lashes so white that they looked as though thickly floured. Something about the face made the Chief Inspector think of a face seen under water, or through a veil.

Pointer explained again about the meeting at the Home Secretary's.

"So sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Clifford, but I thought that perhaps you might remember some trifle which would help to locate Mr. Clifford——"

Mrs. Clifford regretted that she could be of no use. "My husband often disappears for a short time. Generally, of course, he lets me know where he will be, but not always. And I'm afraid he has a very poor memory for engagements."

"Sometimes he's writing, or dictating, and gets to a passage which needs local knowledge," Hobbs put in, "when he'll stop, think a moment, and without a word leave the room, take down his hat and topcoat, and be off. To return with the necessary information and atmosphere perhaps after a week."

Mrs. Clifford smiled acquiescence. "I'm afraid we must possess our souls in patience. He left me a note saying that he might be delayed until Friday."

"Delayed?" Pointer wondered at that word.

"I've heard, of course, of your wonderful powers," he went on politely. "Couldn't you ascertain by means of them where Mr. Clifford really is?" It was a test question. What would the woman's reply be?

"I've been watching him in my crystal off and on all morning," she said at once, smiling faintly with down-dropped lids—lids so thin that Pointer could see the colour of the iris through them.

Even as she spoke she touched the antique silver clasp of a small black velvet bag beside her. Within it Pointer saw a

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ball of what looked like glass. Bending lower she looked into it. He watched her. Seen like this, with the light on her silvery hair and amber frock, he saw her charm for the first time. There was something very alluring about the picture which she made. She looked like a tree sprite talking for a few moments to a mortal.

"There he is now!" she exclaimed suddenly. "I can always get results quicker if I am with some one who wants to see what I do. Yes, there he is!"

She half turned a shoulder so that both Pointer and Hobbs could look. Pointer saw but the shifting light beautifully reflected in the ball. Hobbs had stalked to the window, and stood with his back to the room, disapproval in every line of his body.

"What is Mr. Clifford doing? Where is he?" Marbury asked, gaping. Was the faint smile that curved her pale mouth mischievous or malicious?

"I'm afraid there's no address given in a crystal. I only see a street . . . a very winding street. . . ." She was staring into the ball with what looked like concentrated attention, turning it now and then in its nest of velvet.

"Gables," she went on, "built like steps running up into heaven, are on both sides of him. Now he's lighting a cigarette. He's pulled out his watch. Now he's gone!"

"Gables built like steps running up into heaven?" Pointer echoed. "What sort of houses would they be on?"

Mrs. Clifford shot Hobbs a glance from under her lids as she shut her velvet bag. Pointer fancied that she regretted those words, and hoped that her cousin had not heard them.

"Oh, just irregular gables," she said hurriedly.

"Wonderful!" Marbury fairly gaped; "really wonderful! Thank you so much. And when Mr. Clifford returns, will

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you ask him to have a message sent me? We may clear up the mystery then. For I confess I find Mr. Clifford's unexpected absence a mystery."

His rather yellow eyeballs—there are drops, very beneficial to the eye, which yellow the balls for the rest of the day—turned vaguely towards the figure of a young woman who had just sauntered down the gravel path towards them past their window. At his words, spoken very clearly, even though in Marbury's little staccato voice, it stopped with the small head a little forward on the long neck, the large eyes glancing into the room at Mrs. Clifford—at Hobbs—at their visitor. Dwelling on each in turn for a length of time that meant uneasiness to Pointer. By what, or by whom, was the uneasiness caused?

"Is that Miss Clifford?" Marbury asked, taking a step towards her, "perhaps she——"

"There is no Miss Clifford," Alison said, while the girl outside stood still. No one made any move towards mentioning her name.

"What! No help towards solving the puzzle of where Mr. Clifford is! Dear, dear!"

Mr. Marbury dropped first one glove then the other. The girl outside in the garden had stiffened where she stood. Now she passed on.

"That's a Miss Haslar, a niece of Mr. Clifford's," Hobbs said quickly, and turned towards the door.

Diana Haslar walked on as though deep in thought—unpleasant thought. Tall and slender, she looked a mere girl, but she was close on thirty. She had a fascinating rather than a pretty face. There were subtle lines in it. There was both mockery and mischief in her smile. And her large eyes looked as though few things would escape them. Had there been a greater warmth in it, her face would have been more universal in its charm. Yet there were hints of fire in the tawny eyes, in

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the beautiful lustre of her close-clipped, wavy hair, in some tones of her rather deep voice. At last, still apparently lost in thought, still unpleasant thought, she stepped into one of the rooms, and laid a hand on the young librarian's shoulder.

Richard Straight, as he had told Marbury, had only landed yesterday from Australia. He had been head librarian in a large Melbourne civic library. Julian Clifford had met him while on a world's lecturing tour, and had been struck with his original views on how private libraries should be, and could be, run. On his return, the author had offered him the post of his librarian. A small position, but one that could bring Straight into contact with many people worth meeting. Straight had thought it over for a month, and finally accepted it. Had he known what Diana Haslar carefully did not tell him until his decision was made, that the great writer was a connection of hers, Straight would not have hesitated for a day. He had been a constant visitor at the big Haslar house in Melbourne. A friend of Arnold Haslar's, it was not his fault if he was not by this time his brother-in-law. As it was, he still hoped to win Diana.

"Dick!"—the two were about the same age, and Christian names come easily in Australia—"tear yourself away from first editions, isn't a man from the Home Office the same as from the police?"

Richard Straight tore himself away from books very promptly at the tone in which that question was put. He looked at her in surprise.

"You'll be had up for slandering the Force if you mean that benevolent old dear in the morning-room. He certainly can't be the same as a policeman. Why?"

Diana seated herself on the table and ruffled the pages of a book in a way to set a conscientious librarian's teeth on edge. Dick did not seem to mind.

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"He came about Uncle Julian. . . . I heard him say his absence was a mystery. . . ."

"Well?" Dick asked easily.

Diana looked at him a moment in silence. Then she turned away. Straight knew that a door had been gently shut in his face.

"How do you think you're going to like your work at Thornbush?" she asked, after a moment.

"I think I'm going to like it very much here." This was high praise from Straight. He was an ugly, clever-looking young man with a certain air of quiet self-possession. An air which still annoyed Diana Haslar exceedingly at times. "I should like any place where I could be near you," he added rather fatuously.

She gave him a rallying smile.

"Any place? I really can't imagine your liking *any* place, Dick. You're rather a particular young man. Besides, when Uncle Julian has finished his Life of my grandfather, I'm off. It's only the fact I can check the family dates better than any one else can that keeps me here, though I like the work." She finished thoughtfully with a certain critical note in her voice.

"But not the house?" he asked, quickly looking up.

"We're so frank 'down under,'" she said a little wistfully, "dreadfully frank, you used to think when you first came out. And Thornbush—" She seemed to seek for the right word.

"Thornbush isn't?"

"Not frank. No. Not lately. I seem to be always interrupting people in most private conversations. I think I shall be glad when the Life is finished and I'm free once more. Though I love being with Uncle Julian."

"He's a splendid chap, isn't he!" Straight said warmly. "His welcome to me was kindness itself."

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