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GRIM VENGEANCE

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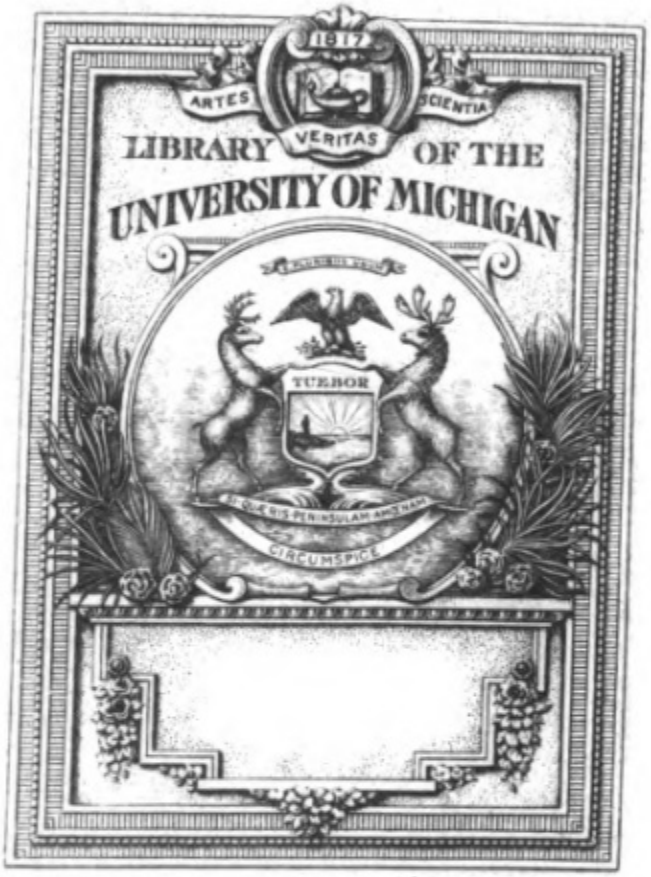

THE GIFT OF

Mrs. Albert Stanley

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The Old Corner Book
Store, Inc.
Boston, - Mass.

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By J. J. Connington

DEATH AT SWAYTHLING COURT

THE DANGERFIELD TALISMAN

MURDER IN THE MAZE

TRAGEDY AT RAVENSTHORPE

MYSTERY AT LYNDEN SANDS

THE CASE WITH NINE SOLUTIONS

GRIM VENGEANCE

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GRIM VENGEANCE

BY

J. J. CONNINGTON

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1929

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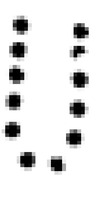

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NOTE

I take this opportunity of acknowledging my indebtedness to Mr. Victor Gollancz, who suggested the basal idea of the following story. For certain details in the narrative I have drawn upon the information given in the League of Nations paper C.52.M.52.1927.IV. and Mr. Albert Londres' book "The Road to Buenos Ayres."

J. J. C.

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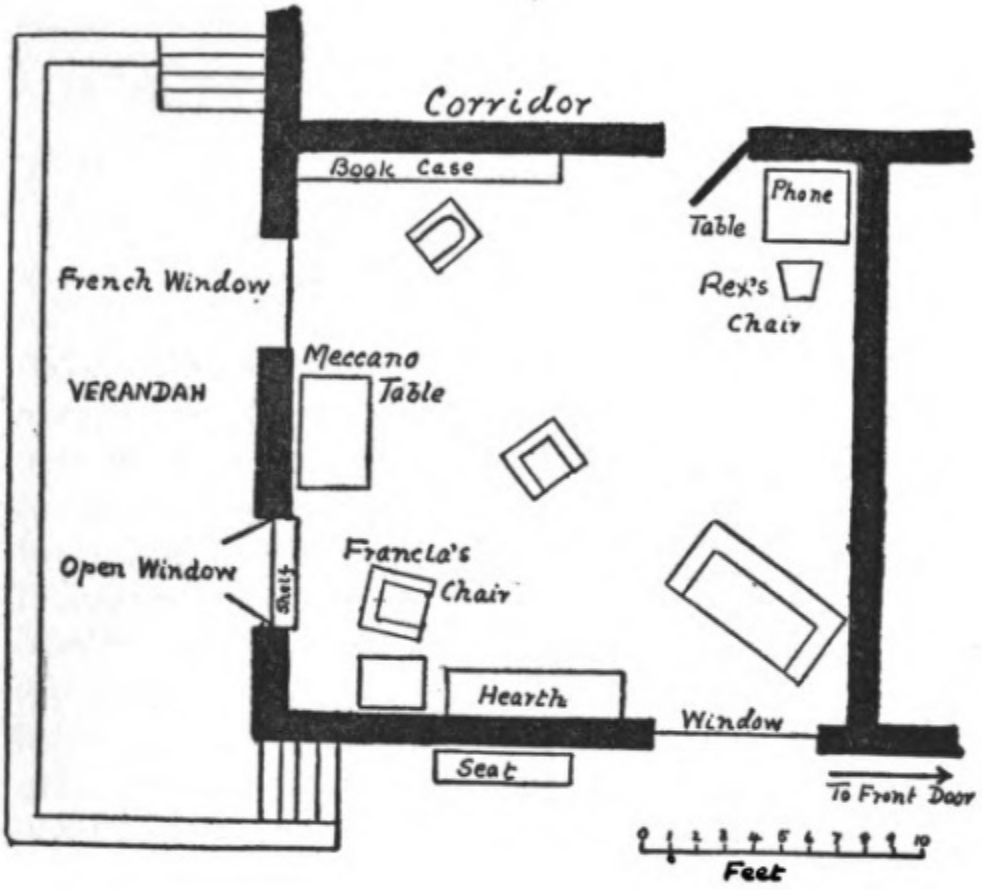

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CHAPTER I: THE AFFAIR BY THE ROADSIDE

THE big car ran smoothly through the darkness, opening up vista after vista of the road with the long beams of its headlights; and Sir Clinton Driffield, alone at the wheel, reflected contentedly that he might have fallen upon a worse night for his journey. He liked to drive late in the evening when the heavy traffic of the day was over; and now for the last half-hour he had not seen the lamps of another car. A pleasant feeling of isolation from humanity, tempered by the company of the machine, fitted in well with his mood and served to make him forget the annoyance of disarranged plans.

He was just back from a holiday, and had intended to drive down in time for dinner at the house which his sister had leased at Raynham Parva. But the breakdown of an engine had disorganized the Continental service; and when at last he reached London, it was too late to keep to his original programme. He had telephoned his news, so that there might be no anxiety at his non-arrival; and then, after dining at his club, he had started out in time to reach his destination about midnight.

Sir Clinton diverted his gaze momentarily from the pale ribbon of the road under his headlights and glanced across at the milometer on the dashboard. He had never been over the route before; but he had a mental picture of the map to guide him; and the figures ➤

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on the dial showed that he was near a point where he would have to leave the main highway for a by-road. His eyes turned to the illuminated clock beside the speedometer, and he noticed that it was rather later than he had believed.

Half a mile farther on, he swung off into the expected side-road; and with the change came a feeling of even more complete solitude. Except for the hum of the motor, the night was silent. The air was pleasantly cool; and as he swept through a little pine wood, Sir Clinton caught a whiff of aromatic scents drifting from the trees. Then once more he was under the open sky, running between low hedges, over the tops of which he could catch faint glimpses of fields under the stars.

A small dark object hurried laboriously across the road in the beam of his headlight, and Sir Clinton relaxed his pressure on the accelerator lest he should run over the creature ere it could get out of his way. When it had scuttled into safety at the wayside, he let the car out once more.

"A hedgehog!" he said aloud to himself. "This is the peaceful country and no mistake. I wonder if it would have punctured a tyre if I had run over it."

The hedges gave way to a high stone wall enclosing some large estate; and a couple of miles farther on, Sir Clinton had to take another turn. Inspection of the milometer told him that he was nearing the outskirts of Raynham Parva, and two or three scattered lights ahead suggested the village itself. He slowed down, for the road had become crooked. Then, as he rounded a turn, his headlights broke on a scene which contrasted strangely with the peace out of which he had come.

A car with only sidelamps lighted stood by the roadside; and in the free space of the road, Sir Clinton's

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headlights glared upon the figures of two men who had come to grips with each other. Close by, but in the background, stood a woman, with something which looked like a suitcase at her feet.

Sir Clinton had all the decent man's dislike for getting mixed up in a brawl, especially one in which it was impossible to distinguish the right side. The presence of the girl influenced him to some extent; since she might be left at the mercy of the victor in the struggle, if no help were at hand. Apart from all other considerations, this factor weighed with him as he checked his car and cautiously drew nearer to the three figures.

But his mere arrival momentarily disturbed the balance. As the blaze of the headlights fell upon the group, one of the combatants, dazzled by the unexpected glare, fell back a pace; and the smaller man seized the opportunity to launch a not unsuccessful kick. The heavier figure stepped back under the shock and desisted from his attack while he rapidly explored the extent of the damage.

The advantage gained was merely momentary. Finding himself undisabled, the bigger man paused as though gathering himself together; then, with a dash, he fell upon his antagonist, shook him by the coat-collar, and swung him round.

"So kickin's in the game, is it?" he demanded furiously. "All right. Turn about's fair play. It's my turn."

And at once he put his suggestion into practice, administering a brutal punishment to his adversary.

The girl made a movement as though to interfere; but the burly man, with an angry gesture, warned her back to her place. Sir Clinton pulled up his car and stepped out; but before he could reach the group, the

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affair was over. The bigger man, after a last kick, flung his opponent from him so violently that he stumbled and fell to the ground, where he lay groaning.

"That'll perhaps learn you not to come sniffin' round after other men's girls!" the victor commented sneeringly, as he stood over his adversary.

Then, seeing Sir Clinton's figure approaching, he turned away and beckoned to the girl.

"You come along with me," he ordered. "I'll see you safe home."

But the girl ignored his order, still keeping her place by the roadside. For a moment the man seemed to think of using force to compel her obedience; then, with a glance at Sir Clinton's approaching figure, he turned and walked past the tail of the standing car. Before he could be called back, he had slipped into a by-road out of sight. From round the corner came the sound of a self-starter; gears were engaged; and soon the noise of the motor had died away in the distance.

Coming up to the standing car, Sir Clinton stooped over the figure on the road and offered his hand to assist the man to rise. Evidently the kicking had been a vicious one; but it seemed to have done no permanent damage; for when the man got to his feet again he was able to hobble painfully to the door of his car. Apparently he was in a furious rage, for he did not even pause to thank Sir Clinton for his help. Instead, he climbed painfully into the driving seat of the two-seater and worked the self-starter.

As he lifted his head after reaching forward to the knob, his face came into the full glare of Sir Clinton's headlights and revealed his features, contorted with passion. Sir Clinton noted that he had a sort of coarse handsomeness; and that the cast of his looks was un-

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English. He might have been a southern Frenchman or Spaniard, had it not been for the suggestion of some other race which Sir Clinton failed to identify. In spite of well-cut and inconspicuous clothes, there seemed to be a hint of showiness in his appearance which accentuated his divergence from the normal English type.

Paying no attention to Sir Clinton, he leaned out of the car and addressed the girl, who was still standing where she had been throughout the scene.

"Strap your suitcase on the grid and get in," he said curtly.

But the girl's attitude showed more than a little hesitation. She glanced from the man in the car to Sir Clinton, as though weighing the position in her mind before she spoke.

"I don't think I'll come," she answered doubtfully.

This seemed to infuriate the man in the car.

"Get in when I tell you," he said angrily. "Don't stand there gaping! That fellow may change his mind and come back again, any minute. Come on, now, quick!"

The tone of his voice seemed to stiffen the girl's resistance.

"I'm not going with you," she answered in a firmer tone.

The man examined her face in the glare of the headlights, and seemed for a moment or two as though he were calculating his chance of swaying her from her decision. But the presence of a stranger evidently hampered him. He cast a glance of annoyance at Sir Clinton; and decided to give up his attempt.

"All right," he snarled. "Stay where you are. It's your loss."

And without wasting more words, he started his car.

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The girl watched him stonily as he drove away round the corner and out of sight. A glimpse of her face, brightly lit by the headlights, gave Sir Clinton the impression of a conflict between relief and disappointment on her features.

The affair was no business of his, obviously, however out of the common run it might appear, but he could hardly leave a girl by the wayside at that time of night without offering some assistance, since her suitcase might be a heavy one. It was a case for tact; and he determined, even at the cost of absurdity, to ignore what he had seen.

"You seem to be left stranded," he said, as he approached her. "I'm driving into Raynham Parva; and if it's any use to you, I'll be glad to give you a lift in my car."

He pointed to the empty back seats, by way of suggesting that she need not sit beside him unless she wished to do so. For a moment or two, the girl seemed to hesitate; then, with a glance at the pine spinney which fringed the road behind her, she shook her head decidedly.

"I'll manage all right, thank you."

As she turned her head to answer him, Sir Clinton saw that she was a pretty girl. Her voice, with its slight quiver of agitation, was a pleasant one; and only the faintest accent betrayed that she did not belong to his own class. A single incurious glance had shown him that she had good taste and carried her clothes well, though they were not expensive ones.

"If it's any help, I'll take your suitcase for you and drop it in Raynham Parva. There's no need for you to drag it along, even if you don't feel inclined to risk yourself with a stranger at this time of night."

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"No, thanks. I'll manage quite well."

Sir Clinton had no intention of forcing his company on her. After all, she knew her own business best; and it was not his affair to look after her if she preferred to be left to her own resources.

"That's Raynham Parva just ahead, isn't it?" he asked, by way of taking the awkwardness out of the situation.

The girl nodded.

"Keep straight on," she volunteered. "You'll come to it in two or three minutes. It's only half a mile or so along the road."

Sir Clinton thanked her and was about to turn away, when a thought struck him.

"Perhaps you could save me some trouble. I'm going to Mrs. Thornaby's — at Fern Lodge. I don't know the village — never been here before; and by the time I get there, everyone will have gone to bed long ago and I'll find no one to tell me my road. Perhaps you could direct me?"

A new expression came into the girl's face, something with more than a tinge of dismay in it.

"Oh, then you're Sir Clinton Driffield?" she exclaimed.

She stopped abruptly, biting her lip as though she had let the question slip out in spite of herself and now regretted that she had done so.

"You seem to know me," Sir Clinton admitted, restraining his surprise.

He examined the girl closely; but could not recall that he had ever seen her before. He felt a slight touch of vexation at this, for he prided himself on his memory for faces.

She seemed uneasy under his scrutiny; and made no

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reply to his implied question. To relieve her, he took his eyes from her face and made a gesture towards his car.

"Well, since you know who I am, now, perhaps you'll change your mind and let me take you in to the village. There's no point in your dragging that suitcase along the road."

But again the girl shook her head, this time so definitely that Sir Clinton saw her mind was clearly made up.

"I can tell you how to get to Mrs. Thornaby's," she said. "You go right on till you come to the village. . . . Wait a moment, I must think. . . . Yes, go down the main street till you come to the Black Bull Hotel — you can't miss it. Turn up the road on the right, just beyond it. There's a grocer's shop at the corner, so you can't mistake it. Then you go along that road till . . . let me see. . . . Oh, yes, till you cross a bridge with stone walls on each side of the road. Then you take the first road on your right again. Mrs. Thornaby's house is in that road. It's on your left hand side. You'll know it at once because it's got two beasts carved on the tops of the gate-pillars; and the name of the house is on shield-things on the pillars, too. You can't possibly mistake it."

"Thanks," said Sir Clinton. "I'd better get on my road. You're sure you'll be all right if I leave you here?"

Again the girl refused the invitation which he implied.

"I'll manage all right," she assured him.

Sir Clinton had no further excuse for lingering; but he was still puzzled, and he hated to be perplexed by an unsolved problem.

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"I wish you'd tell me how you recognised me," he said. "You don't know me by sight, obviously, or you'd have spotted who I was when I came up at first."

For a second or two the girl remained silent, evidently uncertain what to say.

"I knew you were coming to-night," she said at last, "and I guessed who you were when you spoke to me."

She stopped, as though a fresh aspect of the situation had occurred to her, and it was only after a pause that she went on:

"Please don't ask questions, Sir Clinton. And, please, if you see me again, don't say anything to anyone about this affair to-night. You must have seen that it wasn't nice. I want to forget all about it. And I don't want anyone to hear a word about it. Don't let anyone know that you've seen me before. You won't, please?"

Her distress was apparent; and Sir Clinton could see no valid objection to giving his promise.

"Sounds a bit mysterious, doesn't it?" he said lightly. "You seem to think we're likely to come across each other again. Well, if it'll ease your mind, I certainly won't say anything about it to anyone; and you needn't recognise me when we do meet. That's all right. Now about these directions you gave me. Let's see if I have them right. Straight on till I come to the Black Bull; then up to the right past the grocer's shop; then on till I come to a bridge; and the first road on the right brings me to Fern Lodge. That's correct, isn't it? Thanks for putting me on my way."

He did not repeat his offer of a lift, but made his way back to his car. The girl showed no sign of leaving her post, but stood on the grass edging of the road with her suitcase at her feet as he drove slowly past her. A few yards down the road, he turned and glanced back in

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her direction; but by that time her figure seemed to have been swallowed up in the darkness.

A few hundred yards farther on, he ran into Raynham Parva, and had little difficulty in finding the Black Bull Hotel. The village was asleep; and he congratulated himself on having secured directions about his route beforehand, for there was no one in the streets whom he could have questioned. Taking the turn at the grocer's shop, he found a couple of minutes driving took him beyond the outskirts of the village into the open country once more.

His thoughts, however, were less on the road before him than on the scene which he had just witnessed. On the face of it, the meaning of the affair was plain enough: the quarrel of two men over a girl, ending in a rough-and-tumble struggle. The girl's suitcase pointed clearly to some projected elopement which had apparently been interrupted by the arrival of the second man.

Sir Clinton's eye was trained to catch minor details; and he had noticed that the girl's ring-finger was bare. But that in itself meant very little. A married woman leaving her husband might very well take off her wedding-ring, even if the removal of it was a mere emotional gesture.

The foreign-looking fellow in the car seemed an obvious interloper. If he had been posing as a lover of the girl, the pretence had been stripped bare by his actions at the last moment; for all the emotion which he had shown was easily to be accounted for on other grounds, and his manner to the girl had been anything but lover-like. He had behaved like a bad loser confronted by an unexpected disaster.

The second man's doings presented an even greater

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puzzle. If he was the girl's husband, why had he left her by the roadside? Village manners would suggest quite another line of action for him. If he were either a lover or a brother, why had he not waited until the other man drove away and then settled matters to his own satisfaction, if possible? There must have been some fairly strong motive in his mind if it impelled him to leave the girl stranded on the road with a suitcase at that hour of the night, especially when he had a car in waiting round the corner.

The girl's behaviour furnished yet another problem. Her voice, Sir Clinton recalled, had not suggested any local accent, though she obviously did not belong to his own class. She spoke nicely — with an intonation quite different from that of the second man. But in country places it is not uncommon to find a girl with a cleaner accent than that of the men in her circle.

One thing was fairly apparent. She had arranged to meet the foreigner at an hour when the coast was clear; and she had brought a suitcase. The whole affair was obviously clandestine; and on this basis it was clear enough that she could not be picked up by the car at the very door of her own house. On the other hand, if the car was available, there would be no point in letting her carry her suitcase for any considerable distance from her home. The conclusion seemed to be that she must live somewhere close to the point where Sir Clinton had left her by the roadside; and this, in addition to other possible reasons, would account for her refusal of a lift in his car.

Finally, there was the question of her recognition of himself, which at first sight seemed the most puzzling point of all. Very brief consideration gave Sir Clinton a possible explanation of that side of the problem; and,

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as he thought it over, he found that it fitted neatly into the rest of the affair.

While he was thinking, the car had run for the best part of a mile, and yet there had been no sign of the bridge which was one of his landmarks; and he had almost come to the conclusion that the girl had misdirected him when he saw the stone parapets lining the road. And when he had crossed the stream, there was no sign of any road leading off to the right. He held to his instructions, however, though he knew that by this time he had left Raynham Parva far behind; and at last he came to a hairpin corner formed by the expected tributary road.

Sir Clinton had a good head for locality; and after he had gone a mile or so along this fresh route, it became obvious to him that he was now returning on a line which would bring him back to the vicinity of the village. When he realised this, a faint smile crossed his face; for it was just what he might have expected, if his guess at the situation had been correct.

"Very smart, on the spur of the moment," he confessed to himself. "She's evidently got her wits about her even when she's shaken up a bit."

His suspicion that he had been entirely misdirected died away; and his faith in his interpretation of the affair by the roadside was strengthened when the gates of Fern Lodge appeared in the beam of his lights, unmistakable with the carved lions surmounting the pillars.

The way was clear, and he turned his car into the entrance. Before him, a short drive opened up; and at the end of this Fern Lodge itself appeared, a substantial house decked with creepers, which gave it an old-established air. Light streamed from the hall door

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across the gravel sweep; and the windows of one room glowed in the night. Except for this, the building was dark against the sky.

A glance at the clock on the dashboard showed Sir Clinton that the détour he had made since leaving Raynham Parva had been longer than he had supposed. Evidently the Fern Lodge household had gone to bed, with the exception of someone who was sitting up to await him on his arrival. He sounded his horn gently as he drew near the door; then, pulling up his car, he got out and entered the house without ceremony.

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CHAPTER II: THE MAN FROM THE ARGENTINE

As Sir Clinton entered the hall, he heard a light step; a door opened, and Mrs. Thornaby came forward to welcome him. Though she was slightly older than her brother, few people would have realised this at first acquaintance. Her looks did not betray it; and she had a personality which seemed to take her out of the normal limitations of age and to let her mix with young people as easily as with those of her own generation. A marked capacity for making allowances for the prejudices of others was one of her most salient characteristics; and it made people turn to her for sympathy in their difficulties with a certainty that they would go away again with fresh courage.

"I heard your horn," she said, after they had exchanged greetings. "Just as well you telephoned. I'd have been worried about you if you hadn't turned up at dinner-time.

"You'd better put your car into the garage now. It'll save going out again later on. Drive down that path there, and you'll find the place."

She watched him start the engine, and then turned back into the house. Sir Clinton put his car into the garage, locked the front door of the house as he returned, and took off his overcoat.

"Come in here, Clinton," he heard his sister directing from the room out of which she had appeared on his first arrival.

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As he crossed the threshold, he threw a quick glance of inquiry round the room; but if he was surprised to find his sister alone, he did not let it appear in his expression.

"You must be cold after that long drive. There's whiskey and soda over yonder. If you'd rather have coffee, I can make it in a minute or two; I've got the machine here. When you telephoned that you'd be late, I didn't keep the maids up; and I expect they're off to bed long ago."

Sir Clinton nodded, declined the coffee, and helped himself to some whiskey and soda. With a gesture, Mrs. Thornaby invited him to take a comfortable chair near her own. Part of her charm lay in the fact that she always seemed more interested in other people than in herself; and it was characteristic that now, although she had news which concerned her deeply, she put it aside for the moment and questioned her brother about his own doings.

"Had a good holiday, Clinton?"

"Not bad."

Sir Clinton also had the habit of suppressing his own affairs and showing a greater interest in other people's.

His sister laughed gently.

"Really, Clinton, this police work of yours seems to be converting you into a sort of human oyster, so far as your own doings are concerned. One would think you were losing the gift of expression. I suppose it's all this official secrecy business; but surely, after a couple of months on the Continent, you might come back with something more detailed than 'Not bad' as a report. It sounds a trifle bald, somehow."

Sir Clinton laughed in his turn at this thrust.

"What do you expect? Detailed descriptions of

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Dutch windmills? You've seen 'em yourself. The Eiffel Tower's still standing, and I don't see much change in the view from the Lucendro Pass. I just wandered about and met a lot of interesting human specimens, here and there."

"And left no address behind you."

"How could I? I didn't know, one day, where I'd go on the next. I wanted a real holiday, not a Cook's tour with a time-schedule. When I got tired of a place, I just moved on to a fresh one that took my fancy."

He drew a case from his pocket, chose and lighted a cigarette. In some indefinable way he made the gesture put a closure on the discussion of his own affairs.

"Now what about yourself?" he demanded, as he laid down the spent match. "Johnnie's in bed long ago, I suppose; but where's Elsie? I thought she'd have stayed up to see me."

His quick eye detected a faint tinge of trouble in Mrs. Thornaby's face at the mention of her daughter's name; but when she spoke, it was evident that she was trying to treat the matter lightly.

"If you insist on cutting yourself off from your family for weeks, Clinton, you can't complain of surprises when you turn up again. I've got one for you. Elsie's married."

Sir Clinton seemed less astonished than she had expected.

"Married, is she? Well, Rex Brandon's a sound young cub as cubs go; and he certainly deserved to win. I've seldom seen any youngster so keen on a girl."

Mrs. Thornaby shook her head.

"It isn't Rex Brandon. It's someone you've never heard of, Clinton."

The tone of distrust in his sister's voice was faint

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but unmistakable. Sir Clinton's careless manner fell from him at the sound of it; and the face which he turned to Mrs. Thornaby was that of the official Sir Clinton.

"That's rum," he said slowly. "Tell me about it, Anne. You've managed to spring a surprise on me all right."

Those who knew Sir Clinton only as an efficient and somewhat cynical Chief Constable would have been surprised if they had seen him with his nephew and niece. They would have discovered an entirely fresh side of his character; for since the death of his brother-in-law, ten years before, he had taken the two children under his wing and made an effort to fill the gap left in their lives by their father's death.

Mrs. Thornaby made a gesture which seemed to suggest that she herself knew very little about the matter.

"I was never very keen on Elsie's going to London, you know," she explained. "I'd much rather have kept her beside me, though perhaps I'm a bit old-fashioned in that. But one can't deny that she's good with her violin. She's quite worth the best training I could afford for her. And when she wanted to go to the R.A.M., I hadn't the heart to refuse, once I found she was really eager about it. You know how one feels, Clinton. If she had her chance, then there was no grievance; but if I had objected to her going, she'd always have felt she'd missed something that might have made a big difference to her playing. She wouldn't have groused about it; but I'd have felt all the time that I'd stood in her way. Let her have the experience, I thought, and then she won't feel she's missed an opportunity, even if nothing comes of it in the end. Besides, I felt that in a case of

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that sort, one's better to weight the scales against oneself — just to make sure. I wanted to keep her; and I had a sort of notion that I was being selfish and disguising it by telling myself I was prudent. You see what I mean?"

Sir Clinton nodded, but said nothing. He and his sister understood each other; and this problem was one which Mrs. Thornaby had settled for herself. Comment was needless.

"Well, I'm afraid it didn't turn out quite as I'd hoped," Mrs. Thornaby went on. "Elsie didn't neglect her work — trust her for that. She's too keen on her fiddling. But she seems to have got among a rather weird lot of people in London. Some of the musical set introduced her to people outside, and they introduced her to others, and so on."

Again Sir Clinton nodded without speaking.

"What I didn't like about it was that she seemed to pick up a lot of futile ideas from these people; and if one didn't agree at once that these notions were the last touch in up-to-dateness, then one was classed as mid-Victorian. I don't mind being called Edwardian, but really mid-Victorian is a bit unkind, at my age."

Sir Clinton's face relaxed in a smile.

"They seem to have stirred you out of your senile torpor, anyhow. What sort of notions were they?"

"Oh, all about freedom, and living your own life without bothering about other people's feelings, and so forth. Getting away from all the petty restrictions that hampered the older generation."

Sir Clinton's smile deepened.

"That comes well from people who can't buy a cigarette or a box of chocolates in a shop after 8 P. M. without running the risk of being run in. We weren't

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quite so hampered as all that in King Edward's days."

"Most of their notions seemed mixed up with the sex question," Mrs. Thornaby continued, disregarding the interjection. "Some of them seem to me simply silly. For one thing, they don't believe in a girl getting engaged to a man; it seems that's a case of petty restriction. A man and a girl go about together for a while; and then, one day, they decide to get married — if they take even that trouble — and they drop into a registry office and fix it up without telling anyone. And that's that. It may be a new way of doing things, but I don't think much of it."

Sir Clinton made no effort to conceal his amusement.

"It's none so new, you know, Anne. When I was a boy, it was the ordinary method of getting married which servant-maids used. 'Walking out' they called it. I don't see much novelty in that. Mid-Victorian's no name for it. They must be a very unsophisticated bunch if it's fresh to them."

"It's no laughing matter to me, Clinton. That's just what Elsie did."

The "official" expression returned to Sir Clinton's face.

"Let's hear about this, Anne."

Mrs. Thornaby seemed to find relief in putting the matter into words. She was not the type which discusses its private affairs with friends; and the return of her brother had given her an outlet which hitherto she had lacked.

"Well, it seems that a man Francia was one of the circle she drifted amongst."

"Francia? What is he? Spanish?"

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"South American, I believe. He comes from the Argentine, Elsie told me. It seems that he fell in love with Elsie — violently in love."

She paused for a moment, as though the subject grated on her indefinably.

"You'll see him to-morrow," she continued, as Sir Clinton made no comment. "Perhaps it's jealousy on my part — quite likely. You know how much Elsie is to me, Clinton, and naturally I don't like the idea of her going away to South America. It's selfish, perhaps, but there you are. I can't help it."

She halted again, as though expecting some remark from her brother. Sir Clinton threw away the stub of his cigarette and chose another from his case, as though to fill the pause. He was evidently following his sister's story closely, but had no intention of interrupting the narrative.

"Elsie attracted this man's attention," Mrs. Thornaby continued with some hesitation, as though she were picking her words in dealing with a disagreeable subject. "They seem to have gone about together a good deal. He managed to make her care for him — she's quite keen on him, I can see. And the result was that they put these modern notions into practice: arranged everything and went off one day to a registrar's and got married without a word to anyone beforehand. She's of age of course, and it's all in order; but they didn't even tell me about it till it was all over. That cuts one a bit, you know, Clinton."

Sir Clinton nodded gravely. He had had a different picture of his niece's wedding in his mind. Elsie's excitement over an announced engagement; her surprise over her wedding-presents; all the fun of choosing a trousseau; a pretty wedding, with her friends as brides-

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maids and herself as the star; and, instead of all that, a visit to a dingy registrar's office, a business with as much romance in it as taking out a dog-licence.

"H'm! She's missed a lot of harmless pleasure," he commented, as though to cover his sister's emotion. "The new method doesn't seem to offer the same opportunities as the old one, to my mind. However, if she's fond of him, that's always something."

He seemed to ponder for a moment.

"A bit rum to come home and find the kiddie married. It seems not so long ago since she was climbing on to my knee clamouring for fairy tales. And now she's the wife of a fellow I'd never even heard of. I can appreciate your feelings, Anne."

Mrs. Thornaby had recovered herself.

"Elsie wired me after it was all over," she went on. "They went off for a week-end together. Then Elsie brought him down here, and they're staying till they go out to Buenos Ayres. I've done my best, Clinton. I was quite prepared to take second place, now. But he's foreign — not our sort. His manners are all right, you know, only too much so, if you see what I mean. Somehow, I feel as if I'd never get to know the man."

For his sister's sake, Sir Clinton tried to put the best face on things.

"Spanish?" he said thoughtfully. "After all, Spaniards aren't necessarily dagoes, you know, Anne. Some of them are sound stuff. One mustn't get too prejudiced merely because a man doesn't come from our own part of the country. Though I admit I'd have been better pleased if Elsie had kept to her own people and left foreigners alone. Rex Brandon was the man I was betting on. He may be a bit sharp-tempered at times, but he's a likeable cub. Pity!"

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"Well, perhaps I'm prejudiced," Mrs. Thornaby admitted, with a tired smile. "I expect this wrench of Elsie going off to the other side of the world may have a good deal to do with my feelings. One can't help that. It's only natural."

Sir Clinton seemed to be following a fresh train of thought.

"He can't have married Elsie for money," he said at last. "She hasn't a penny of her own, and she knows that quite well."

"Oh, that had nothing to do with it," Mrs. Thornaby admitted frankly. "He seems to have plenty of money, so far as one can see. Elsie's dropped one or two things which point that way. I gathered that he's got quite big interests in the Argentine."

"What's his line?" Sir Clinton inquired.

Mrs. Thornaby's gesture showed that she had little definite to tell.

"I don't really know. I'm not inclined to cross-question Elsie too much, you see, Clinton. I'm doing my best to conceal my feelings from her. I don't want to stir up trouble in these last few weeks that are all I'll have of her for long enough. I don't want to seem too curious, because, if I talk too much about him, I'm afraid she'll see clearly enough what I feel."

Sir Clinton nodded understandingly.

"But you've got some notion, haven't you?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Mrs. Thornaby answered doubtfully. "I think he does something with horses."

"That's not unlikely in the Argentine. Anything else?"

"He seems to have something to do with theatres — or else some friend of his is interested in them and he

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has influence in that line. That reminds me, Clinton. They've got a couple of girls here — Elsie asked them down. It's something to do with this theatre business. You'll see them to-morrow."

Sir Clinton nodded rather absent-mindedly at this information. He was evidently still trying to bring himself to new bearings in the matter of his niece.

"She was always such a pretty, trustful kiddie," he said reminiscently. "Never been hurt, and thought everybody was as straight as herself. The worst of the marriage system is that, if the husband comes a smash, he drags his wife down with him. It's hardly fair, when one comes to think of it."

He glanced at his sister's face, saw that he had let something slip out which had done no good, and changed the subject abruptly.

"What about the other half of the family? At the age of eleven, Johnnie's hardly likely to have got involved in troubles of that sort, anyhow."

"Johnnie's all right," Mrs. Thornaby confirmed. "He was looking forward so much to seeing you to-night; and when he found you wouldn't be here till late, and I wouldn't let him sit up for you, he nearly rebelled. I expect he'll be hammering at your door to-morrow long before you're awake. He's got a lot of things he wants to show you. He's got a regular menagerie round by the garage, and he's frightfully keen over some hutches he's made. Don't omit to be enthusiastic."

"Is he still worrying round with Meccano and that sort of thing?"

"He's still quite keen on it. Some of the things he makes on it are really quite good — most complicated working models. He seems to have a turn for that sort of thing."

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"It's always a sound thing if a cub can use his hands. I've brought him a lot of supplementary stuff — it's in the car and he'll get it to-morrow. That'll infuse some fresh interest into the business for him."

Mrs. Thornaby nodded.

"You spoil the boy," she said, with a faint smile. "But I don't think he likes you merely for what he can get out of you. The latest is that he's 'going into the police, like Uncle Clinton,' when he grows up. By the way, Clinton, are you really dropping the Chief Constableship?"

Sir Clinton glanced up whimsically.

"No. Shouldn't dream of it now," he said, with a purposely solemn face.

"You aren't sending in your resignation, then?"

"No. Once is quite enough. I resigned the other day. You see, Anne, when old James left me his money, I knew there was a string tied to it. He didn't put it in black and white because he knew he could trust me. But he wants the old place decently kept up; tenants looked after and so forth. James had very conscientious views about the duties of the country landlord towards his dependents. So I'll have to step into his shoes and run the thing properly; and that's a whole-time job if one takes it seriously. I haven't time for that and the Chief Constableship, obviously, unless I let one or other of them down — or both. So I cleared out. No more police for me. I've earned a change of occupation, at any rate."

Mrs. Thornaby's face showed her satisfaction at the news.

"Well, we shall see more of you in future, Clinton. You won't be tied down so much as you used to be."

"It'll be a change, certainly. And this affair of Elsie

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has altered things a good bit. You'd better come and help me to look after things at the old place. I'm short of a Lady Bountiful at present; and there's nothing to keep you here when Elsie's gone."

He rose slowly to his feet, glancing at his watch as he did so.

"It's getting well on into the morning. I'd no notion time had gone so fast. Suppose we turn in? I've got a suitcase in the hall, if you'll show me where my room is. The geography of this place is new to me."

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CHAPTER III: SERGEANT LEDBURY

MRS. THORNABY'S overnight prophecy was fulfilled to the letter. Long before the normal breakfast hour, Sir Clinton was awakened by a peremptory rapping at his door and the incursion of a small boy into the room.

"Good morning, uncle. I say, here's your shaving-water; and I've told them downstairs to have breakfast ready for you in half an hour."

He put down the steaming can and flew to the windows to throw back the curtains, through which the sunlight was already making its way. Sir Clinton, wide awake on the instant, inspected his watch.

"Easy with those curtains, young man," he directed. "You'll wake the whole neighbourhood if you slam the runners about like that. This is an ungodly hour to rouse a travel-worn relative."

Johnnie turned back from the window and perched himself on the edge of the bed.

"They wouldn't let me sit up to see you, last night," he complained, "and I've got heaps of things I want to talk to you about."

"That last one's a commoner complaint than you seem to think, Johnnie. Quite a lot of people suffer from a mania for talking about their own affairs," Sir Clinton pointed out. "Like this place in the country, after having been a town-bird all your life?"

Johnnie nodded vigorously.

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"It's A 1. I never thought I'd live in a place like this, just stuffed full of interesting things. Do you know, uncle, I saw a badger yesterday, wandering along under a hedge. I didn't know what it was when I saw it, but somebody told me afterwards. I'd no notion badgers were as big as that, had you?"

"Not knowing how big it was, I can't say."

"Well, it was ever so much bigger than I expected. And there's a rabbit-warren in the wood behind the house. You can see them come out into the fields just about dusk. And I've seen two weasels in the wood. I don't like weasels. And there's a dovecote on the top of a pole in the yard; and there's any amount of fowls and pigs and ducks and turkeys. And two collie dogs. And, do you know, uncle, I've got a pony all to myself."

His uncle made a pretence of being galvanised by this last item of news.

"All the modern conveniences, evidently. Hop off the bed, young fellow, and let me get up. We must look into all this."

Sir Clinton slipped out of bed and put on his dressing-gown.

"Now you can show me where the bathroom is. This house is new to me, and I forgot to inquire my way about last night. If I happen to fall asleep while I'm dressing, please wait for half an hour and then waken me again — gently, this time. Meanwhile, kindly lead the way, and don't talk at the top of your voice when you pass the door of anyone's bedroom. Show some fellow-feeling and let 'em sleep, even if I mayn't."

Johnnie grinned at his uncle's suggestion. He had carried his point and managed matters so that he would have Sir Clinton to himself during breakfast; and he

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hoped to carry him off immediately afterwards to inspect the grounds, before any of the rest of the family put in an appearance. He led the way to the bathroom, chattering eagerly as he went; and it was with obvious reluctance that he turned away when Sir Clinton cut him short by closing the door in his face.

"I forgot one thing, uncle," he communicated via the keyhole. "There's a lake runs up into the grounds. It's got fish in it and a lot of water-fowl live there. And I've learned to row a boat on it. I'll row you, by and by."

"I don't mind if you do. I can swim. Now clear out!"

Twenty minutes later, Sir Clinton descended the stairs to find Johnnie restlessly wandering about the hall, in evident impatience at what had seemed to him an interminable delay.

"Come on, uncle. Along this way. Staffin's just taking in the grub. I told her you took coffee. Do you know, there's a couple of owls about the place — huge ones. I've never seen a live owl before, except at the Zoo. But you'll need to wait for dusk to-night. In here, this is the breakfast-room."

He stood aside to let his uncle enter; but at the door they almost collided with the table-maid, who was hurrying out of the room. Her eyes met those of Sir Clinton for a moment, and he recognised the girl he had left by the wayside with her suitcase on the previous night. She looked anxiously at him as they met; but Sir Clinton, mindful of his promise, let no sign of recognition escape him.

As he helped himself to breakfast, he reflected that his inferences had been correct. The point where he had encountered the girl was obviously quite close to Fern

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Lodge; and she had deliberately misdirected him over a roundabout route in order to give herself time to regain the house before he arrived himself. Obviously it might have been difficult for the girl to re-enter the house and slip off to her room undetected, if she had come back at the moment when the place was astir at his arrival. She could hardly guess that only Mrs. Thornaby would be sitting up to welcome him. And, naturally, when she met him on the road, she guessed his identity as soon as she heard that he was bound for Fern Lodge, since he was the only visitor expected.

"There's a pine spinney running down to the road near here, isn't there?" he asked Johnnie, merely to clinch the point to his own satisfaction.

"Oh, yes. There's a short cut through it, down to the road. It's in our grounds. I found a toad there, the other day."

Johnnie was so eager to exhibit the resources of the neighbourhood that Sir Clinton found breakfast anything but a quiet meal. Good-naturedly, he made as little delay as possible; and they rose from the table before any other members of the family appeared.

"Now where's this pony of yours, Johnnie?"

The pony occupied some time; and, after it had been fully admired, Sir Clinton was conducted round the chief sights of the farmyard and out-buildings. At last, when Johnnie had exhausted the sights in the immediate environs of Fern Lodge, his uncle turned resolutely towards the house.

"Elsie will be downstairs by this time, Johnnie. I haven't seen her yet, you know. By the way, which is the shortest way to the garage? There's something we've got to pick up there."

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Johnnie, feeling that his uncle was passing into the hands of unappreciative grown-ups, led the way reluctantly to the garage door. Sir Clinton's luggage had been removed from the grid of his car and taken up to the house; but a large wooden box had been left in the back of the tonneau. Sir Clinton went to take it out, whilst Johnnie glanced round the roomy garage in manifest surprise.

"Why, where's Vincent's car?" he demanded.

"Who's Vincent?" Sir Clinton inquired, as he lifted out the box.

"Elsie's husband, of course," Johnnie replied. "She calls him Vincent. His real name's Vicente, though. I know that because he told me himself. Vicente's the Spanish for Vincent."

"Well, what about his car?" Sir Clinton asked.

"It isn't here," Johnnie explained. "It's a two-seater and he keeps it in our garage. This is our own car," he added, pointing to a four-seater saloon which was standing beside Sir Clinton's touring car.

"Never mind about it just now. Here's something for you," his uncle answered, indicating the wooden box. "It's a new set of Meccano parts, and a few other things I picked up for you a while ago and didn't send on at the time. There's a couple of electric motors to make the wheels go round; and a battery or two for the motors."

Brushing aside Johnnie's thanks, his uncle picked up the box.

"A bit too heavy for you to carry. I'll take it up to the house and you can unpack it for yourself."

When they reached Fern Lodge, Sir Clinton was surprised to find Staffin, the table-maid, in the hall. The girl was making a pretence of setting something to

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rights; but it was obvious at the first glance that she was doing this merely as an excuse for her presence. Sir Clinton was about to pass her, when over the head of Johnnie she made it clear that she was anxious to speak to him in private.

"Hardly like Anne to have a table-maid who vamps casual visitors at second sight," Sir Clinton reflected amusedly.

A glance at the girl's face convinced him, however, that she was in real trouble.

"Cut along and get your box opened, Johnnie. Put it down somewhere where the packing won't make too much of a mess," he directed.

Then, as Johnnie disappeared towards the back of the house, Sir Clinton turned to Staffin.

"Well?"

The girl threw an apprehensive glance towards the stairs and the breakfast-room door, as though afraid that she might be overheard.

"Oh, sir," she said breathlessly, "I've just heard that Mr. Quevedo's dead and they've arrested Teddy . . ."

"Mr. Quevedo being the man in the motor-car, and Teddy your old friend?" Sir Clinton interjected.

"Yes, sir. Teddy's hot-tempered; but he'd never go that length, or anywhere near it. It's all a mistake . . ."

She had some difficulty in restraining herself as she broke off. Sir Clinton offered her no assistance. It seemed better, since she had a story to tell, to let her tell it in her own way without leading questions. In a moment or two she regained control over herself and was able to continue.

"It was like this, sir. Teddy's the son of a small farmer close by; and when I came down here with Mrs.

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Thornaby, he took a fancy to me. We'd talked in a sort of way about getting married; and I suppose he thought it was all settled up. Then Mr. Quevedo came to the village; and *he* seemed to take a fancy to me too. He made Teddy jealous; and Teddy and I had a row over the head of it; and I sent him about his business."

Sir Clinton refrained from showing by his expression that he had inferred most of this from what he had seen with his own eyes.

"Then," the girl went on, "Mr. Quevedo got a bit more friendly; and he was always telling me that a girl like me was wasted in service. I could do better for myself than that, if I'd go to London. He was going to find a good post for me. He seemed so kind about it, and he never seemed to expect anything for himself. All he wanted, he said, was to see a girl making the best of herself and getting a good screw."

She threw another apprehensive glance at the door of the breakfast-room, from which came the sound of voices.

"They'll be finishing breakfast any minute," she went on. "When things got this length, Mr. Quevedo found he had to go back to London himself; and he offered to give me a lift in his car. He was very careful, and said that he wouldn't like to drive up to the house and take me away. People would get all sorts of bad ideas in their heads if he did that. And, of course, so they would."

Sir Clinton nodded without speaking, but the glance which he threw in his turn towards the breakfast-room had the effect of keeping the girl to the point.

"Mr. Quevedo arranged to pick me up on the road last night. I was to slip down through the spinney and

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meet him where you saw us. He said he could find a place for me to stay in London, if I had no friends there. Very particular people, he said they were. They'd probably take me to church on Sundays, he said; and he asked if I thought I could stand that, just so as not to give them a bad impression."

"And you believed all that?" Sir Clinton demanded, almost incredulously.

"I don't now, of course," the girl admitted frankly, "but then it sounded quite all right, sir. He seemed so anxious to give me a chance; and he never made any suggestions or took any liberties with me. I thought he was just being kind. And he had a way of talking that made it all seem just as simple as anything. Looking back I see — oh, what a fool I've been!"

She showed signs of breaking down, but again she managed to recover her surface composure.

"Then I met Teddy, sir, and he was so anxious to make it up and begin again. But he'd hurt my feelings badly with some things he'd said in his quick temper before; and I just wanted to even up with him. So I told him I'd better things to think about than him. And somehow, with our getting a bit angry with each other, I let slip something that showed him how the land lay — about Mr. Quevedo meeting me that very night."

She glanced rather piteously at Sir Clinton, as though expecting some comment on her tale; but none came.

"You saw what happened, sir. Teddy's got a terrible temper. But he'd never — he'd never have killed Mr. Quevedo. It's all some dreadful mistake. Teddy's not that sort of man, sir. He's as kind as kind, really. I can't think what made me behave like a fool and not

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know when I'd got what I really cared for. It was just Teddy making me lose my temper, and his losing his, that did it."

"And why do you tell me all this?" Sir Clinton asked in a colourless voice.

"Why, sir, we know all about you, being Mrs. Thornaby's brother. They all say you're so clever at finding things out, Sir Clinton. Can't you do something to help poor Teddy? It nearly drives me out of my mind when I think of him in gaol, and knowing no more about Mr. Quevedo's death than I do, I'm sure. That's why I came to you, sir. Please help us, and get Teddy off. Please, please, do! You're in the police yourself, and they'd listen to you."

"I'm not in the police now," Sir Clinton corrected. "And that makes no difference in this kind of case. I'll give you one bit of sound advice, Staffin. When you're dragged into this, as you may be, then stick to the plain truth. Don't try to make up a story in the hope of helping Teddy — what's his other name, by the way?"

"Barford, sir. You will help him, Sir Clinton, won't you?"

Sir Clinton's face betrayed his sympathy with the girl in her trouble, but his reply was guarded.

"It's everybody's business to see that an innocent man isn't condemned. But I can't suppress what I know myself about your doings last night, remember."

"But that's the worst thing there is against Teddy!" the girl exclaimed. "If that comes out, everybody'll be sure he went after Mr. Quevedo and killed him."

"They'll have to prove it, though; and that's harder than merely saying it. Take my advice, and make a clean breast of the whole affair, if they ask you about

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it. If you don't, it'll be dragged out of you sooner or later; and it'll make a very much worse impression that way."

The girl was obviously about to make another appeal to him when the sound of a chair colliding with something in the breakfast-room arrested the words in her throat.

"They're coming," she muttered, and she hurried away towards the servants' quarters before the breakfast-room door opened.

Sir Clinton glanced after her as she went. A faint, but not altogether pleasant smile crossed his face as he thought of the trouble she had raised by not knowing her own mind in time. Of course some men had the gift of a plausible tongue; and no doubt Quevedo had played his game well enough to take this girl in completely. Barford's temper had probably precipitated the whole business and thrown the girl straight into the foreigner's hands at the crucial moment; though luckily for her he had upset the arrangement and let Quevedo show himself in his real colours in the end. On the face of it, the whole business seemed to be a sordid enough little affair; and it was the duty of the local police to clear it up. But would the local police get to the bottom of it? Sir Clinton discovered a certain sympathy in his mind for Barford, in the circumstances.

His train of thought was interrupted by the opening of the breakfast-room door. He heard his niece's voice speaking to some people who were evidently still at table. Then, as she came out of the room, she caught sight of him and hurried forward.

"Oh, there you are, uncle! You must have come down very early. When we turned up, Johnnie had

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carried you off somewhere or other, and no one knew where you'd gone."

She held up her face and Sir Clinton kissed her. As he did so, he became aware of a second figure in the background.

"This is Vincent, uncle. Mother's told you all about us, I expect, hasn't she?"

Francia came forward as she spoke and bowed to Sir Clinton with a certain foreign politeness which seemed to suit his appearance. Sir Clinton let his eyes travel unobtrusively over his new relative. He did not wish to let himself be prejudiced by anything his sister had said; and, at the first glance, he found little to cavil at in Francia's appearance. The man would never have passed for an Englishman; but Sir Clinton was enough of a cosmopolitan to judge other races by their own standards rather than by British criteria; and he mentally ticked off the externals of the man before him. Foreign-looking, Francia undoubtedly was; handsome, by some standards undeniably, though to Sir Clinton's taste the Argentiner's looks were a trifle florid. As for his clothes, "good tailor" might have been inferred at a glance from their appearance. Altogether, the result of his survey removed one of Sir Clinton's apprehensions. This new nephew-in-law was at least outwardly presentable; though Mrs. Thornaby had been quite fair in describing him as "foreign."

"He's not Anne's sort; that's plain," Sir Clinton reflected rather ruefully. "The main thing is, though, does he suit Elsie?"

He seemed to find an answer in a glance which his niece shot at her husband. Despite himself, he felt a twinge of jealousy as he saw it. All of them would have to take a back seat now, evidently. The old relation-

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ships might go on, but this new one had altered all former bearings; and Sir Clinton could not help realising how acutely his sister would feel the change.

Elsie slipped her arm into her uncle's and led him towards the hall door.

"Now I've rescued you from Johnnie's clutches, I'm not going to yet you go," she announced. "I've heaps of things I want to hear."

She turned to her husband.

"Vincent! Please bring some camp-chairs out to the lawn. We'll sit there for a while — over yonder under the lee of the rhododendrons. You'd better fetch four chairs when you're about it. Mother may come out when she's got through breakfast."

Her husband, with a gesture of excuse towards Sir Clinton, went off obediently in search of the chairs, while Elsie led her uncle out into the open air.

"Well?" she demanded eagerly, as soon as Francia was out of earshot.

Sir Clinton had guessed the reason which had led her to despatch Francia on his errand; but he wished that he had more time in which to reply to the implied question.

"You seem to favour the compendious in your conversation nowadays," he said teasingly. "I suppose your 'Well?' means 'What do I think of your husband?' He seems all right and he says 'Good morning' better than most people. Beyond that, our acquaintance hasn't provided much material, has it?"

He glanced down at his niece's eager face.

"Quite happy?" he demanded seriously.

"Just ever so, and a bit more," Elsie answered, with equal seriousness. "You've no notion what a dear Vincent is. You'll like him, uncle, once you get to know

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him. He's so thoughtful — seems to spend his time thinking of things that'll please me."

"H'm! Spoils you, in plain English," said Sir Clinton, with a glimmer of a smile.

"Well, what if he does? You did your best yourself in your day, uncle, so you can't afford to put on airs."

Sir Clinton's smile vanished abruptly. The sting of the phrase "in your day" was all the sharper owing to Elsie's complete unconsciousness that she was marking the vanishing of the old order of things. His day was over now, as it was bound to be, sooner or later. That was inevitable, of course. No one wanted a girl to spend all her life in circling round an uncle. But at the back of Sir Clinton's mind there had always been a fairly definite idea of the sort of man who would supplant him: not necessarily young Brandon, of course, but at least someone of the young Brandon type, a youngster one could take to and trust with Elsie, because he was one's own sort. This man from the Argentine was different — "foreign," as Mrs. Thornaby had put it the night before. He might be all right; one hoped he was; but he wasn't young Brandon or anything like him.

"You musn't be jealous, you know," Elsie said impulsively, as though she had been able to read her uncle's mind. "You needn't think anything of that sort. I'm not that kind."

"Jealous!" Sir Clinton laughed to conceal the shrewdness of the stroke. "What would I be jealous about? I couldn't have married you myself, could I? All I want is to see you happy, Elsie. You know that well enough."

"Then I am happy, so that's all right."

Her smile vouched for her even better than her tone.

"Here's Vincent with the chairs. Put them down over

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here, Vincent, please. Oh, by the way, you'd better get a couple more. I'd forgotten that these two girls may be coming out later on."

"Time enough when they turn up," Sir Clinton suggested.

He had no desire to pursue the conversation with his niece at the moment. It was getting on to dangerous ground, and he knew that by an incautious phrase or even a failing in enthusiasm he might open a breach which would be hard to re-close. Besides, he was curious to learn something at first-hand about Francia. He helped to set up the camp-chairs, and watched Elsie's husband arrange a cushion at her back when she sat down.

"That's nice," she said, leaning back luxuriously. "Nobody arranges a cushion so comfortably as you do, Vincent. You must have taken lessons or something."

"A correspondence course," Francia admitted, with a smile which showed white, even teeth. "Seven lessons, ten dollars, with a diploma thrown in."

He gave the cushion a final touch and went over to his own chair. Sir Clinton also smiled, but without amusement. Francia was obviously an old hand at settling a girl's shoulders comfortably on a cushion; and the joke about a correspondence course seemed rather pointless.

"Have you been long in Europe?" he asked, as he sat down in his turn.

"A few months," Francia answered concisely.

He pulled a cigar-case from his pocket.

"You allow me?" he asked, glancing at Elsie for permission to smoke.

She nodded, and he selected a cigar with some care.

"I do not like your climate," he continued, turning

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to Sir Clinton with another smile, which showed his teeth under his moustache. "We are not accustomed to this particular kind of dampness over yonder. Brrr!"

He shrugged his shoulders as though a shiver had gone up his spine.

"I shall be glad to be back in Buenos Ayres, I can tell you, Sir Clinton."

"You aren't thinking of leaving immediately, I suppose?"

"In a month or six weeks," Francia answered. "I shall be much pleased to taste *café con lèch* again. England is, of course, a wonderful country; but it cannot make *café con lèche* as we can."

"That's *café au lait*, uncle," Elsie explained.

Sir Clinton needed no assistance in the matter, but he nodded his thanks for the information.

"Six weeks?" he said, returning to the earlier subject. "I'd no idea you were leaving so soon as that."

"It does seem short," Elsie interrupted. "But won't it be a lovely trip when it does come? We're joining the boat at Havre, you know, uncle; and then we go down the coast of Spain. I've never seen Spain before. And then on to Teneriffe and Dakar — fancy seeing Africa! I never thought I'd get as far as that."

"Neither did I," Sir Clinton admitted, with an assumption of cheerfulness so good that it deceived his niece. "And then?"

"Oh, Rio. You know, the place where the armadillos come from. You used to make me sing 'Roll down, roll down to Rio' when you gave me the 'Just-So Stories,' you remember, long ago; and I used to wish I could roll to Rio. I was only about six then, wasn't I?"

"About that, I suppose."

"And then Santos, Montevideo, and Buenos Ayres,"

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Elsie wound up, disregarding him. "I've looked it all up in the atlas, you know, uncle. What a trip!"

Sir Clinton agreed with a gesture.

"If I had the time, I'd go out with you and have a look round myself. Nice to see you settled down in your own house."

"I wish you could," Elsie exclaimed. "Oh, uncle, now you're out of the police, couldn't you manage it?"

Sir Clinton saw from the tone of her voice that, although he might have dropped into the second place in her life, he still had his full share of her affection. Quite obviously, she was eager to see him come out. The tail of his eye swept round to Francia's face in time to catch a totally different feeling displayed there. It was a mere fleeting expression, but Sir Clinton saw it clearly enough before it was suppressed.

"Can't be done, I'm afraid, Elsie," he said regretfully. "I'll have my work cut out for me this year in getting to know my way about the estate business. I'm new to it, you know."

Elsie's face betrayed her disappointment.

"Then you'll come out later on," she decided.

A mischievous expression crossed her face.

"What a pity you can't come. You'd have been such company for Estelle."

"What's Estelle got to do with it?" Sir Clinton demanded.

Estelle Scotswood was one of Elsie's oldest friends, and in the days when the two children had been almost inseparable, Sir Clinton had been elected to the post of Estelle's "Honorary Uncle." The honorary uncleship had its perquisites later when Estelle grew up into a tall, graceful girl who was never bored when taken out to dinner or to a theatre.

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"It was Vincent who suggested it," Elsie explained. "He said he was afraid I might be lonely, going away out yonder, at first."

Francia nodded gravely to Sir Clinton as though in confirmation.

"A new country, new faces, a new language," he said, "it might be rather trying at first if one had no friend at hand. So I thought."

"And so we're taking Estelle out with us, and she'll stay with me for a couple of months. Wasn't it nice of Vincent to think of it? Of course, we're paying Estelle's passage, as she's our guest. She's tremendously keen to come; and it'll be so nice to have her there, instead of starting off with no friends at all. Won't it?"

A weight fell from Sir Clinton's mind when he heard the plan. Elsie couldn't have picked a better companion than Estelle; and it was a relief to know that she wouldn't be landed out in Buenos Ayres with not a soul she knew, except her husband, on the whole western continent. Estelle would bridge the gap until Elsie picked up some acquaintances. He had to admit to himself that Francia had shown thoughtfulness for which Elsie had praised him. An idea of that sort needed some sympathetic imagination to produce it. And there was a certain amount of sacrifice involved as well. Most men would shrink from having a friend of their wife's planted on them for a couple of months immediately after marriage and before there had been time for the inevitable adjustments which marriage brings in its train.

Before he could answer his niece, however, there came an interruption. The figure of the table-maid came across the lawn towards their group; and as she drew near Sir Clinton saw that her face was white.

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"Sergeant Ledbury's in the smoking-room, sir," she said, addressing Francia. "He's called about a motor-car, he says. And," she added, turning to Sir Clinton with a look of appeal in her eyes, "he says he's heard that you're here; and he'd be very glad if you could spare time to have a word with him."

Francia was evidently taken by surprise.

"What can he want to see me about?" he asked.

"A motor-car was what he said, sir."

Sir Clinton dismissed the maid.

"We'd better see what it's all about," he suggested quietly.

He was careful to betray no hint that he had any clue in the matter. Francia looked doubtful, and a puzzled expression passed over his face as he offered Elsie his excuses for leaving her. Sir Clinton said nothing; but the unspoken message in his glance served to reassure his niece as they left her and turned towards the house.

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CHAPTER IV: ACCIDENT OR HOMICIDE?

SERGEANT LEDBURY proved to be a burly, red-moustached man whose general air of dullness was curiously belied by the sharpness of his rather small and close-set eyes. Sir Clinton, after a shrewd glance of inspection, inclined to the view that the dullness was wilful rather than natural; and he waited with some interest to see if his inference would prove accurate.

"You're Sir Clinton Driffield, sir?" Ledbury inquired respectfully as they came into the room. "And this will be Mr. Francia, I suppose? Just so."

Sir Clinton nodded; and the sergeant subjected both of them to a polite but detailed scrutiny, as though he had not quite decided what to say next and was merely occupying his eyes while he turned over his phrases in his mind.

"I've called about your motor-car, sir," he explained, turning to Francia. "Isn't it a grey two-seater Alvis with the number JX. 7079?"

The sergeant's query stirred Sir Clinton's recollections. He recalled that Johnnie had drawn attention to the absence of Francia's car from the garage that morning; and this linked itself in his mind with the two-seater which had played a part in the affair by the roadside on the previous night. Though apparently indifferent, he was watching Francia keenly; and he detected a fleeting expression of surprise and uneasiness on the face of the Argentiner when the sergeant put his question.

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"Yes," Francia admitted, "that is a description of my car."

The sergeant waited for a moment, evidently in the hope that Francia might be drawn into something further if he were given time; but, finding that nothing was volunteered, he assumed an expression of condolence.

"I'm sorry to say, sir, that it's met with an accident. The radiator's smashed and one of the wheels is badly buckled. You weren't driving it yourself, of course?"

Sir Clinton mentally gave the sergeant a good mark. Ledbury knew, of course, that Quevedo had been driving the car and had been killed; but in all probability he had ascertained from the servants that Francia was still in ignorance of the tragedy; and he was keeping this card up his sleeve until the proper moment arrived for playing it. Evidently the sergeant believed in giving himself every chance of eliciting information before he was forced to be frank himself.

The effect of the news upon Francia was what might have been expected from any man who learns that he has had a valuable car smashed up.

"That *is* a bad business," he ejaculated. "I hope no one was hurt?"

Ledbury's face showed that his hand was being forced.

"Well, sir," he said, "might I ask who was driving your car last night? I take it that it hasn't been stolen."

"No," Francia admitted, after a pause so slight that it might easily have passed unnoticed, "it wasn't stolen. I lent it to an acquaintance of mine. He had to get to London in a hurry, and he borrowed it."

"Ah, just so," said Ledbury, producing a notebook.

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"I'll take the particulars, sir, if you don't mind. One likes to have things ship-shape, and I never trust my memory. Now, would you let me have the name of the driver?"

"Quevedo is his name—Pedro Quevedo."

Ledbury, slightly accentuating the dullness of his expression, requested Francia to spell the name, and then took it down in his notebook after laboriously moistening the tip of his pencil.

"Pedro Quevedo," he said at last ruminatively. A friend of yours, sir, I suppose?"

"An acquaintance," Francia amended.

"Ah, just so," Ledbury corrected himself. "An acquaintance."

He moistened his pencil once more and made a note. Sir Clinton watched him amusedly. He was afraid that the sergeant was overdoing things a little; but possibly a foreigner might not see through the acting. As Ledbury looked up from his notebook, Sir Clinton glanced at him with a twinkle in his eye; but the sergeant stared owlishly at him with no answering flicker in his face.

"An acquaintance?" he repeated heavily. "You didn't know him long, then?"

Francia shook his head definitely.

"I met him on the ship coming from Buenos Ayres." Sir Clinton was following the interview with a certain mild amusement. Quite obviously, Francia had made up his mind to volunteer no information; and the sergeant was finding his task more difficult than he had expected.

"I thought perhaps you might have had some information about him," Ledbury confessed, with an air of disappointment. "You see, sir, in this country one

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doesn't lend one's car to chance acquaintances. It's not usual."

Again there was an almost undetectable pause before Francia replied.

"I think I had better be quite clear," he suggested. "Mr. Quevedo was not a friend of mine, you understand? But we had some business dealings — private business transactions — and naturally I went, perhaps, a little out of my way to oblige him in the matter of the car. A business acquaintance, that is how I should describe him."

"Quite so," Ledbury answered, as though the point had been cleared up to his satisfaction. "I quite see how it is, sir. You'll have his home address — I mean, his business premises in America — of course?"

This time the pause was a shade longer than before.

"No," Francia said, at last, "I don't remember it. I had his address in London at one time. But when he came down here to stay at the Black Bull Hotel, I threw his London address into the wastepaper-basket — having no further need of it — and I cannot recall it now."

At this answer, the sergeant's face brightened slightly. The information seemed to have taken a weight off his mind.

"I see, sir," he said briskly. "This Mr. Quevedo, then, was nobody of much interest to you personally? That's all the better; for I'm sorry to say he was killed in this motor-smash. Very sad, isn't it?" he added perfunctorily.

Sir Clinton, knowing that this revelation was bound to come sooner or later, had kept his eyes on Francia's face; but the Argentiner betrayed no particular sorrow at the news of Quevedo's fate.

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"Very sad," he agreed, in an almost formal tone. "How did it happen?"

"A skid, sir. It took him smash into a stone wall. He's been badly cut about by the glass of the windscreen. Later on, perhaps, we'll need to ask you to identify him, just for form's sake, sir. But that won't be immediately."

Francia nodded as though agreeing to this.

"I'm quite at your service," he volunteered.

Then, as though a thought had struck him, he inquired:

"Was anyone else hurt in the accident?"

Ledbury shook his head.

"Nobody, sir."

He seemed to have elicited all that he wanted from Francia at the moment.

"I think that's all just now, sir. I'll let you know later on about the identification."

He turned to Sir Clinton, but seemed doubtful about dealing with him so long as Francia was present. Sir Clinton saw his difficulty and helped him out.

"I think you wanted to speak to me about something, sergeant? Right! Then I tell you what we can do. I've got my car in the garage, and I'll run you down to the village. Save you a bit of a walk, and you can do your talking in the car. That suit you?"

Ledbury accepted the invitation eagerly; and, taking leave of Francia, they walked round to the garage. As Sir Clinton drove down the short approach to the house, he turned to the sergeant.

"I don't know this neighbourhood — only arrived last night after dark. You'll need to pilot me."

Ledbury nodded.

"Turn to the left at the gate, sir, and then, if you

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don't mind, you might take the first on the left. The fact is, I'd like you to see the state of affairs with your own eyes; and then perhaps you'd be good enough to give me your advice. You've had experience, sir, and I'd be very glad if you'd give me the benefit of it."

Sir Clinton turned an innocent face to his passenger.

"Advice? What do you want advice for, sergeant? I gather a man's been knocked out in a car accident. Well, the coroner will have to look into it. You know the routine, surely?"

Ledbury fidgetted slightly in his seat before replying.

"It's not quite so simple as all that, sir."

Sir Clinton made no effort to restrain his smile.

"Ah, I see, sergeant," he suggested, "It's this murder case you have in your mind — Teddy Barford, I suppose?"

The sergeant was evidently taken aback.

"Well, you do seem to know more than one expects! It's what I'd heard about you, sir, if you don't mind my saying it. How . . ."

Sir Clinton had no desire to encourage a roving inquiry into the sources of his information. He changed the subject abruptly and decisively.

"You didn't say anything about a murder to Mr. Francia, I noticed?"

Ledbury seemed to take the hint.

"Well, sir," he explained, "when you're out to get all the information you can, it seems to me there's two ways of doing it. One's to pretend you know all about it before you start, and let on you can check every fact as it comes out. That wants a good bluffer to work it properly. Then there's the other way: to pretend you know nothing at all and take all you get as if it was a treat to get it. That's the sympathetic way, and the

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stupider you look while you're working it, the more you're likely to fish up. I'm more fitted to look stupid than to bluff well, sir; so I take the easiest line."

"Ah," commented Sir Clinton, "then that would account for the laborious pencil-licking and so forth, I take it?"

Ledbury recognised that he had met a kindred spirit.

"Just so, sir. It all helps, you see. When people see me licking away at my pencil, they put me down as a blank idiot, naturally; because anyone with a grain of common sense would sharpen the point before it got to that state. I've thought out one or two things of that sort: like scratching your ear as if you were puzzled, or breathing noisily, or losing your place in your note-book. It's easier to pretend that you're stupider than you are than that you're cleverer than you are."

"A bit involved, that last sentence. But I get a dim notion of your drift, I think. Now suppose, sergeant, that for a moment or two you contrive to be just as clever as you are, no more no less; and kindly tell me what it's all about."

The sergeant struggled for a moment with a nascent grin and succeeded in repressing it at last. Sir Clinton's reputation had led him to expect this kind of thing; and he was pleased to find himself ready for it.

"Turn to the left here, sir," he directed, as they came to a cross-road.

Sir Clinton obediently swung the car round; and as he came into the fresh road, he recognised that it was the one which had brought him into Raynham Parva on his arrival. The pine spinney on the left was where he had left Staffin with her suitcase. She had

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evidently sent him on a long wild-goose chase by her mis-directions.

"Well, sergeant?" he prompted.

"This is what happened, sir. About a quarter to one this morning, Constable Peel was cycling home along this road a bit farther up — coming in this direction. He'd been out to some spree or other; — he's young and unmarried — and he'd stayed pretty late. Of course he was off duty."

"It sounds like it. Go on."

"He was pedalling along, not expecting anything on the road at that hour of the morning; and he'd come within a few hundred yards of the lodge gate of Screvesby Manor. There's a stone wall on each side of the road there, sir, with a deepish ditch."

Sir Clinton nodded as though accepting information; but he had no difficulty in recalling the long high wall past which he had driven on the previous night.

"He turned a corner, sir," the sergeant continued, "and in front of him was the glare of a motor's headlights. He expected it to be down on him in a second or two; but it turned out that the car was standing; so he cycled along towards it. By the time he came level with it, he was pretty dazzled by the lights, but as he passed the car, he saw it was empty and the door was open. Then, a few yards farther down the road, he made out — after he got his eyes free from the glare of the lamps — something big on one side of the road, and somebody standing beside it."

"Was that near the lodge gate?" Sir Clinton demanded.

"A couple of hundred yards on the other side of it

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from here," Ledbury explained. "You'll see it all for yourself in a few minutes, sir."

Sir Clinton nodded, and the sergeant went on with his tale.

"When Peel got his eyes a bit undazzled, he made out that the thing in the ditch was a car, pretty badly smashed up. So he got off his bike and wheeled it over to where the man was standing. Peel recognised him, of course, at the first look. It was Teddy Barford. So Peel, not rightly understanding what was afoot, spoke up and asked Teddy what it was all about and if anyone was hurt in the smash. Meanwhile, he was peering about as best he could with his dazzled eyes, trying to see for himself. I always keep one eye shut myself, when I'm passing motor-lights; but Peel never thinks to do a simple thing like that."

Sir Clinton had a suspicion that Constable Peel was not altogether a favourite with his superior.

"Teddy Barford looked a bit taken aback, it seems, when he saw Peel," the sergeant proceeded. "He's rather a rough-spoken man when he's angry, and I gather he asked Peel what the hell he was doing there — or words to that effect," Ledbury added hurriedly. "It sounds as if he'd been a bit surprised by Peel turning up like that — hadn't noticed him coming up, I expect. Anyhow, Peel pushed past him and looked at the smash-up; and there was the body of a man lying in the ditch, and a lot of stuff that Peel took to be blood. So Peel laid down his bike and had a good look at things. It seems the poor chap was a deader — complete — but quite warm. Knocked out only a few minutes before, by the look of things."

Ledbury paused for a moment, as though his last words had completed one section of his narrative.

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"Peel climbed out of the ditch, after he'd seen all he could see with the help of his bicycle lamp; and then it seems to have struck him that Teddy Barford wasn't doing overmuch to help in the affair. He'd had a good look at the deceased's face; but it was so cut about with the glass of the windscreen that he made very little of it. So he turned to Teddy and asked if he knew who it was. Teddy glowered at him and said: 'Yes, it's that swine Quevedo. That settles the score I had against him.' And a few more things that showed there'd been bad blood between 'em. Peel pricked up his ears at that."

"Death settles most scores," Sir Clinton commented, with wilful sententiousness.

Ledbury glanced round as though he detected something more in the phrase than appeared on the surface.

"Just so, sir," he agreed. "It might mean that. But Peel, being one of those young fellows that's keen on promotion and getting their names into the papers, didn't quite take that out of it all. There'd been a bit of talk about the place lately about Teddy Barford having his nose put out of joint by Quevedo over some girl or other; and Peel, putting one thing to another, made up his mind that likely enough Teddy Barford had lost his temper and gone for Quevedo. Peel's got one of these leaping intellects, sir, that don't seem to need to wait for evidence before they get set like a bit of concrete."

Sir Clinton smiled covertly at this further revelation of Ledbury's distaste for his subordinate.

"Some people go one way to the truth, others go another, you know, sergeant. It takes all kinds to make a world."

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Ledbury stared suspiciously at his companion. This flood of platitude was hardly in keeping with his preconceived opinion of Sir Clinton.

"Ah, just so," he admitted grudgingly, after a slight pause. "Well, the end of it was, he asked Teddy if he'd any objection to being searched — just as a kind of guarantee of good faith, or something of that sort. And Teddy Barford was so mad at the notion, that he fairly damned Peel's eyes for him — just as I expect I'd have done myself in his place. That made Peel more set on his notions than ever, of course. He's one of these obstinate fellows — you know, sir. And the upshot of it was that he arrested Teddy Barford there and then for murder. No warrant, of course, and no evidence worth a hen's whistle."

His face showed clearly enough what he thought of the affair. Sir Clinton made no comment; and the sergeant, after waiting for one, decided to go on with his story.

"He made Teddy take his bike into the car as well as himself, and then they drove into Raynham Parva and got me roused up. By that time, Teddy Barford had got cooled down a bit. He'd had time to think things over. So when I tackled him, he just said that he'd make no statement till he'd seen a solicitor. Wisest thing he could have done, of course; and I didn't dissuade him. If I'd thought it was murder, I'd have had a turn at him myself, to see if I could get him to talk. But the whole thing was obviously an ordinary motor-smash, from all I could get out of Peel. So I explained to Teddy Barford that he'd better let us lock him up for the rest of the night and it would be all right in the morning, no doubt. He'd sobered up

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a good bit, and he agreed to this. He knows he'll get a square deal from me."

"Humorous situation you all seem to have got into," Sir Clinton admitted. "And meanwhile the unfortunate dead man was left by the roadside to horrify the next passer-by?"

"No longer than I could help, sir. I got hold of another constable and sent him out with a waterproof sheet to make things decent, and gave him orders to stand by until he was relieved. Much better to leave things as they were until daylight, when we could see clearly."

"And then?"

"Well, of course, by breakfast-time, the whole place was buzzing with the news. I took Peel with me and went down to the smash-up. Once I'd had a look round in daylight, the thing was clear enough. It was just an ordinary motor-smash. The tracks are plain enough on the road. Quevedo's car had swerved, hit the ditch, half-overturned with the jerk. He'd gone clean through the windscreen and got frightfully cut about the face and neck by the glass. The car had brought up short against the stone wall — the radiator's crushed and the bonnet's all burst. Then, as the tracks show, Teddy Barford had come along behind in his car. His track overlies Quevedo's car-marks and travels on a bit beyond the place where Quevedo went into the ditch. There's no doubt he arrived after the smash. He pulled up at the sight of the wreck, got out, and walked back. And then Peel must have come down on top of him before he'd time to do much."

"Well, that sounds simple enough," Sir Clinton pointed out. "What am I doing here, if I may ask?"

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Ledbury grinned at the thrust.

"It's this way, sir," he explained. "The car's well enough known round here. We've all seen Mr. Francia and his wife driving it. So we had to inquire about it, anyhow, in case it had been stolen by Quevedo, or anything of that sort. And we had to let the owner know it had got into a smash. Well, you'd hardly believe it, sir, but even after I'd shown Peel the track of Teddy Barford's wheels overlying those of Quevedo's car, he still stuck to it that it was a murder case. He's got his knife into Teddy hard. They never liked each other; and now, what with a chance of a bit of notoriety and a chance of paying off scores, Peel's that obstinate that he won't give in he's wrong. Now I want to let Teddy Barford out as quick as may be, for the whole thing's a mare's nest. But Peel's obstinate; and he's been as near insolent as he dares be about my 'favouring the escape of a criminal' — that's his way of putting it."

To Ledbury's astonishment, Sir Clinton interjected a question which suggested that his mind was wandering from the main track.

"What sort of driver is Mr. Teddy Barford? A good one?"

"Oh, quite good," the sergeant admitted in a puzzled tone. "He drives hard, but I never knew him to come near an accident for all that. He's no patience, Teddy though. I've often had a lift in his car; and when he starts off, it fairly jerks the inside out of you."

"Let's the clutch in with a bang, you mean?"

"Just so, sir. Makes the car jump about two feet as it gets off the mark. Cruel on the machinery, sir."

"Sorry I interrupted," Sir Clinton apologised. "Go

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on with the story. I'm still unable to see why I'm here."

"Well, it's this way, sir. Peel wouldn't give way and nothing I could say to him would shift him from his notions. So at last I said to him: 'There's no use our arguing this thing up and down any more. You say it's a murder done by Teddy Barford. I say it's just a plain motor-smash. Suppose we call in an umpire to settle it one way or the other?' You see, I'd got word you were coming down to stay at Fern Lodge, sir. So I said to him: 'You've heard of Sir Clinton Driffield that's just retired from the Police? You're so keen on the papers that you must have seen that and know all about him. What about asking him to settle who's right? You won't go against his opinion, will you? Nor I, either.' Well, Peel hummed and hawed, but at last he had to give in. 'You'll never get him to come,' he said. 'If he's the sort of person I've heard he is,' I said, 'he won't refuse. And I'll go up now and fetch him if he'll come. You wait here and see no one stands round gaping. And keep your mouth shut,' I said to him as I went off. And I left him thinking."

"You didn't leave me much chance of refusing, did you?" Sir Clinton pointed out, with a smile. "Well, if it's really going to be of any help to you, it's very little trouble to me. But I must have a look round, you know. I can't hazard an opinion on second-hand evidence in a matter of importance."

"Of course, sir. That's understood. And it's very good of you to fall in with the idea, sir. Peel won't have a word to say if you agree with me."

"And if I happen to agree with Peel, by any chance?"

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