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# THE LODGER

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**THE CHINK IN THE ARMOUR**

# THE LODGER

BY

MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES

AUTHOR OF "THE CHINK IN THE ARMOUR" ETC.

"LOVER AND FRIEND HAST THOU PUT FAR FROM ME,  
AND MINE ACQUAINTANCE INTO DARKNESS."

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# THE LODGER

## CHAPTER I

**R**OBERT BUNTING and Ellen his wife sat before their dully burning, carefully-banked-up fire.

The room, especially when it be known that it was part of a house standing in a grimy, if not exactly sordid, London thoroughfare, was exceptionally clean and well-cared-for. A casual stranger, more particularly one of a superior class to their own, on suddenly opening the door of that sitting-room, would have thought that Mr. and Mrs. Bunting presented a very pleasant, cosy picture of comfortable married life. Bunting, who was leaning back in a deep leather arm-chair, was clean-shaven and dapper, still in appearance what he had been for many years of his life—a self-respecting man-servant.

On his wife, now sitting up in an uncomfortable straight-backed chair, the marks of past servitude were less apparent; but they were there all the same—in her neat black stuff dress, and in her scrupulously clean, plain collar and cuffs. Mrs. Bunting, as a single woman, had been what is known as a useful maid.

But peculiarly true of average English life is the time-worn English proverb as to appearances being deceitful. Mr. and Mrs. Bunting were sitting in a very nice room, and in their time—how long ago it now seemed!—both husband and wife had been proud of their carefully chosen belongings. Everything in the room was strong and substantial, and each article of furniture had been bought at a well-conducted auction held in a private house.

Thus the red damask curtains which now shut out the fog-laden, drizzling atmosphere of the Marylebone Road, had cost a mere song, and yet they might have been warranted to last another thirty years. A great bargain also had been the excellent Axminster carpet which covered the floor; as, again, the arm-chair in which Bunting now sat forward, staring into the dull, small fire. In fact, that arm-chair had been an extravagance of Mrs. Bunting. She had wanted her husband to be comfortable after the day's work was done, and she had paid thirty-seven shillings for the chair. Only yesterday Bunting had tried to find a purchaser for it, but the man who had come to look at it, guessing their cruel necessities, had only offered them twelve shillings and sixpence for it; so for the present they were keeping their arm-chair.

But man and woman want something more than mere material comfort, much as that is valued by the Buntings of this world. So, on the walls of the sitting-room, hung neatly framed if now rather faded photographs—photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting's various former employers, and of the pretty country houses in which they had separately lived during the

long years they had spent in a not unhappy servitude.

But appearances were not only deceitful, they were more than usually deceitful with regard to these unfortunate people. In spite of their good furniture—that substantial outward sign of respectability which is the last thing which wise folk who fall into trouble try to dispose of—they were almost at the end of their tether. Already they had learnt to go hungry, and they were beginning to learn to go cold. Tobacco, the last thing the sober man forgoes among his comforts, had been given up some time ago by Bunting. And even Mrs. Bunting—prim, prudent, careful woman as she was in her way—had realised what this must mean to him. So well, indeed, had she understood that some days back she had crept out and bought him a packet of Virginia.

Bunting had been touched—touched as he had not been for years by any woman's thought and love for him. Painful tears had forced themselves into his eyes, and husband and wife had both felt, in their odd, unemotional way, moved to the heart.

Fortunately he never guessed—how could he have guessed, with his slow, normal, rather dull mind?—that his poor Ellen had since more than once bitterly regretted that fourpence-ha'penny, for they were now very near the soundless depths which divide those who dwell on the safe tableland of security—those, that is, who are sure of making a respectable, if not a happy, living—and the submerged multitude who, through some lack in themselves, or owing to the conditions under which our strange civilisation has become

organised, struggle rudderless till they die in work-house, hospital, or prison.

Had the Buntings been in a class lower than their own, had they belonged to the great company of human beings technically known to so many of us as "the poor," there would have been friendly neighbours ready to help them, and the same would have been the case had they belonged to the class of smug, well-meaning, if unimaginative, folk whom they had spent so much of their lives in serving.

There was only one person in the world who might possibly be brought to help them. That was an aunt of Bunting's first wife. With this woman, the widow of a man who had been well-to-do, lived Daisy, Bunting's only child by his first wife, and during the last long two days he had been trying to make up his mind to write to the old lady, and that though he suspected that she would almost certainly retort with a cruel, sharp rebuff.

As to their few acquaintances, former fellow-servants, and so on, they had gradually fallen out of touch with them. There was but one friend who often came to see them in their deep trouble. This was a young fellow named Chandler, under whose grandfather Bunting had been footman years and years ago. Joe Chandler had never gone into service; he was attached to the police; in fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, young Chandler was a detective.

When they had first taken the house which had brought them, so they both thought, such bad luck, Bunting had encouraged the young chap to come often, for his tales were well worth listening to—quite

exciting at times. But now poor Bunting didn't want to hear that sort of stories—stories of people being cleverly “ nabbed,” or stupidly allowed to escape the fate they always, from Chandler's point of view, richly deserved.

But Joe still came very faithfully once or twice a week, so timing his calls that neither host nor hostess need press food upon him—nay, more, he had done that which showed him to have a good and feeling heart. He had offered his father's old acquaintance a loan, and Bunting, at last, had taken 30s. Very little of that money now remained: Bunting still could jingle a few coppers in his pocket, and Mrs. Bunting had 2s. 9d.; that, and the rent they would have to pay in five weeks, was all they had left. Everything of the light, portable sort that would fetch money had been sold. Mrs. Bunting had a fierce horror of the pawnshop. She had never put her feet in such a place, and she declared she never would—she would rather starve first.

But she had said nothing when there had occurred the gradual disappearance of various little possessions she knew that Bunting valued, notably of the old-fashioned gold watch-chain which had been given to him after the death of his first master, a master he had nursed faithfully and kindly through a long and terrible illness. There had also vanished a twisted gold tie-pin, and a large mourning ring, both gifts of former employers.

When people are living near that deep pit which divides the secure from the insecure—when they see themselves creeping closer and closer to its dread

edge—they are apt, however loquacious by nature, to fall into long silences. Bunting had always been a talker, but now he talked no more. Neither did Mrs. Bunting, but then she had always been a silent woman, and that was perhaps one reason why Bunting had felt drawn to her from the very first moment he had seen her.

It had fallen out in this way. A lady had just engaged him as butler, and he had been shown, by the man whose place he was to take, into the dining-room. There, to use his own expression, he had discovered Ellen Green, carefully pouring out the glass of port wine which her then mistress always drank at 11.30 every morning. And as he, the new butler, had seen her engaged in this task, as he had watched her carefully stopper the decanter and put it back into the old wine-cooler, he had said to himself, "That is the woman for me!"

But now her stillness, her—her dumbness, had got on the unfortunate man's nerves. He no longer felt like going into the various little shops close by, patronised by him in more prosperous days, and Mrs. Bunting also went afield to make the slender purchases which still had to be made every day or two, if they were to be saved from actually starving to death.

Suddenly, across the stillness of the dark November evening there came the muffled sounds of hurrying feet and of loud, shrill shouting outside—boys crying the late afternoon editions of the evening papers.

Bunting turned uneasily in his chair. The giving up of a daily paper had been, after his tobacco, his bitterest deprivation. And the paper was an older

habit than the tobacco, for servants are great readers of newspapers.

As the shouts came through the closed windows and the thick damask curtains, Bunting felt a sudden sense of mind hunger fall upon him.

It was a shame—a damned shame—that he shouldn't know what was happening in the world outside! Only criminals are kept from hearing news of what is going on beyond their prison walls. And those shouts, those hoarse, sharp cries must portend that something really exciting had happened, something warranted to make a man forget for the moment his own intimate, gnawing troubles.

He got up, and going towards the nearest window strained his ears to listen. There fell on them, emerging now and again from the confused babel of hoarse shouts, the one clear word "Murder!"

Slowly Bunting's brain pieced the loud, indistinct cries into some sort of connected order. Yes, that was it—"Horrible Murder! Murder at St. Pancras!" Bunting remembered vaguely another murder which had been committed near St. Pancras—that of an old lady by her servant-maid. It had happened a great many years ago, but was still vividly remembered, as of special and natural interest, among the class to which he had belonged.

The newsboys—for there were more than one of them, a rather unusual thing in the Marylebone Road—were coming nearer and nearer; now they had adopted another cry, but he could not quite catch what they were crying. They were still shouting hoarsely, excitedly, but he could only hear a word or

two now and then. Suddenly "The Avenger! The Avenger at his work again!" broke on his ear.

During the last fortnight four very curious and brutal murders had been committed in London and within a comparatively small area.

The first had aroused no special interest—even the second had only been awarded, in the paper Bunting was still then taking in, quite a small paragraph.

Then had come the third—and with that a wave of keen excitement, for pinned to the victim—a drunken woman's—dress had been found a three-cornered piece of paper, on which was written, in red ink, and in printed characters, the words,

" THE AVENGER "

It was then realised, not only by those whose business it is to investigate such terrible happenings, but also by the vast world of men and women who take an intelligent interest in such sinister mysteries, that the same miscreant had committed all three crimes; and before that extraordinary fact had had time to soak well into the public mind there took place yet another murder, and again the murderer had been to special pains to make it clear that some obscure and terrible lust for vengeance possessed him.

Now everyone was talking of The Avenger and his crimes! Even the man who left their ha'porth of milk at the door each morning had spoken to Bunting about them that very day.

Bunting came back to the fire and looked down at his wife with mild excitement. Then, seeing her pale,



apathetic face, her look of weary, mournful absorption, a wave of irritation swept through him. He felt he could have shaken her !

Ellen had hardly taken the trouble to listen when he, Bunting, had come back to bed that morning, and told her what the milkman had said. In fact, she had been quite nasty about it, intimating that she didn't like hearing about such horrid things.

It was a curious fact that though Mrs. Bunting enjoyed tales of pathos and sentiment, and would listen with frigid amusement to the details of a breach of promise action, she shrank from stories of immorality or of physical violence. In the old, happy days, when they could afford to buy a paper, aye, and more than one paper daily, Bunting had often had to choke down his interest in some exciting " case " or " mystery " which was affording him pleasant mental relaxation, because any allusion to it sharply angered Ellen.

But now he was at once too dull and too miserable to care how she felt.

Walking away from the window he took a slow, uncertain step towards the door ; when there he turned half round, and there came over his close-shaven, round face the rather sly, pleading look with which a child about to do something naughty glances at its parent.

But Mrs. Bunting remained quite still ; her thin, narrow shoulders just showed above the back of the chair on which she was sitting, bolt upright, staring before her as if into vacancy.

Bunting turned round, opened the door, and quickly he went out into the dark hall—they had given up

lighting the gas there some time ago—and opened the front door. . . .

Walking down the small flagged path outside, he flung open the iron gate which gave on to the damp pavement. But there he hesitated. The coppers in his pocket seemed to have shrunk in number, and he remembered ruefully how far Ellen could make even four pennies go.

Then a boy ran up to him with a sheaf of evening papers, and Bunting, being sorely tempted—fell. "Give me a *Sun*," he said roughly, "*Sun* or *Echo*!"

But the boy, scarcely stopping to take breath, shook his head. "Only penny papers left," he gasped. "What'll yer 'ave, sir?"

With an eagerness which was mingled with shame, Bunting drew a penny out of his pocket and took a paper—it was the *Evening Standard*—from the boy's hand.

Then, very slowly, he shut the gate and walked back through the raw, cold air, up the flagged path, shivering yet full of eager, joyful anticipation.

Thanks to that penny he had just spent so recklessly he would pass a happy hour, taken, for once, out of his anxious, despondent, miserable self. It irritated him shrewdly to know that these moments of respite from carking care would not be shared with his poor wife, with careworn, troubled Ellen.

A hot wave of unease, almost of remorse, swept over Bunting. Ellen would never have spent that penny on herself—he knew that well enough—and if it hadn't been so cold, so foggy, so—so drizzly, he would have gone out again through the gate and stood under the street lamp to take his pleasure. He dreaded with a

nervous dread the glance of Ellen's cold, reproving light-blue eye. That glance would tell him that he had had no business to waste a penny on a paper, and that well he knew it!

Suddenly the door in front of him opened, and he heard a familiar voice saying crossly, yet anxiously, "What on earth are you doing out there, Bunting? Come in—do! You'll catch your death of cold! I don't want to have you ill on my hands as well as everything else!" Mrs. Bunting rarely uttered so many words at once nowadays.

He walked in through the front door of his cheerless house. "I went out to get a paper," he said sullenly.

After all, he was master. He had as much right to spend the money as she had; for the matter of that the money on which they were now both living had been lent, nay, pressed on him—not on Ellen—by that decent young chap, Joe Chandler. And he, Bunting, had done all he could; he had pawned everything he could pawn, while Ellen, so he resentfully noticed, still wore her wedding ring.

He stepped past her heavily, and though she said nothing, he knew she grudged him his coming joy. Then, full of rage with her and contempt for himself, and giving himself the luxury of a mild, a very mild, oath—Ellen had very early made it clear she would have no swearing in her presence—he lit the hall gas full-flare.

"How can we hope to get lodgers if they can't even see the card?" he shouted angrily.

And there was truth in what he said, for now that he had lit the gas, the oblong card, though not the

word "Apartments" printed on it, could be plainly seen outlined against the old-fashioned fanlight above the front door.

Bunting went into the sitting-room, silently followed by his wife, and then, sitting down in his nice arm-chair, he poked the little banked-up fire. It was the first time Bunting had poked the fire for many a long day, and this exertion of marital authority made him feel better. A man has to assert himself sometimes, and he, Bunting, had not asserted himself enough lately.

A little colour came into Mrs. Bunting's pale face. She was not used to be flouted in this way. For Bunting, when not thoroughly upset, was the mildest of men.

She began moving about the room, flicking off an imperceptible touch of dust here, straightening a piece of furniture there.

But her hands trembled—they trembled with excitement, with self-pity, with anger. A penny? It was dreadful—dreadful to have to worry about a penny! But they had come to the point when one has to worry about pennies. Strange that her husband didn't realise that.

Bunting looked round once or twice; he would have liked to ask Ellen to leave off fidgeting, but he was fond of peace, and perhaps, by now, a little bit ashamed of himself, so he refrained from remark, and she soon gave over what irritated him of her own accord.

But Mrs. Bunting did not come and sit down as her husband would have liked her to do. The sight of him, absorbed in his paper as he was, irritated her, and made her long to get away from him. Opening the door which separated the sitting-room from the

bedroom behind, and—shutting out the aggravating vision of Bunting sitting comfortably by the now brightly burning fire, with the *Evening Standard* spread out before him—she sat down in the cold darkness, and pressed her hands against her temples.

Never, never had she felt so hopeless, so—so broken as now. Where was the good of having been an upright, conscientious, self-respecting woman all her life long, if it only led to this utter, degrading poverty and wretchedness? She and Bunting were just past the age which gentlefolk think proper in a married couple seeking to enter service together, unless, that is, the wife happens to be a professed cook. A cook and a butler can always get a nice situation. But Mrs. Bunting was no cook. She could do all right the simple things any lodger she might get would require, but that was all.

Lodgers? How foolish she had been to think of taking lodgers! For it had been her doing. Bunting had been like butter in her hands.

Yet they had begun well, with a lodging-house in a seaside place. There they had prospered, not as they had hoped to do, but still pretty well; and then had come an epidemic of scarlet fever, and that had meant ruin for them, and for dozens, nay, hundreds, of other luckless people. Then had followed a business experiment which had proved even more disastrous, and which had left them in debt—in debt to an extent they could never hope to repay, to a good-natured former employer.

After that, instead of going back to service, as they might have done, perhaps, either together or separ-

ately, they had made up their minds to make one last effort, and they had taken over, with the trifle of money that remained to them, the lease of this house in the Marylebone Road.

In former days, when they had each been leading the sheltered, impersonal, and, above all, financially easy existence which is the compensation life offers to those men and women who deliberately take upon themselves the yoke of domestic service, they had both lived in houses overlooking Regent's Park. It had seemed a wise plan to settle in the same neighbourhood, the more so that Bunting, who had a good appearance, had retained the kind of connection which enables a man to get a job now and again as waiter at private parties.

But life moves quickly, jaggedly, for people like the Buntings. Two of his former masters had moved to another part of London, and a caterer in Baker Street whom he had known went bankrupt.

And now? Well, just now Bunting could not have taken a job had one been offered him, for he had pawned his dress clothes. He had not asked his wife's permission to do this, as so good a husband ought to have done. He had just gone out and done it. And she had not had the heart to say anything; nay, it was with part of the money that he had handed her silently the evening he did it that she had bought that last packet of tobacco.

And then, as Mrs. Bunting sat there thinking these painful thoughts, there suddenly came to the front door the sound of a loud, tremulous, uncertain double knock.

## CHAPTER II

MRS. BUNTING jumped nervously to her feet. She stood for a moment listening in the darkness, a darkness made the blacker by the line of light under the door behind which sat Bunting reading his paper.

And then it came again, that loud, tremulous, uncertain double knock; not a knock, so the listener told herself, that boded any good. Would-be lodgers gave sharp, quick, bold, confident raps. No; this must be some kind of beggar. The queerest people came at all hours, and asked—whining or threatening—for money.

Mrs. Bunting had had some sinister experiences with men and women—especially women—drawn from that nameless, mysterious class made up of the human flotsam and jetsam which drifts about every great city. But since she had taken to leaving the gas in the passage unlit at night she had been very little troubled with that kind of visitors, those human bats which are attracted by any kind of light, but leave alone those who live in darkness.

She opened the door of the sitting-room. It was Bunting's place to go to the front door, but she knew far better than he did how to deal with difficult or obtrusive callers. Still, somehow, she would have

liked him to go to-night. But Bunting sat on, absorbed in his newspaper; all he did at the sound of the bedroom door opening was to look up and say, "Didn't you hear a knock?"

Without answering his question she went out into the hall.

Slowly she opened the front door.

On the top of the three steps which led up to the door, there stood the long, lanky figure of a man, clad in an Inverness cape and an old-fashioned top hat. He waited for a few seconds blinking at her, perhaps dazzled by the light of the gas in the passage. Mrs. Bunting's trained perception told her at once that this man, odd as he looked, was a gentleman, belonging by birth to the class with whom her former employment had brought her in contact.

"Is it not a fact that you let lodgings?" he asked, and there was something shrill, unbalanced, hesitating, in his voice.

"Yes, sir," she said uncertainly—it was a long, long time since anyone had come after their lodgings, anyone, that is, that they could think of taking into their respectable house.

Instinctively she stepped a little to one side, and the stranger walked past her, and so into the hall.

And then, for the first time, Mrs. Bunting noticed that he held a narrow bag in his left hand. It was quite a new bag, made of strong brown leather.

"I am looking for some quiet rooms," he said; then he repeated the words, "quiet rooms," in a dreamy, absent way, and as he uttered them he looked nervously round him.



Then his sallow face brightened, for the hall had been carefully furnished, and was very clean.

There was a neat hat-and-umbrella stand, and the stranger's weary feet fell soft on a good, serviceable dark-red drugget, which matched in colour the flock-paper on the walls.

A very superior lodging-house this, and evidently a superior lodging-house keeper.

"You'd find my rooms quite quiet, sir," she said gently. "And just now I have four to let. The house is empty, save for my husband and me, sir."

Mrs. Bunting spoke in a civil, passionless voice. It seemed too good to be true, this sudden coming of a possible lodger, and of a lodger who spoke in the pleasant, courteous way and voice which recalled to the poor woman her happy, far-off days of youth and of security.

"That sounds very suitable," he said. "Four rooms? Well, perhaps I ought only to take two rooms, but, still, I should like to see all four before I make my choice."

"How fortunate, how very fortunate it was that Bunting had lit the gas! But for that circumstance this gentleman would have passed them by.

She turned towards the staircase, quite forgetting in her agitation that the front door was still open; and it was the stranger whom she already in her mind described as "the lodger," who turned and rather quickly walked down the passage and shut it.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry you should have had the trouble."

For a moment their eyes met. "It's not safe to leave a front door open in London," he said, rather

sharply. "I hope you do not often do that. It would be so easy for anyone to slip in."

Mrs. Bunting felt rather upset. The stranger had still spoken courteously, but he was evidently very much put out.

"I assure you, sir, I never leave my front door open," she answered hastily. "You needn't be at all afraid of that!"

And then, through the closed door of the sitting-room, came the sound of Bunting coughing—it was just a little, hard cough, but Mrs. Bunting's future lodger started violently.

"Who's that?" he said, putting out a hand and clutching her arm. "Whatever was that?"

"Only my husband, sir. He went out to buy a paper a few minutes ago, and the cold just caught him, I suppose."

"Your husband——?" he looked at her intently, suspiciously. "What—what, may I ask, is your husband's occupation?"

Mrs. Bunting drew herself up. The question as to Bunting's occupation was no one's business but theirs. Still, it wouldn't do for her to show offence. "He goes out waiting," she said stiffly. "He was a gentleman's servant, sir. He could, of course, valet you should you require him to do so."

And then she turned and led the way up the steep, narrow staircase.

At the top of the first flight of stairs was what Mrs. Bunting, to herself, called the drawing-room floor. It consisted of a sitting-room in front, and a bedroom behind.

She opened the door of the sitting-room and quickly lit the chandelier.

This front room was pleasant enough, though perhaps a little over-encumbered with furniture. Covering the floor was a green carpet simulating moss ; four chairs were placed round the table which occupied the exact middle of the apartment, and in the corner, opposite the door giving on to the landing, was a roomy, old-fashioned chiffonnier.

On the dark-green walls hung a series of eight engravings, portraits of early Victorian belles, clad in lace and tarletan ball dresses, clipped from an old Book of Beauty. Mrs. Bunting was very fond of these pictures ; she thought they gave the drawing-room a note of elegance and refinement.

As she hurriedly turned up the gas she was glad, glad indeed, that she had summoned up sufficient energy, two days ago, to give the room a thorough turn-out.

It had remained for a long time in the state in which it had been left by its last dishonest, dirty occupants when they had been scared into going away by Bunting's rough threats of the police. But now it was in apple-pie order, with one paramount exception, of which Mrs. Bunting was painfully aware. There were no white curtains to the windows, but that omission could soon be remedied if this gentleman really took the lodgings.

But what was this——? The stranger was looking round him rather dubiously. "This is rather—rather too grand for me," he said at last. "I should like to see your other rooms, Mrs.—er——"

"——Bunting," she said softly. "Bunting, sir."

And as she spoke the dark, heavy load of care again came down and settled on her sad, burdened heart. Perhaps she had been mistaken, after all—or rather, she had not been mistaken in one sense, but perhaps this gentleman was a poor gentleman—too poor, that is, to afford the rent of more than one room, say eight or ten shillings a week; eight or ten shillings a week would be very little use to her and Bunting, though better than nothing at all.

"Will you just look at the bedroom, sir?"

"No," he said, "no. I think I should like to see what you have farther up the house, Mrs. ——," and then, as if making a prodigious mental effort, he brought out her name, "Bunting," with a kind of gasp.

The two top rooms were, of course, immediately above the drawing-room floor. But they looked poor and mean, owing to the fact that they were bare of any kind of ornament. Very little trouble had been taken over their arrangement; in fact, they had been left in much the same condition as that in which the Buntings had found them.

For the matter of that, it is difficult to make a nice, genteel sitting-room out of an apartment of which the principal features are a sink and a big gas stove. The gas stove, of an obsolete pattern, was fed by a tiresome, shilling-in-the-slot arrangement. It had been the property of the people from whom the Buntings had taken over the lease of the house, who, knowing it to be of no monetary value, had thrown it in among the humble fittings they had left behind.

What furniture there was in the room was substantial

and clean, as everything belonging to Mrs. Bunting was bound to be, but it was a bare, uncomfortable-looking place, and the landlady now felt sorry that she had done nothing to make it appear more attractive.

To her surprise, however, her companion's dark, sensitive, hatchet-shaped face became irradiated with satisfaction. "Capital! Capital!" he exclaimed, for the first time putting down the bag he held at his feet, and rubbing his long, thin hands together with a quick, nervous movement.

"This is just what I have been looking for." He walked with long, eager strides towards the gas stove. "First-rate—quite first-rate! Exactly what I wanted to find! You must understand, Mrs.—er—Bunting, that I am a man of science. I make, that is, all sorts of experiments, and I often require the—ah, well, the presence of great heat."

He shot out a hand, which she noticed shook a little, towards the stove. "This, too, will be useful—exceedingly useful, to me," and he touched the edge of the stone sink with a lingering, caressing touch.

He threw his head back and passed his hand over his high, bare forehead; then, moving towards a chair, he sat down—wearily. "I'm tired," he muttered in a low voice, "tired—tired! I've been walking about all day, Mrs. Bunting, and I could find nothing to sit down upon. They do not put benches for tired men in the London streets. They do so on the Continent. In some ways they are far more humane on the Continent than they are in England, Mrs. Bunting."

"Indeed, sir," she said civilly; and then, after a

nervous glance, she asked the question of which the answer would mean so much to her, "Then you mean to take my rooms, sir?"

"This room, certainly," he said, looking round. "This room is exactly what I have been looking for, and longing for, the last few days;" and then hastily he added, "I mean this kind of place is what I have always wanted to possess, Mrs. Bunting. You would be surprised if you knew how difficult it is to get anything of the sort. But now my weary search has ended, and that is a relief—a very, very great relief to me!"

He stood up and looked round him with a dreamy, abstracted air. And then, "Where's my bag?" he asked suddenly, and there came a note of sharp, angry fear in his voice. He glared at the quiet woman standing before him, and for a moment Mrs. Bunting felt a tremor of fright shoot through her. It seemed a pity that Bunting was so far away, right down the house.

But Mrs. Bunting was aware that eccentricity has always been a perquisite, as it were the special luxury, of the well-born and of the well-educated. Scholars, as she well knew, are never quite like other people, and her new lodger was undoubtedly a scholar. "Surely I had a bag when I came in?" he said in a scared, troubled voice.

"Here it is, sir," she said soothingly, and, stooping, picked it up and handed it to him. And as she did so she noticed that the bag was not at all heavy; it was evidently by no means full.

He took it eagerly from her. "I beg your pardon,"

he muttered. "But there is something in that bag which is very precious to me—something I procured with infinite difficulty, and which I could never get again without running into great danger, Mrs. Bunting. That must be the excuse for my late agitation."

"About terms, sir?" she said a little timidly, returning to the subject which meant so much, so very much to her.

"About terms?" he echoed. And then there came a pause. "My name is Sleuth," he said suddenly,—*S-l-e-u-t-h*. Think of a hound, Mrs. Bunting, and you'll never forget my name. I could provide you with a reference——" (he gave her what she described to herself as a funny, sideways look), "but I should prefer you to dispense with that, if you don't mind. I am quite willing to pay you—well, shall we say a month in advance?"

A spot of red shot into Mrs. Bunting's cheeks. She felt sick with relief—nay, with a joy which was almost pain. She had not known till that moment how hungry she was—how eager for a good meal. "That would be all right, sir," she murmured.

"And what are you going to charge me?" There had come a kindly, almost a friendly note into his voice. "With attendance, mind! I shall expect you to give me attendance, and I need hardly ask if you can cook, Mrs. Bunting?"

"Oh, yes, sir," she said. "I am a plain cook. What would you say to twenty-five shillings a week, sir?" She looked at him deprecatingly, and as he did not answer she went on falteringly, "You see, sir, it may seem a good deal, but you would have the

best of attendance and careful cooking—and my husband, sir—he would be pleased to valet you.”

“ I shouldn’t want anything of that sort done for me,” said Mr. Sleuth hastily. “ I prefer looking after my own clothes. I am used to waiting on myself. But, Mrs. Bunting, I have a great dislike to sharing lodgings——”

She interrupted eagerly, “ I could let you have the use of the two floors for the same price—that is, until we get another lodger. I shouldn’t like you to sleep in the back room up here, sir. It’s such a poor little room. You could do as you say, sir—do your work and your experiments up here, and then have your meals in the drawing-room.”

“ Yes,” he said hesitatingly, “ that sounds a good plan. And if I offered you two pounds, or two guineas ? Might I then rely on your not taking another lodger ? ”

“ Yes,” she said quietly. “ I’d be very glad only to have you to wait on, sir.”

“ I suppose you have a key to the door of this room, Mrs. Bunting ? I don’t like to be disturbed while I’m working.”

He waited a moment, and then said again, rather urgently, “ I suppose you have a key to this door, Mrs. Bunting ? ”

“ Oh, yes, sir, there’s a key—a very nice little key. The people who lived here before had a new kind of lock put on to the door.” She went over, and throwing the door open, showed him that a round disc had been fitted above the old keyhole.

He nodded his head, and then, after standing silent a little, as if absorbed in thought, “ Forty-two shillings



a week? Yes, that will suit me perfectly. And I'll begin now by paying my first month's rent in advance. Now, four times forty-two shillings is"—he jerked his head back and stared at his new landlady; for the first time he smiled, a queer, wry smile—"why, just eight pounds eight shillings, Mrs. Bunting!"

He thrust his hand through into an inner pocket of his long cape-like coat and took out a handful of sovereigns. Then he began putting these down in a row on the bare wooden table which stood in the centre of the room. "Here's five—six—seven—eight—nine—ten pounds. You'd better keep the odd change, Mrs. Bunting, for I shall want you to do some shopping for me to-morrow morning. I met with a misfortune to-day." But the new lodger did not speak as if his misfortune, whatever it was, weighed on his spirits.

"Indeed, sir. I'm sorry to hear that." Mrs. Bunting's heart was going thump—thump—thump. She felt extraordinarily moved, dizzy with relief and joy.

"Yes, a very great misfortune! I lost my luggage, the few things I managed to bring away with me." His voice dropped suddenly. "I shouldn't have said that," he muttered. "I was a fool to say that!" Then, more loudly, "Someone said to me, 'You can't go into a lodging-house without any luggage. They wouldn't take you in.' But *you* have taken me in, Mrs. Bunting, and I'm grateful for—for the kind way you have met me—" He looked at her feelingly, appealingly, and Mrs. Bunting was touched. She was beginning to feel very kindly towards her new lodger.

"I hope I know a gentleman when I see one," she said, with a break in her staid voice.

"I shall have to see about getting some clothes to-morrow, Mrs. Bunting." Again he looked at her appealingly.

"I expect you'd like to wash your hands now, sir. And would you tell me what you'd like for supper? We haven't much in the house."

"Oh, anything'll do," he said hastily. "I don't want you to go out for me. It's a cold, foggy, wet night, Mrs. Bunting. If you have a little bread-and-butter and a cup of milk I shall be quite satisfied."

"I have a nice sausage," she said hesitatingly.

It was a very nice sausage, and she had bought it that same morning for Bunting's supper; as to herself, she had been going to content herself with a little bread and cheese. But now—wonderful, almost, intoxicating thought—she could send Bunting out to get anything they both liked. The ten sovereigns lay in her hand full of comfort and good cheer.

"A sausage? No, I fear that will hardly do. I never touch flesh meat," he said; "it is a long, long time since I tasted a sausage, Mrs. Bunting."

"Is it indeed, sir?" She hesitated a moment, then asked stiffly, "And will you be requiring any beer, or wine, sir?"

A strange, wild look of lowering wrath suddenly filled Mr. Sleuth's pale face.

"Certainly not. I thought I had made that quite clear, Mrs. Bunting. I had hoped to hear that you were an abstainer——"

"So I am, sir, lifelong. And so's Bunting been

since we married." She might have said, had she been a woman given to make such confidences, that she had made Bunting abstain very early in their acquaintance. That he had given in about that had been the thing that first made her believe that he was sincere in all the nonsense that he talked to her, in those far-away days of his courting. Glad she was now that he had taken the pledge as a younger man; but for that nothing would have kept him from the drink during the bad times they had gone through.

And then, going downstairs, she showed Mr. Sleuth the nice bedroom which opened out of the drawing-room. It was a replica of Mrs. Bunting's own room just underneath, excepting that everything up here had cost just a little more, and was therefore rather better in quality.

The new lodger looked round him with such a strange expression of content and peace stealing over his worn face. "A haven of rest," he muttered; and then, "'He bringeth them to their desired haven.' Beautiful words, Mrs. Bunting."

"Yes, sir."

Mrs. Bunting felt a little startled. It was the first time anyone had quoted the Bible to her for many a long day. But it seemed to set the seal, as it were, on Mr. Sleuth's respectability.

What a comfort it was, too, that she had to deal with only one lodger, and that a gentleman, instead of with a married couple! Very peculiar married couples had drifted in and out of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting's lodgings, not only here, in London, but at the seaside. . . .

How unlucky they had been, to be sure! Since they had come to London not a single pair of lodgers had been even moderately respectable and kindly. The last lot had belonged to that horrible underworld of men and women who, having, as the phrase goes, seen better days, now only keep their heads above water with the help of petty fraud.

"I'll bring you up some hot water in a minute, sir, and some clean towels," she said, going to the door.

And then Mr. Sleuth turned quickly round. "Mrs. Bunting"—and as he spoke he stammered a little—"I—I don't want you to interpret the word attendance too liberally. You need not run yourself off your feet for me. I'm accustomed to look after myself."

And, queerly, uncomfortably, she felt herself dismissed—even a little snubbed. "All right, sir," she said. "I'll only just let you know when I've your supper ready."

### CHAPTER III

**B**UT what was a little snub compared with the intense relief and joy of going down and telling Bunting of the great piece of good fortune which had fallen their way ?

Staid Mrs. Bunting seemed to make but one leap down the steep stairs. In the hall, however, she pulled herself together, and tried to still her agitation. She had always disliked and despised any show of emotion ; she called such betrayal of feeling " making a fuss."

Opening the door of their sitting-room, she stood for a moment looking at her husband's bent back, and she realised, with a pang of pain, how the last few weeks had aged him.

Bunting suddenly looked round, and, seeing his wife, stood up. He put the paper he had been holding down on to the table : " Well," he said, " well, who was it, Ellen ? "

He felt rather ashamed of himself ; it was he who ought to have answered the door and done all that parleying of which he had heard murmurs.

And then in a moment his wife's hand shot out, and the ten sovereigns fell in a little clinking heap on the table.

" Look there ! " she whispered, with an excited, tearful quiver in her voice. " Look there, Bunting ! "

And Bunting did look there, but with a troubled, frowning gaze.

He was not quick-witted, but at once he jumped to the conclusion that his wife had just had in a furniture dealer, and that this ten pounds represented all their nice furniture upstairs. If that were so, then it was the beginning of the end. That furniture in the first-floor front had cost—Ellen had reminded him of the fact bitterly only yesterday—seventeen pounds nine shillings, and every single item had been a bargain. It was too bad that she had only got ten pounds for it.

Yet he hadn't the heart to reproach her.

He did not speak as he looked across at her, and meeting that troubled, rebuking glance, she guessed what it was that he thought had happened.

"We've a new lodger!" she cried. "And—and, Bunting? He's quite the gentleman! He actually offered to pay four weeks in advance, at two guineas a week."

"No, never!"

Bunting moved quickly round the table, and together they stood there, fascinated by the little heap of gold. "But there's ten sovereigns here," he said suddenly.

"Yes, the gentleman said I'd have to buy some things for him to-morrow. And, oh, Bunting, he's so well spoken, I really felt that—I really felt that——" and then Mrs. Bunting, taking a step or two sideways, sat down, and throwing her little black apron over her face burst into gasping sobs.

Bunting patted her back timidly. "Ellen?" he

said, much moved by her agitation, "Ellen? Don't take on so, my dear——"

"I won't," she sobbed, "I—I won't! I'm a fool—I know I am! But, oh, I didn't think we was ever going to have any luck again!"

And then she told him—or rather tried to tell him—what the lodger was like. Mrs. Bunting was no hand at talking, but one thing she did impress on her husband's mind, namely, that Mr. Sleuth was eccentric, as so many clever people are eccentric—that is, in a harmless way—and that he must be humoured.

"He says he doesn't want to be waited on much," she said at last, wiping her eyes, "but I can see he will want a good bit of looking after, all the same, poor gentleman."

And just as the words left her mouth there came the unfamiliar sound of a loud ring. It was that of the drawing-room bell being pulled again and again.

Bunting looked at his wife eagerly. "I think I'd better go up, eh, Ellen?" he said. He felt quite anxious to see their new lodger. For the matter of that, it would be a relief to be doing something again.

"Yes," she answered, "you go up! Don't keep him waiting! I wonder what it is he wants? I said I'd let him know when his supper was ready."

A moment later Bunting came down again. There was an odd smile on his face. "Whatever d'you think he wanted?" he whispered mysteriously. And as she said nothing, he went on, "He's asked me for the loan of a Bible!"

"Well, I don't see anything so out of the way in that," she said hastily, "'specially if he don't feel well. I'll take it up to him."

And, then, going to a small table which stood between the two windows, Mrs. Bunting took off it a large Bible, which had been given to her as a wedding present by a married lady with whose mother she had lived for several years.

"He said it would do quite well when you take up his supper," said Bunting; and, then, "Ellen? He's a queer-looking cove—not like any gentleman I ever had to do with."

"He *is* a gentleman," said Mrs. Bunting rather fiercely.

"Oh, yes, that's all right." But still he looked at her doubtfully. "I asked him if he'd like me to just put away his clothes. But, Ellen, he said he hadn't got any clothes!"

"No more he hasn't;" she spoke quickly, defensively. "He had the misfortune to lose his luggage. He's one dishonest folk 'ud take advantage of."

"Yes, one can see that with half an eye," Bunting agreed.

And then there was silence for a few moments, while Mrs. Bunting put down on a little bit of paper the things she wanted her husband to go out and buy for her. She handed him the list, together with a sovereign. "Be as quick as you can," she said, "for I feel a bit hungry. I'll be going down now to see about Mr. Sleuth's supper. He only wants a glass of milk and two eggs. I'm glad I've never fallen to bad eggs!"



"Sleuth," echoed Bunting, staring at her. "What a queer name! How d'you spell it—S-l-u-t-h?"

"No," she shot out, "S-l-e-u-t-h."

"Oh," he said doubtfully.

"He said, 'Think of a hound and you'll never forget my name,' " and Mrs. Bunting smiled.

When he got to the door, Bunting turned round: "We'll now be able to pay young Chandler back some o' that thirty shillings. I *am* glad."

She nodded; her heart, as the saying is, too full for words.

And then each went about his and her business—Bunting out into the drénching fog, his wife down to her cold kitchen.

The lodger's tray was soon ready; everything upon it nicely and daintily arranged. Mrs. Bunting knew how to wait upon a gentleman.

Just as the landlady was going up the kitchen stair, she suddenly remembered Mr. Sleuth's request for a Bible. Putting the tray down in the hall, she went into her sitting-room and took up the Book; but when back in the hall she hesitated a moment as to whether it was worth while to make two journeys. But, no, she thought she could manage; clasping the large, heavy volume under her arm, and taking up the tray, she walked slowly up the staircase.

But a great surprise awaited her; in fact, when Mr. Sleuth's landlady opened the door of the drawing-room she very nearly dropped the tray. She actually did drop the Bible, and it fell with a heavy thud to the ground.

The new lodger had turned all those nice framed!

engravings of the early Victorian beauties, of which Mrs. Bunting had been so proud, with their faces to the wall!

For a moment she was really too surprised to speak. Putting the tray down on the table, she stooped and picked up the Book. It troubled her that the Bible should have fallen to the ground; but really she hadn't been able to help it—it was a mercy that the tray hadn't fallen, too.

Mr. Sleuth got up. "I—I have taken the liberty to arrange the room as I should wish it to be," he said awkwardly. "You see, Mrs.—er—Bunting, I felt as I sat here that these women's eyes followed me about. It was a most unpleasant sensation, and gave me quite an eerie feeling."

The landlady was now laying a small tablecloth over half of the table. She made no answer to her lodger's remark, for the good reason that she did not know what to say.

Her silence seemed to distress Mr. Sleuth. After what seemed a long pause, he spoke again.

"I prefer bare walls, Mrs. Bunting," he spoke with some agitation. "As a matter of fact, I have been used to seeing bare walls about me for a long time."

And then, at last, his landlady answered him, in a composed, soothing voice, which somehow did him good to hear. "I quite understand, sir. And when Bunting comes in he shall take the pictures all down. We have plenty of space in our own rooms for them."

"Thank you—thank you very much."

Mr. Sleuth appeared greatly relieved.

"And I have brought you up my Bible, sir. I understood you wanted the loan of it?"

Mr. Sleuth stared at her as if dazed for a moment; and then, rousing himself, he said, "Yes, yes, I do. There is no reading like the Book. There is something there which suits every state of mind, aye, and of body too——"

"Very true, sir." And then Mrs. Bunting, having laid out what really looked a very appetising little meal, turned round and quietly shut the door.

She went down straight into her sitting-room and waited there for Bunting, instead of going to the kitchen to clear up. And as she did so there came to her a comfortable recollection, an incident of her long-past youth, in the days when she, then Ellen Green, had maided a dear old lady.

The old lady had a favourite nephew—a bright, jolly young gentleman, who was learning to paint animals in Paris. And one morning Mr. Algernon—that was his rather peculiar Christian name—had had the impudence to turn to the wall six beautiful engravings of paintings done by the famous Mr. Landseer!

Mrs. Bunting remembered all the circumstances as if they had only occurred yesterday, and yet she had not thought of them for years.

It was quite early; she had come down—for in those days maids weren't thought so much of as they are now, and she slept with the upper housemaid, and it was the upper housemaid's duty to be down very early—and there, in the dining-room, she had found Mr. Algernon engaged in turning each engraving to the wall! Now, his aunt thought all the world of

those pictures, and Ellen had felt quite concerned, for it doesn't do for a young gentleman to put himself wrong with a kind aunt.

"Oh, sir," she had exclaimed in dismay, "whatever are you doing?" And even now she could almost hear his merry voice, as he had answered, "I am doing my duty, fair Helen"—he had always called her "fair Helen" when no one was listening. "How can I draw ordinary animals when I see these half-human monsters staring at me all the time I am having my breakfast, my lunch, and my dinner?" That was what Mr. Algernon had said in his own saucy way, and that was what he repeated in a more serious, respectful manner to his aunt, when that dear old lady had come downstairs. In fact, he had declared, quite soberly, that the beautiful animals painted by Mr. Landseer put his eye out!

But his aunt had been very much annoyed—in fact, she had made him turn the pictures all back again; and as long as he stayed there he just had to put up with what he called "those half-human monsters."

Mrs. Bunting, sitting there, thinking the matter of Mr. Sleuth's odd behaviour over, was glad to recall that funny incident of her long-gone youth. It seemed to prove that her new lodger was not so strange as he appeared to be. Still, when Bunting came in, she did not tell him the queer thing which had happened. She told herself that she would be quite able to manage the taking down of the pictures in the drawing-room herself.

But before getting ready their own supper, Mr. Sleuth's landlady went upstairs to clear away, and

when on the staircase she heard the sound of—was it talking, in the drawing-room? Startled, she waited a moment on the landing outside the drawing-room door, then she realised that it was only the lodger reading aloud to himself.

There was something very awful in the words which rose and fell on her listening ears:

“A strange woman is a narrow gate. She also lieth in wait as for a prey, and increaseth the transgressors among men.”

She remained where she was, her hand on the handle of the door, and again there broke on her shrinking ears that curious, high, sing-song voice, “Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death.”

It made the listener feel quite queer. But at last she summoned up courage, knocked, and walked in.

“I’d better clear away, sir, had I not?” she said.

And Mr. Sleuth nodded.

Then he got up and closed the Book. “I think I’ll go to bed now,” he said. “I am very, very tired. I’ve had a long and a very weary day, Mrs. Bunting.”

After he had disappeared into the back room, Mrs. Bunting climbed up on a chair and unhooked the pictures which had so offended Mr. Sleuth. Each left an unsightly mark on the wall—but that, after all, could not be helped.

Treading softly, so that Bunting should not hear her, she carried them down, two by two, and stood them behind her bed.

## CHAPTER IV

MRS. BUNTING woke up the next morning feeling happier than she had felt for a very, very long time.

For just one moment she could not think why she felt so different—and then she suddenly remembered.

How comfortable it was to know that upstairs, just over her head, lay, in the well-found bed she had bought with such satisfaction at an auction held in a Baker Street house, a lodger who was paying two guineas a week! Something seemed to tell her that Mr. Sleuth would be "a permanency." In any case, it wouldn't be her fault if he wasn't. As to his—his queerness, well, there's always something funny in everybody.

But after she had got up, and as the morning wore itself away, Mrs. Bunting grew a little anxious, for there came no sound at all from the new lodger's rooms.

At twelve, however, the drawing-room bell rang.

Mrs. Bunting hurried upstairs. She was painfully anxious to please and satisfy Mr. Sleuth. His coming had only been in the nick of time to save them from horrible disaster.

She found her lodger up, and fully dressed. He was sitting at the round table which occupied the

middle of the sitting-room, and his landlady's large Bible lay open before him.

As Mrs. Bunting came in, he looked up, and she was troubled to see how tired and worn he seemed.

"You do not happen," he asked, "to have a Concordance, Mrs. Bunting?"

She shook her head; she had no idea what a Concordance could be, but she was quite sure that she had nothing of the sort about.

And then her new lodger proceeded to tell her what it was he desired her to buy for him. She had supposed the bag he had brought with him to contain certain little necessaries of civilised life—such articles, for instance, as a comb and brush, a set of razors, a tooth-brush, to say nothing of a couple of night-shirts—but no, that was evidently not so, for Mr. Sleuth required all these things to be bought now.

After having cooked him a nice breakfast, Mrs. Bunting hurried out to purchase the things of which he was in urgent need.

How pleasant it was to feel that there was money in her purse again—not only someone else's money, but money she was now in the very act of earning so agreeably.

Mrs. Bunting first made her way to a little barber's shop close by. It was there she purchased the brush and comb and the razors. It was a funny, rather smelly little place, and she hurried as much as she could, the more so that the foreigner who served her insisted on telling her some of the strange, peculiar details of this Avenger murder which had taken place

forty-eight hours before, and in which Bunting took such a morbid interest.

The conversation upset Mrs. Bunting. She didn't want to think of anything painful or disagreeable on such a day as this.

Then she came back and showed the lodger her various purchases. Mr. Sleuth was pleased with everything, and thanked her most courteously. But when she suggested doing his bedroom he frowned, and looked quite put out.

"Please wait till this evening," he said hastily. "It is my custom to stay at home all day. I only care to walk about the streets when the lights are lit. You must bear with me, Mrs. Bunting, if I seem a little, just a little, unlike the lodgers you have been accustomed to. And I must ask you to understand that I must not be disturbed when thinking out my problems——" He broke off short, sighed, then added solemnly, "for mine are the great problems of life and death."

And Mrs. Bunting willingly fell in with his wishes. In spite of her prim manner and love of order, Mr. Sleuth's landlady was a true woman—she had, that is, an infinite patience with masculine vagaries and oddities.

When she was downstairs again, Mr. Sleuth's landlady met with a surprise; but it was quite a pleasant surprise. While she had been upstairs, talking to the lodger, Bunting's young friend, Joe Chandler, the detective, had come in, and as she walked into the sitting-room she saw that her husband



was pushing half a sovereign across the table towards Joe.

Joe Chandler's fair, good-natured face was full of satisfaction : not at seeing his money again, mark you, but at the news Bunting had evidently been telling him—that news of the sudden wonderful change in their fortunes, the coming of an ideal lodger.

" Mr. Sleuth don't want me to do his bedroom till he's gone out ! " she exclaimed. And then she sat down for a bit of a rest.

It was a comfort to know that the lodger was eating his good breakfast, and there was no need to think of him for the present. In a few minutes she would be going down to make her own and Bunting's dinner, and she told Joe Chandler that he might as well stop and have a bite with them.

Her heart warmed to the young man, for Mrs. Bunting was in a mood which seldom surprised her—a mood to be pleased with anything and everything. Nay, more. When Bunting began to ask Joe Chandler about the last of those awful Avenger murders, she even listened with a certain languid interest to all he had to say.

In the morning paper which Bunting had begun taking again that very day three columns were devoted to the extraordinary mystery which was now beginning to be the one topic of talk all over London, West and East, North and South. Bunting had read out little bits about it while they ate their breakfast, and in spite of herself Mrs. Bunting had felt thrilled and excited.

" They do say," observed Bunting cautiously, " They

do say, Joe, that the police have a clue they won't say nothing about?" He looked expectantly at his visitor. To Bunting the fact that Chandler was attached to the detective section of the Metropolitan Police invested the young man with a kind of sinister glory—especially just now, when these awful and mysterious crimes were amazing and terrifying the town.

"Them who says that says wrong," answered Chandler slowly, and a look of unease, of resentment, came over his fair, stolid face. "'Twould make a good bit of difference to me if the Yard had a clue."

And then Mrs. Bunting interposed. "Why that, Joe?" she said, smiling indulgently; the young man's keenness about his work pleased her. And in his slow, sure way Joe Chandler was very keen, and took his job very seriously. He put his whole heart and mind into it.

"Well, 'tis this way," he explained. "From to-day I'm on this business myself. You see, Mrs. Bunting, the Yard's nettled—that's what it is, and we're all on our mettle—that we are. I was right down sorry for the poor chap who was on point duty in the street where the last one happened——"

"No!" said Bunting incredulously. "You don't mean there was a policeman there, within a few yards?"

That fact hadn't been recorded in his newspaper.

Chandler nodded. "That's exactly what I do mean, Mr. Bunting! The man is near off his head, so I'm told. He did hear a yell, so he says, but he took no notice—there are a good few yells in that part

o' London, as you can guess. People always quarrelling and rowing at one another in such low parts."

"Have you seen the bits of grey paper on which the monster writes his name?" inquired Bunting eagerly.

Public imagination had been much stirred by the account of those three-cornered pieces of grey paper, pinned to the victims' skirts, on which was roughly written in red ink and in printed characters the words "The Avenger."

His round, fat face was full of questioning eagerness. He put his elbows on the table, and stared across expectantly at the young man.

"Yes, I have," said Joe briefly.

"A funny kind of visiting card, eh!" Bunting laughed; the notion struck him as downright comic.

But Mrs. Bunting coloured. "It isn't a thing to make a joke about," she said reprovingly.

And Chandler backed her up. "No, indeed," he said feelingly. "I'll never forget what I've been made to see over this job. And as for that grey bit of paper, Mr. Bunting—or, rather, those grey bits of paper"—he corrected himself hastily—"you know they've three of them now at the Yard—well, they gives me the horrors!"

And then he jumped up. "That reminds me that I oughtn't to be wasting my time in pleasant company——"

"Won't you stay and have a bit of dinner?" said Mrs. Bunting solicitously.

But the detective shook his head. "No," he said, "I had a bite before I came out. Our job's a queer kind of job, as you know. A lot's left to our

discretion, so to speak, but it don't leave us much time for lazing about, I can tell you."

When he reached the door he turned round, and with elaborate carelessness he inquired, "Any chance of Miss Daisy coming to London again soon?"

Bunting shook his head, but his face brightened. He was very, very fond of his only child; the pity was he saw her so seldom. "No," he said, "I'm afraid not, Joe. Old Aunt, as we calls the old lady, keeps Daisy pretty tightly tied to her apron-string. She was quite put about that week the child was up with us last June."

"Indeed? Well, so long!"

After his wife had let their friend out, Bunting said cheerfully, "Joe seems to like our Daisy, eh, Ellen?"

But Mrs. Bunting shook her head scornfully. She did not exactly dislike the girl, though she did not hold with the way Bunting's daughter was being managed by that old aunt of hers—an idle, good-for-nothing way, very different from the fashion in which she herself had been trained at the Foundling, for Mrs. Bunting as a little child had known no other home, no other family, than those provided by good Captain Coram.

"Joe Chandler's too sensible a young chap to be thinking of girls yet awhile," she said tartly.

"No doubt you're right," Bunting agreed. "Times be changed. In my young days chaps always had time for that. 'Twas just a notion that came into my head, hearing him asking, anxious-like, after her."

. . . . .

About five o'clock, after the street lamps were well alight, Mr. Sleuth went out, and that same evening there came two parcels addressed to his landlady. These parcels contained clothes. But it was quite clear to Mrs. Bunting's eyes that they were not new clothes. In fact, they had evidently been bought in some good second-hand clothes-shop. A funny thing for a real gentleman like Mr. Sleuth to do! It proved that he had given up all hope of getting back his lost luggage.

When the lodger had gone out he had not taken his bag with him, of that Mrs. Bunting was positive. And yet, though she searched high and low for it, she could not find the place where Mr. Sleuth kept it. And at last, had it not been that she was a very clear-headed woman, with a good memory, she would have been disposed to think that the bag had never existed, save in her imagination.

But no, she could not tell herself that! She remembered exactly how it had looked when Mr. Sleuth had first stood, a strange, queer-looking figure of a man, on her doorstep.

She further remembered how he had put the bag down on the floor of the top front room, and then, forgetting what he had done, how he had asked her eagerly, in a tone of angry fear, where the bag was—only to find it safely lodged at his feet!

As time went on Mrs. Bunting thought a great deal about that bag, for, strange and amazing fact, she never saw Mr. Sleuth's bag again. But, of course, she soon formed a theory as to its whereabouts. The brown leather bag which had formed Mr. Sleuth's only

luggage the afternoon of his arrival was almost certainly locked up in the lower part of the drawing-room chiffonnier. Mr. Sleuth evidently always carried the key of the little corner cupboard about his person ; Mrs. Bunting had also had a good hunt for that key, but, as was the case with the bag, the key disappeared, and she never saw either the one or the other again.

## CHAPTER V

HOW quietly, how uneventfully, how pleasantly, sped the next few days. Already life was settling down into a groove. Waiting on Mr. Sleuth was just what Mrs. Bunting could manage to do easily, and without tiring herself.

It had at once become clear that the lodger preferred to be waited on only by one person, and that person his landlady. He gave her very little trouble. Indeed, it did her good having to wait on the lodger; it even did her good that he was not like other gentlemen; for the fact occupied her mind, and in a way it amused her. The more so that whatever his oddities Mr. Sleuth had none of those tiresome, disagreeable ways with which landladies are only too familiar, and which seem peculiar only to those human beings who also happen to be lodgers. To take but one point: Mr. Sleuth did not ask to be called unduly early. Bunting and his Ellen had fallen into the way of lying rather late in the morning, and it was a great comfort not to have to turn out to make the lodger a cup of tea at seven, or even half-past seven. Mr. Sleuth seldom required anything before eleven.

But odd he certainly was.

The second evening he had been with them Mr. Sleuth had brought in a book of which the queer name

was Cruden's Concordance. That and the Bible—Mrs. Bunting had soon discovered that there was a relation between the two books—seemed to be the lodger's only reading. He spent hours each day, generally after he had eaten the breakfast which also served for luncheon, poring over the Old Testament and over that strange kind of index to the Book.

As for the delicate and yet the all-important question of money, Mr. Sleuth was everything—everything that the most exacting landlady could have wished. Never had there been a more confiding or trusting gentleman. On the very first day he had been with them he had allowed his money—the considerable sum of one hundred and eighty-four sovereigns—to lie about wrapped up in little pieces of rather dirty newspaper on his dressing-table. That had quite upset Mrs. Bunting. She had allowed herself respectfully to point out to him that what he was doing was foolish, indeed wrong. But as only answer he had laughed, and she had been startled when the loud, unusual and discordant sound had issued from his thin lips.

"I know those I can trust," he had answered, stuttering rather, as was his way when moved. "And—and I assure you, Mrs. Bunting, that I hardly have to speak to a human being—especially to a woman" (and he had drawn in his breath with a hissing sound) "before I know exactly what manner of person is before me."

It hadn't taken the landlady very long to find out that her lodger had a queer kind of fear and dislike of women. When she was doing the staircase and landings she would often hear Mr. Sleuth reading aloud to



himself passages in the Bible that were very uncomplimentary to her sex. But Mrs. Bunting had no very great opinion of her sister woman, so that didn't put her out. Besides, where one's lodger is concerned, a dislike of women is better than—well, than the other thing.

In any case, where would have been the good of worrying about the lodger's funny ways? Of course, Mr. Sleuth was eccentric. If he hadn't been, as Bunting funnily styled it, "just a leetle touched upstairs," he wouldn't be here, living this strange, solitary life in lodgings. He would be living in quite a different sort of way with some of his relatives, or with a friend of his own class.

There came a time when Mrs. Bunting, looking back—as even the least imaginative of us are apt to look back to any part of our own past lives which becomes for any reason poignantly memorable—wondered how soon it was that she had discovered that her lodger was given to creeping out of the house at a time when almost all living things prefer to sleep.

She brought herself to believe—but I am inclined to doubt whether she was right in so believing—that the first time she became aware of this strange nocturnal habit of Mr. Sleuth's happened to be during the night which preceded the day on which she had observed a very curious circumstance. This very curious circumstance was the complete disappearance of one of Mr. Sleuth's three suits of clothes.

It always passes my comprehension how people can remember, over any length of time, not every moment of certain happenings, for that is natural enough, but the day, the hour, the minute when these happenings

took place ! Much as she thought about it afterwards, even Mrs. Bunting never quite made up her mind whether it was during the fifth or the sixth night of Mr. Sleuth's stay under her roof that she became aware that he had gone out at two in the morning and had only come in at five.

But that there did come such a night is certain—as certain as is the fact that her discovery coincided with various occurrences which were destined to remain retrospectively memorable.

It was intensely dark, intensely quiet—the darkest, quietest hour of the night, when suddenly Mrs. Bunting was awakened from a deep, dreamless sleep by sounds at once unexpected and familiar. She knew at once what those sounds were. They were those made by Mr. Sleuth, first coming down the stairs, and walking on tiptoe—she was sure it was on tiptoe—past her door, and finally softly shutting the front door behind him.

Try as she would, Mrs. Bunting found it quite impossible to go to sleep again. There she lay wide awake, afraid to move lest Bunting should waken up too, till she heard Mr. Sleuth, three hours later, creep back into the house and so up to bed.

Then, and not till then, she slept again. But in the morning she felt very tired, so tired indeed, that she had been very glad when Bunting good-naturedly suggested that he should go out and do their little bit of marketing.

The worthy couple had very soon discovered that in the matter of catering it was not altogether an easy matter to satisfy Mr. Sleuth, and that though he always

tried to appear pleased. This perfect lodger had one serious fault from the point of view of those who keep lodgings. Strange to say, he was a vegetarian. He would not eat meat in any form. He sometimes, however, condescended to a chicken, and when he did so condescend he generously intimated that Mr. and Mrs. Bunting were welcome to a share in it.

Now to-day—this day of which the happenings were to linger in Mrs. Bunting's mind so very long, and to remain so very vivid, it had been arranged that Mr. Sleuth was to have some fish for his lunch, while what he left was to be "done up" to serve for his simple supper.

Knowing that Bunting would be out for at least an hour, for he was a gregarious soul, and liked to have a gossip in the shops he frequented, Mrs. Bunting rose and dressed in a leisurely manner; then she went and "did" her front sitting-room.

She felt languid and dull, as one is apt to feel after a broken night, and it was a comfort to her to know that Mr. Sleuth was not likely to ring before twelve.

But long before twelve a loud ring suddenly clanged through the quiet house. She knew it for the front door bell.

Mrs. Bunting frowned. No doubt the ring betokened one of those tiresome people who come round for old bottles and such-like fal-lals.

She went slowly, reluctantly to the door. And then her face cleared, for it was that good young chap, Joe Chandler, who stood waiting outside.

He was breathing a little hard, as if he had walked over-quickly through the moist, foggy air.

"Why, Joe?" said Mrs. Bunting wonderingly. "Come in—do! Bunting's out, but he won't be very long now. You've been quite a stranger these last few days."

"Well, you know why, Mrs. Bunting——"

She stared at him for a moment, wondering what he could mean. Then, suddenly she remembered. Why, of course, Joe was on a big job just now—the job of trying to catch The Avenger! Her husband had alluded to the fact again and again when reading out to her little bits from the halfpenny evening paper he was taking again.

She led the way to the sitting-room. It was a good thing Bunting had insisted on lighting the fire before he went out, for now the room was nice and warm—and it was just horrible outside. She had felt a chill go right through her as she had stood, even for that second, at the front door.

And she hadn't been alone to feel it, for, "I say, it is jolly to be in here, out of that awful cold!" exclaimed Chandler, sitting down heavily in Bunting's easy chair.

And then Mrs. Bunting bethought herself that the young man was tired, as well as cold. He was pale, almost pallid under his usual healthy, tanned complexion—the complexion of the man who lives much out of doors.

"Wouldn't you like me just to make you a cup of tea?" she said solicitously.

"Well, to tell truth, I should be right down thankful for one, Mrs. Bunting!" Then he looked round, and again he said her name, "Mrs. Bunting——?"

He spoke in so odd, so thick a tone that she turned quickly. "Yes, what is it, Joe?" she asked. And then, in sudden terror, "You've never come to tell me that anything's happened to Bunting? He's not had an accident?"

"Goodness, no! Whatever made you think that? But—but, Mrs. Bunting, there's been another of them!"

His voice dropped almost to a whisper. He was staring at her with unhappy, it seemed to her terror-filled, eyes.

"Another of them?" She looked at him, bewildered—at a loss. And then what he meant flashed across her—"another of them" meant another of these strange, mysterious, awful murders.

But her relief for the moment was so great—for she really had thought for a second that he had come to give her ill news of Bunting—that the feeling that she did experience on hearing this piece of news was actually pleasurable, though she would have been much shocked had that fact been brought to her notice.

Almost in spite of herself, Mrs. Bunting had become keenly interested in the amazing series of crimes which was occupying the imagination of the whole of London's nether-world. Even her refined mind had busied itself for the last two or three days with the strange problem so frequently presented to it by Bunting—for Bunting, now that they were no longer worried, took an open, unashamed, intense interest in "The Avenger" and his doings.

She took the kettle off the gas-ring. "It's a pity

Bunting isn't here," she said, drawing in her breath. "He'd a-liked so much to hear you tell all about it, Joe."

As she spoke she was pouring boiling water into a little teapot.

But Chandler said nothing, and she turned and glanced at him. "Why, you do look bad!" she exclaimed.

And, indeed, the young fellow did look bad—very bad indeed.

"I can't help it," he said, with a kind of gasp. "It was your saying that about my telling you all about it that made me turn queer. You see, this time I was one of the first there, and it fairly turned me sick—that it did. Oh, it was too awful, Mrs. Bunting! Don't talk of it."

He began gulping down the hot tea before it was well made.

She looked at him with sympathetic interest. "Why, Joe," she said, "I never would have thought, with all the horrible sights you see, that anything could upset you like that."

"This isn't like anything there's ever been before," he said. "And then—then—oh, Mrs. Bunting, 'twas I that discovered the piece of paper this time."

"Then it *is* true," she cried eagerly. "It *is* The Avenger's bit of paper! Bunting always said it was. He never believed in that practical joker."

"I did," said Chandler reluctantly. "You see, there are some queer fellows even—even—" (he lowered his voice, and looked round him as if the walls

had ears)—“even in the Force, Mrs. Bunting, and these murders have fair got on our nerves.”

“No, never!” she said. “D’you think that a Bobby might do a thing like that?”

He nodded impatiently, as if the question wasn’t worth answering. Then, “It was all along of that bit of paper and my finding it while the poor soul was still warm”—he shuddered—“that brought me out West this morning. One of our bosses lives close by, in Prince Albert Terrace, and I had to go and tell him all about it. They never offered me a bit or a sup—I think they might have done that, don’t you, Mrs. Bunting?”

“Yes,” she said absently. “Yes, I do think so.”

“But, there, I don’t know that I ought to say that,” went on Chandler. “He had me up in his dressing-room, and was very considerate-like to me while I was telling him.”

“Have a bit of something now?” she said suddenly.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t eat anything,” he said hastily. “I don’t feel as if I could ever eat anything any more.”

“That’ll only make you ill.” Mrs. Bunting spoke rather crossly, for she was a sensible woman. And to please her he took a bite out of the slice of bread-and-butter she had cut for him.

“I expect you’re right,” he said. “And I’ve a goodish heavy day in front of me. Been up since four, too—”

“Four?” she said. “Was it then they found—” she hesitated a moment, and then said, “it?”

He nodded. “It was just a chance I was near by.

If I'd been half a minute sooner either I or the officer who found her must have knocked up against that—that monster. But two or three people do think they saw him slinking away."

"What was he like?" she asked curiously.

"Well, that's hard to answer. You see, there was such an awful fog. But there's one thing they all agree about. He was carrying a bag——"

"A bag?" repeated Mrs. Bunting, in a low voice. "Whatever sort of bag might it have been, Joe?"

There had come across her—just right in her middle, like—such a strange sensation, a curious kind of tremor, or fluttering.

She was at a loss to account for it.

"Just a hand-bag," said Joe Chandler vaguely. "A woman I spoke to—cross-examining her, like—who was positive she had seen him, said, 'Just a tall, thin shadow—that's what he was, a tall, thin shadow of a man—with a bag.'"

"With a bag?" repeated Mrs. Bunting absently. "How very strange and peculiar——"

"Why, no, not strange at all. He has to carry the thing he does the deed with in something, Mrs. Bunting. We've always wondered how he hid it. They generally throws the knife or fire-arms away, you know."

"Do they, indeed?" Mrs. Bunting still spoke in that absent, wondering way. She was thinking that she really must try and see what the lodger had done with his bag. It was possible—in fact, when one came to think of it, it was very probable—that he had just lost it, being so forgetful a gentleman, on one of the



days he had gone out, as she knew he was fond of doing, into the Regent's Park.

"There'll be a description circulated in an hour or two," went on Chandler. "Perhaps that'll help catch him. There isn't a London man or woman, I don't suppose, who wouldn't give a good bit to lay that chap by the heels. Well, I suppose I must be going now."

"Won't you wait a bit longer for Bunting?" she said hesitatingly.

"No, I can't do that. But I'll come in, maybe, either this evening or to-morrow, and tell you any more that's happened. Thanks kindly for the tea. It's made a man of me, Mrs. Bunting."

"Well, you've had enough to unman you, Joe."

"Aye, that I have," he said heavily.

A few minutes later Bunting did come in, and he and his wife had quite a little tiff—the first tiff they had had since Mr. Sleuth became their lodger.

It fell out this way. When he heard who had been there, Bunting was angry that Mrs. Bunting hadn't got more details of the horrible occurrence which had taken place that morning, out of Chandler.

"You don't mean to say, Ellen, that you can't even tell me where it happened?" he said indignantly. "I suppose you put Chandler off—that's what you did! Why, whatever did he come here for, excepting to tell us all about it?"

"He came to have something to eat and drink," snapped out Mrs. Bunting. "That's what the poor lad came for, if you wants to know. He could hardly speak of it at all—he felt so bad. In fact, he didn't

say a word about it until he'd come right into the room and sat down. He told me quite enough!"

"Didn't he tell you if the piece of paper on which the murderer had written his name was square or three-cornered?" demanded Bunting.

"No; he did not. And that isn't the sort of thing I should have cared to ask him."

"The more fool you!" And then he stopped abruptly. The newsboys were coming down the Marylebone Road, shouting out the awful discovery which had been made that morning—that of The Avenger's fifth murder.

Bunting went out to buy a paper, and his wife took the things he had brought in down to the kitchen.

The noise the newspaper-sellers made outside had evidently wakened Mr. Sleuth, for his landlady hadn't been in the kitchen ten minutes before his bell rang.

## CHAPTER VI

**M**R. SLEUTH'S bell rang again.

Mr. Sleuth's breakfast was quite ready, but for the first time since he had been her lodger Mrs. Bunting did not answer the summons at once. But when there came the second imperative tinkle—for electric bells had not been fitted into that old-fashioned house—she made up her mind to go upstairs.

As she emerged into the hall from the kitchen stairway, Bunting, sitting comfortably in their parlour, heard his wife stepping heavily under the load of the well-laden tray.

"Wait a minute!" he called out. "I'll help you, Ellen," and he came out and took the tray from her.

She said nothing, and together they proceeded up to the drawing-room floor landing.

There she stopped him. "Here," she whispered quickly, "you give me that, Bunting. The lodger won't like your going in to him." And then, as he obeyed her, and was about to turn downstairs again, she added in a rather acid tone, "You might open the door for me, at any rate! How can I manage to do it with this here heavy tray on my hands?"

She spoke in a queer, jerky way, and Bunting felt surprised—rather put out. Ellen wasn't exactly what you'd call a lively, jolly woman, but when

things were going well—as now—she was generally equable enough. He supposed she was still resentful of the way he had spoken to her about young Chandler and the new Avenger murder.

However, he was always for peace, so he opened the drawing-room door, and as soon as he had started going downstairs Mrs. Bunting walked into the room.

And then at once there came over her the queerest feeling of relief, of lightness of heart.

As usual, the lodger was sitting at his old place, reading the Bible.

Somehow—she could not have told you why, she would not willingly have told herself—she had expected to see Mr. Sleuth *looking different*. But no, he appeared to be exactly the same—in fact, as he glanced up at her a pleasanter smile than usual lighted up his thin, pallid face.

“Well, Mrs. Bunting,” he said genially, “I overslept myself this morning, but I feel all the better for the rest.”

“I’m glad of that, sir,” she answered, in a low voice. “One of the ladies I once lived with used to say, ‘Rest is an old-fashioned remedy, but it’s the best remedy of all.’”

Mr. Sleuth himself removed the Bible and Cruden’s Concordance off the table out of her way, and then he stood watching his landlady laying the cloth.

Suddenly he spoke again. He was not often so talkative in the morning. “I think, Mrs. Bunting, that there was someone with you outside the door just now?”

“Yes, sir. Bunting helped me up with the tray.”

"I'm afraid I give you a good deal of trouble," he said hesitatingly.

But she answered quickly, "Oh, no, sir! Not at all, sir! I was only saying yesterday that we've never had a lodger that gave us as little trouble as you do, sir."

"I'm glad of that. I am aware that my habits are somewhat peculiar."

He looked at her fixedly, as if expecting her to give some sort of denial to this observation. But Mrs. Bunting was an honest and truthful woman. It never occurred to her to question his statement. Mr. Sleuth's habits *were* somewhat peculiar. Take that going out at night, or rather in the early morning, for instance?

So she remained silent.

After she had laid the lodger's breakfast on the table she prepared to leave the room. "I suppose I'm not to do your room till you goes out, sir?"

And Mr. Sleuth looked up sharply. "No, no!" he said. "I never want my room done when I am engaged in studying the Scriptures, Mrs. Bunting. But I am not going out to-day. I shall be carrying out a somewhat elaborate experiment—upstairs. If I go out at all"—he waited a moment, and again he looked at her fixedly—"I shall wait till night-time to do so." And then, coming back to the matter in hand, he added hastily, "Perhaps you could do my room when I go upstairs, about five o'clock—if that time is convenient to you, that is?"

"Oh, yes, sir! That'll do nicely."

Mrs. Bunting went downstairs, and as she did so

she took herself wordlessly, ruthlessly to task, but she did not face—even in her inmost heart—the strange terrors and tremors which had so shaken her. She only repeated to herself again and again, “I’ve got upset—that’s what I’ve done,” and then she spoke aloud, “I must get myself a dose at the chemist’s next time I’m out. That’s what I must do.”

And just as she murmured the word “do,” there came a loud double knock on the front door.

It was only the postman’s knock, but the postman was an unfamiliar visitor in that house, and Mrs. Bunting started violently. She was nervous, that’s what was the matter with her,—so she told herself angrily. No doubt this was a letter for Mr. Sleuth; the lodger must have relations and acquaintances somewhere in the world. All gentleness have. But when she picked the small envelope off the hall floor, she saw it was a letter from Daisy, her husband’s daughter.

“Bunting!” she called out sharply. “Here’s a letter for you.”

She opened the door of their sitting-room and looked in.

Yes, there was her husband, sitting back comfortably in his easy chair, reading a paper. And as she saw his broad, rather rounded back, Mrs. Bunting felt a sudden thrill of sharp irritation. There he was, doing nothing—in fact, doing worse than nothing—wasting his time reading all about those horrid crimes.

She sighed—a long, unconscious sigh. Bunting was getting into idle ways, bad ways for a man of his years. But how could she prevent it? He had been such an

active, conscientious sort of man when they had first made acquaintance. . . .

She also could remember, even more clearly than Bunting did himself, that first meeting of theirs in the dining-room of No. 90 Cumberland Terrace. As she had stood there, pouring out her mistress's glass of port wine, she had not been too much absorbed in her task to have a good out-of-her-eye look at the spruce, nice, respectable-looking fellow who was standing over by the window. How superior he had appeared even then to the man she already hoped he would succeed as butler !

To-day, perhaps because she was not feeling quite herself, the past rose before her very vividly, and a lump came into her throat.

Putting the letter addressed to her husband on the table, she closed the door softly, and went down into the kitchen ; there were various little things to put away and clean up, as well as their dinner to cook. And all the time she was down there she fixed her mind obstinately, determinedly on Bunting and on the problem of Bunting. She wondered what she'd better do to get him into good ways again.

Thanks to Mr. Sleuth, their outlook was now moderately bright. A week ago everything had seemed utterly hopeless. It seemed as if nothing could save them from disaster. But everything was now changed !

Perhaps it would be well for her to go and see the new proprietor of that registry office, in Baker Street, which had lately changed hands. It would be a good thing for Bunting to get even an occasional job—

for the matter of that he could now take up a fairly regular thing in the way of waiting. Mrs. Bunting knew that it isn't easy to get a man out of idle ways once he has acquired those ways.

When, at last, she went upstairs again she felt a little ashamed of what she had been thinking, for Bunting had laid the cloth, and laid it very nicely, too, and brought up their two chairs to the table.

"Ellen?" he cried eagerly, "here's news! Daisy's coming to-morrow! There's scarlet fever in their house. Old Aunt thinks she'd better come away for a few days. So, you see, she'll be here for her birthday. Eighteen, that's what she be on the nineteenth! It do make me feel old—that it do!"

Mrs. Bunting put down the tray. "I can't have the girl here just now," she said shortly. "I've just as much to do as I can manage. The lodger gives me more trouble than you seem to think for."

"Rubbish!" he said sharply. "I'll help you with the lodger. It's your own fault you haven't had help with him before. Of course, Daisy must come here. Whatever other place could the girl go to?"

Bunting felt pugnacious—so cheerful as to be almost light-hearted. But as he looked across at his wife his feeling of satisfaction vanished. Ellen's face was pinched and drawn to-day; she looked ill—ill and horribly tired. It was very aggravating of her to go and behave like this—just when they were beginning to get on nicely again.

"For the matter of that," he said suddenly, "Daisy'll be able to help you with the work, Ellen, and she'll brisk us both up a bit."



Mrs. Bunting made no answer. She sat down heavily at the table. And then she said languidly, "You might as well show me the girl's letter."

He handed it across to her, and she read it slowly to herself.

"DEAR FATHER (it ran)—I hope this finds you as well as it leaves me. Mrs. Puddle's youngest has got scarlet fever, and Aunt thinks I had better come away at once, just to stay with you for a few days. Please tell Ellen I won't give her no trouble. I'll start at ten if I don't hear nothing.—Your loving daughter,  
DAISY"

"Yes, I suppose Daisy will have to come here," said Mrs. Bunting slowly. "It'll do her good to have a bit of work to do for once in her life."

And with that ungraciously worded permission Bunting had to content himself.

Quietly the rest of that eventful day sped by. When dusk fell Mr. Sleuth's landlady heard him go upstairs to the top floor. She remembered that this was the signal for her to go and do his room.

He was a tidy man, was the lodger; he did not throw his things about as so many gentlemen do, leaving them all over the place. No, he kept everything scrupulously tidy. His clothes, and the various articles Mrs. Bunting had bought for him during the first two days he had been there, were carefully arranged in the chest of drawers. He had lately purchased a pair of boots. Those he had arrived in were peculiar-looking footgear, buff leather shoes with rubber soles, and he had told his landlady on that very

first day that he never wished them to go down to be cleaned.

A funny idea—a funny habit that, of going out for a walk after midnight in weather so cold and foggy that all other folk were glad to be at home, snug in bed. But then Mr. Sleuth himself admitted that he was a funny sort of gentleman.

After she had done his bedroom the landlady went into the sitting-room and gave it a good dusting. This room was not kept quite as nice as she would have liked it to be. Mrs. Bunting longed to give the drawing-room something of a good turn out; but Mr. Sleuth disliked her to be moving about in it when he himself was in his bedroom; and when up he sat there almost all the time. Delighted as he had seemed to be with the top room, he only used it when making his mysterious experiments, and never during the day-time.

And now, this afternoon, she looked at the rosewood chiffonnier with longing eyes—she even gave that pretty little piece of furniture a slight shake. If only the doors would fly open, as the locked doors of old cupboards sometimes do, even after they have been securely fastened, how pleased she would be, how much more comfortable somehow she would feel!

But the chiffonnier refused to give up its secret.

About eight o'clock on that same evening Joe Chandler came in, just for a few minutes' chat. He had recovered from his agitation of the morning, but he was full of eager excitement, and Mrs. Bunting listened in silence, intensely interested in spite of herself, while he and Bunting talked.

"Yes," he said, "I'm as right as a trivet now! I've had a good rest—laid down all this afternoon. You see, the Yard thinks there's going to be something on to-night. He's always done them in pairs."

"So he has," exclaimed Bunting wonderingly. "So he has! Now, I never thought o' that. Then you think, Joe, that the monster 'll be on the job again to-night?"

Chandler nodded. "Yes. And I think there's a very good chance of his being caught, too——"

"I suppose there'll be a lot on the watch to-night, eh?"

"I should think there will be! How many of our men d'you think there'll be on night duty to-night, Mr. Bunting?"

Bunting shook his head. "I don't know," he said helplessly.

"I mean extra," suggested Chandler, in an encouraging voice.

"A thousand?" ventured Bunting.

"Five thousand, Mr. Bunting."

"Never!" exclaimed Bunting, amazed.

And even Mrs. Bunting echoed "Never!" incredulously.

"Yes, that there will. You see, the Boss has got his monkey up!" Chandler drew a folded-up newspaper out of his coat pocket. "Just listen to this:

"The police have reluctantly to admit that they have no clue to the perpetrators of these horrible crimes, and we cannot feel any surprise at the information that a popular attack has been organised on the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. There is even talk of an indignation mass meeting.'

“ What d’you think of that ? That’s not a pleasant thing for a gentleman as is doing his best to read, eh ? ”

“ Well, it does seem queer that the police can’t catch him, now doesn’t it ? ” said Bunting argumentatively.

“ I don’t think it’s queer at all, ” said young Chandler crossly. “ Now you just listen again ! Here’s a bit of the truth for once—in a newspaper. ” And slowly he read out :

“ ‘ The detection of crime in London now resembles a game of blind man’s buff, in which the detective has his hands tied and his eyes bandaged. Thus is he turned loose to hunt the murderer through the slums of a great city. ’ ”

“ Whatever does that mean ? ” said Bunting. “ Your hands aren’t tied, and your eyes aren’t bandaged, Joe ? ”

“ It’s metaphorical-like that it’s intended, Mr. Bunting. We haven’t got the same facilities—no, not a quarter of them—that the French ‘tecs have. ”

And then, for the first time, Mrs. Bunting spoke : “ What was that word, Joe—‘ perpetrators ’ ? I mean that first bit you read out. ”

“ Yes, ” he said, turning to her eagerly.

“ Then do they think there’s more than one of them ? ” she said, and a look of relief came over her thin face.

“ There’s some of our chaps thinks it’s a gang, ” said Chandler. “ They say it can’t be the work of one man. ”

“ What do *you* think, Joe ? ”

“ Well, Mrs. Bunting, I don’t know what to think. I’m fair puzzled. ”

He got up. "Don't you come to the door. I'll shut it all right. So long! See you to-morrow, perhaps." As he had done the other evening, Mr. and Mrs. Bunting's visitor stopped at the door. "Any news of Miss Daisy?" he asked casually.

"Yes; she's coming to-morrow," said her father. "They've got scarlet fever at her place. So Old Aunt thinks she'd better clear out."

The husband and wife went to bed early that night, but Mrs. Bunting found she could not sleep. She lay wide awake, hearing the hours, the half-hours, the quarters chime out from the belfry of the old church close by.

And then, just as she was dozing off—it must have been about one o'clock—she heard the sound she had half unconsciously been expecting to hear, that of the lodger's stealthy footsteps coming down the stairs just outside her room.

He crept along the passage and let himself out, very, very quietly. . . .

But though she tried to keep awake, Mrs. Bunting did not hear him come in again, for she soon fell into a heavy sleep.

Oddly enough, she was the first to wake the next morning; odder still, it was she, not Bunting, who jumped out of bed, and going out into the passage, picked up the newspaper which had just been pushed through the letter-box.

But having picked it up, Mrs. Bunting did not go back at once into her bedroom. Instead she lit the gas in the passage, and leaning up against the wall

to steady herself, for she was trembling with cold and fatigue, she opened the paper.

Yes, there was the heading she sought :

“ THE AVENGER MURDERS ”

But, oh, how glad she was to see the words that followed :

“ Up to the time of going to press there is little new to report concerning the extraordinary series of crimes which are amazing, and, indeed, staggering not only London, but the whole civilised world, and which would seem to be the work of some woman-hating teetotal fanatic. Since yesterday morning, when the last of these dastardly murders was committed, no reliable clue to the perpetrator, or perpetrators, has been obtained, though several arrests were made in the course of the day. In every case, however, those arrested were able to prove a satisfactory alibi.”

And then, a little lower down :

“ The excitement grows and grows. It is not too much to say that even a stranger to London would know that something very unusual was in the air. As for the place where the murder was committed last night——”

“ Last night ! ” thought Mrs. Bunting, startled ; and then she realised that “ last night,” in this connection, meant the night before last.

She began the sentence again :

“ As for the place where the murder was committed last night, all approaches to it were still blocked up to a late hour by hundreds of onlookers, though, of course, nothing now remains in the way of traces of the tragedy.”

Slowly and carefully Mrs. Bunting folded the paper up again in its original creases, and then she stooped and put it back down on the mat where she had found it. She then turned out the gas, and going back into bed she lay down by her still sleeping husband.

"Anything the matter?" Bunting murmured, and stirred uneasily. "Anything the matter, Ellen?"

She answered in a whisper, a whisper thrilling with a strange gladness, "No, nothing, Bunting—nothing the matter! Go to sleep again, my dear."

They got up an hour later, both in a happy, cheerful mood. Bunting rejoiced at the thought of his daughter's coming, and even Daisy's stepmother told herself that it would be pleasant having the girl about the house to help her a bit.

About ten o'clock Bunting went out to do some shopping. He brought back with him a nice little bit of pork for Daisy's dinner, and three mince-pies. He even remembered to get some apples for the sauce.

## CHAPTER VII

**J**UST as twelve was striking a four-wheeler drew up to the gate.

It brought Daisy—pink-cheeked, excited, laughing-eyed Daisy—a sight to gladden any father's heart.

"Old Aunt said I was to have a cab if the weather was bad," she cried out joyously.

There was a bit of a wrangle over the fare. King's Cross, as all the world knows, is nothing like two miles from the Marylebone Road, but the man clamoured for one and sixpence, and hinted darkly that he had done the young lady a favour in bringing her at all.

While he and Bunting were having words, Daisy, leaving them to it, walked up the flagged path to the door where her stepmother was awaiting her.

As they were exchanging a rather frigid kiss, indeed, 'twas a mere peck on Mrs. Bunting's part, there fell, with startling suddenness, loud cries on the still, cold air. Long-drawn and wailing, they sounded strangely sad as they rose and fell across the distant roar of traffic in the Edgware Road.

"What's that?" exclaimed Bunting wonderingly.  
"Why, whatever's that?"

The cabman lowered his voice. "Them's 'a-crying



out that 'orrible affair at King's Cross. He's done for two of 'em this time! That's what I meant when I said I might 'a got a better fare. I wouldn't say nothink before little missy there, but folk 'ave been coming from all over London the last five or six hours; plenty of toffs, too—but there, there's nothing to see now!"

"What? Another woman murdered last night?"

Bunting felt tremendously thrilled. What had the five thousand constables been about to let such a dreadful thing happen?

The cabman stared at him, surprised. "Two of 'em, I tell yer—within a few yards of one another. He 'ave got a nerve— But, of course, they was drunk. He 'ave got a down on the drink!"

"Have they caught him?" asked Bunting perfunctorily.

"Lord, no! They'll never catch 'im! It must 'ave happened hours and hours ago—they was both stone cold. One each end of a little passage what ain't used no more. That's why they didn't find 'em before."

The hoarse cries were coming nearer and nearer—two newsvendors trying to shout each other.

"'Orrible discovery near King's Cross!" they yelled exultantly. "The Avenger again!"

And Bunting, with his daughter's large straw hold-all in his hand, ran forward into the roadway and recklessly gave a boy a penny for a halfpenny paper.

He felt very much moved and excited. Somehow his acquaintance with young Joe Chandler made these murders seem a personal affair. He hoped that

Chandler would come in soon and tell them all about it, as he had done yesterday morning when he, Bunting, had unluckily been out.

As he walked back into the little hall, he heard Daisy's voice—high, voluble, excited—giving her stepmother a long account of the scarlet fever case, and how at first Old Aunt's neighbours had thought it was not scarlet fever at all, but just nettlerash.

But as Bunting pushed open the door of the sitting-room, there came a note of sharp alarm in his daughter's voice, and he heard her cry, "Why, Ellen, whatever is the matter? You *do* look bad!" and his wife's muffled answer, "Open the window—do."

"'Orrible discovery near King's Cross—a clue at last!" yelled the newspaper-boys triumphantly.

And then, helplessly, Mrs. Bunting began to laugh. She laughed, and laughed, and laughed, rocking herself to and fro as if in an ecstasy of mirth.

"Why, father, whatever's the matter with her?"

Daisy looked quite scared.

"She's in 'sterics—that's what it is," he said shortly. "I'll just get the water-jug. Wait a minute!"

Bunting felt very put out. Ellen was ridiculous—that's what she was, to be so easily upset.

The lodger's bell suddenly pealed through the quiet house. Either that sound, or maybe the threat of the water-jug, had a magical effect on Mrs. Bunting. She rose to her feet, still shaking all over, but mentally composed.

"I'll go up," she said a little chokingly. "As for you, child, just run down into the kitchen. You'll

find a piece of pork roasting in the oven. You might start paring the apples for the sauce."

As Mrs. Bunting went upstairs her legs felt as if they were made of cotton wool. She put out a trembling hand, and clutched at the banister for support. But soon, making a great effort over herself, she began to feel more steady; and after waiting for a few moments on the landing, she knocked at the door of the drawing-room.

Mr. Sleuth's voice answered her from the bedroom. "I'm not well," he called out querulously; "I think I've caught a chill. I should be obliged if you would kindly bring me up a cup of tea, and put it outside my door, Mrs. Bunting."

"Very well, sir."

Mrs. Bunting turned and went downstairs. She still felt queer and giddy, so instead of going into the kitchen, she made the lodger his cup of tea over her sitting-room gas-ring.

During their midday dinner the husband and wife had a little discussion as to where Daisy should sleep. It had been settled that a bed should be made up for her in the top back room, but Mrs. Bunting saw reason to change this plan. "I think 'twould be better if Daisy were to sleep with me, Bunting, and you was to sleep upstairs."

Bunting felt and looked rather surprised, but he acquiesced. Ellen was probably right; the girl would be rather lonely up there, and, after all, they didn't know much about the lodger, though he seemed a respectable gentleman enough.

Daisy was a good-natured girl; she liked London,

and wanted to make herself useful to her stepmother. "I'll wash up; don't you bother to come downstairs," she said cheerfully.

Bunting began to walk up and down the room. His wife gave him a furtive glance; she wondered what he was thinking about.

"Didn't you get a paper?" she said at last.

"Yes, of course I did," he answered hastily. "But I've put it away. I thought you'd rather not look at it, as you're that nervous."

Again she glanced at him quickly, furtively, but he seemed just as usual—he evidently meant just what he said and no more.

"I thought they was shouting something in the street—I mean just before I was took bad."

It was now Bunting's turn to stare at his wife quickly and rather furtively. He had felt sure that her sudden attack of queerness, of hysterics—call it what you might—had been due to the shouting outside. She was not the only woman in London who had got the Avenger murders on her nerves. His morning paper said quite a lot of women were afraid to go out alone. Was it possible that the curious way she had been taken just now had had nothing to do with the shouts and excitement outside?

"Don't you know what it was they were calling out?" he asked slowly.

Mrs. Bunting looked across at him. She would have given a very great deal to be able to lie, to pretend that she did not know what those dreadful cries had portended. But when it came to the point she found she could not do so.

"Yes," she said dully. "I heard a word here and there. There's been another murder, hasn't there?"

"Two other murders," he said soberly.

"Two? That's worse news!" She turned so pale—a sallow greenish-white—that Bunting thought she was again going queer.

"Ellen?" he said warningly, "Ellen, now do have a care! I can't think what's come over you about these murders. Turn your mind away from them, do! We needn't talk about them—not so much, that is——"

"But I wants to talk about them," cried Mrs. Bunting hysterically.

The husband and wife were standing, one each side of the table, the man with his back to the fire, the woman with her back to the door.

Bunting, staring across at his wife, felt sadly perplexed and disturbed. She really did seem ill; even her slight, spare figure looked shrunk. For the first time, so he told himself ruefully, Ellen was beginning to look her full age. Her slender hands—she had kept the pretty, soft white hands of the woman who has never done rough work—grasped the edge of the table with a convulsive movement.

Bunting didn't at all like the look of her. "Oh, dear," he said to himself, "I do hope Ellen isn't going to be ill! That would be a to-do just now."

"Tell me about it," she commanded, in a low voice. "Can't you see I'm waiting to hear? Be quick now, Bunting!"

"There isn't very much to tell," he said reluctantly.

"There's precious little in this paper, anyway. But the cabman what brought Daisy told me——"

"Well?"

"What I said just now. There's two of 'em this time, and they'd both been drinking heavily, poor creatures."

"Was it where the others was done?" she asked, looking at her husband fearfully.

"No," he said awkwardly. "No, it wasn't, Ellen. It was a good bit farther West—in fact, not so very far from here. Near King's Cross—that's how the cabman knew about it, you see. They seems to have been done in a passage which isn't used no more." And then, as he thought his wife's eyes were beginning to look rather funny, he added hastily, "There, that's enough for the present! We shall soon be hearing a lot more about it from Joe Chandler. He's pretty sure to come in some time to-day."

"Then the five thousand constables weren't no use?" said Mrs. Bunting slowly.

She had relaxed her grip of the table, and was standing more upright.

"No use at all," said Bunting briefly. "He is artful, and no mistake about it. But wait a minute——" he turned and took up the paper which he had laid aside, on a chair. "Yes, they says here that they has a clue."

"A clue, Bunting?" Mrs. Bunting spoke in a soft, weak, die-away voice, and again, stooping somewhat, she grasped the edge of the table.

But her husband was not noticing her now. He was holding the paper close up to his eyes, and he read from it, in a tone of considerable satisfaction :

“ ‘It is gratifying to be able to state that the police at last believe they are in possession of a clue which will lead to the arrest of the——’ ”

and then Bunting dropped the paper and rushed round the table.

His wife, with a curious sighing moan, had slipped down on to the floor, taking with her the tablecloth as she went. She lay there in what appeared to be a dead faint. And Bunting, scared out of his wits, opened the door and screamed out, “Daisy! Daisy! Come up, child. Ellen’s took bad again.”

And Daisy, hurrying in, showed an amount of sense and resource which even at this anxious moment roused her fond father’s admiration.

“Get a wet sponge, Dad—quick!” she cried, “a sponge,—and, if you’ve got such a thing, a drop o’ brandy. I’ll see after her!” And then, after he had got the little medicine flask, “I can’t think what’s wrong with Ellen,” said Daisy wonderingly. “She seemed quite all right when I first came in. She was listening, interested-like, to what I was telling her, and then, suddenly—well, you saw how she was took, father? ’Tain’t like Ellen this, is it now?”

“No,” he whispered. “No, ’tain’t. But you see, child, we’ve been going through a pretty bad time—worse nor I should ever have let you know of, my dear. Ellen’s just feeling it now—that’s what it is. She didn’t say nothing, for Ellen’s a good plucked one, but it’s told on her—it’s told on her!”

And then Mrs. Bunting, sitting up, slowly opened her eyes, and instinctively put her hand up to her head to see if her hair was all right.

She hadn't really been quite "off." It would have been better for her if she had. She had simply had an awful feeling that she couldn't stand up—more, that she must fall down. Bunting's words touched a most unwonted chord in the poor woman's heart, and the eyes which she opened were full of tears. She had not thought her husband knew how she had suffered during those weeks of starving and waiting.

But she had a morbid dislike of any betrayal of sentiment. To her such betrayal betokened "foolishness," and so all she said was, "There's no need to make a fuss! I only turned over a little queer. I never was right off, Daisy."

Pettishly she pushed away the glass in which Bunting had hurriedly poured a little brandy. "I wouldn't touch such stuff—no, not if I was dying!" she exclaimed.

Putting out a languid hand, she pulled herself up, with the help of the table, on to her feet. "Go down again to the kitchen, child"; but there was a sob, a kind of tremor in her voice.

"You haven't been eating properly, Ellen—that's what's the matter with you," said Bunting suddenly. "Now I come to think of it, you haven't eat half enough these last two days. I always did say—in old days many a time I telled you—that a woman couldn't live on air. But there, you never believed me!"

Daisy stood looking from one to the other, a shadow over her bright, pretty face. "I'd no idea you'd had such a bad time, father," she said feelingly. "Why didn't you let me know about it? I might have got something out of Old Aunt."



"We didn't want anything of that sort," said her stepmother hastily. "But of course—well, I expect I'm still feeling the worry now. I don't seem able to forget it. Those days of waiting, of—of——" she restrained herself; another moment and the word "starving" would have left her lips.

"But everything's all right now," said Bunting eagerly, "all right, thanks to Mr. Sleuth, that is."

"Yes," repeated his wife, in a low, strange tone of voice. "Yes, we're all right now, and as you say, Bunting, it's all along of Mr. Sleuth."

She walked across to a chair and sat down on it. "I'm just a little tottery still," she muttered.

And Daisy, looking at her, turned to her father and said in a whisper, but not so low but that Mrs. Bunting heard her, "Don't you think Ellen ought to see a doctor, father? He might give her something that would pull her round."

"I won't see no doctor!" said Mrs. Bunting with sudden emphasis. "I saw enough of doctors in my last place. Thirty-eight doctors in ten months did my poor missis have. Just determined on having 'em she was! Did they save her? No! She died just the same! Maybe a bit sooner."

"She was a freak, was your last mistress, Ellen," began Bunting aggressively.

Ellen had insisted on staying on in that place till her poor mistress died. They might have been married some months before they were married but for that fact. Bunting had always resented it.

His wife smiled wanly. "We won't have no words about that," she said, and again she spoke in a softer,

kindlier tone than usual. "Daisy? If you won't go down to the kitchen again, then I must"—she turned to her stepdaughter, and the girl flew out of the room.

"I think the child grows prettier every minute," said Bunting fondly.

"Folks are too apt to forget that beauty is but skin deep," said his wife. She was beginning to feel better. "But still, I do agree, Bunting, that Daisy's well enough. And she seems more willing, too."

"I say, we mustn't forget the lodger's dinner," Bunting spoke uneasily. "It's a bit of fish to-day, isn't it? Hadn't I better just tell Daisy to see to it, and then I can take it up to him, as you're not feeling quite the thing, Ellen?"

"I'm quite well enough to take up Mr. Sleuth's luncheon," she said quickly. It irritated her to hear her husband speak of the lodger's dinner. They had dinner in the middle of the day, but Mr. Sleuth had luncheon. However odd he might be, Mrs. Bunting never forgot her lodger was a gentleman.

"After all, he likes me to wait on him, doesn't he? I can manage all right. Don't you worry," she added, after a long pause.

## CHAPTER VIII

PERHAPS because his luncheon was served to him a good deal later than usual, Mr. Sleuth ate his nice piece of steamed sole upstairs with far heartier an appetite than his landlady had eaten her nice slice of roast pork downstairs.

"I hope you're feeling a little better, sir," Mrs. Bunting had forced herself to say when she first took in his tray.

And he had answered plaintively, querulously, "No, I can't say I feel well to-day, Mrs. Bunting. I am tired—very tired. And as I lay in bed I seemed to hear so many sounds—so much crying and shouting. I trust the Marylebone Road is not going to become a noisy thoroughfare, Mrs. Bunting?"

"Oh, no, sir, I don't think that. We're generally reckoned very quiet indeed, sir."

She waited a moment—try as she would, she could not allude to what those unwonted shouts and noises had betokened. "I expect you've got a chill, sir," she said suddenly. "If I was you, I shouldn't go out this afternoon; I'd just stay quietly indoors. There's a lot of rough people about——" Perhaps there was an undercurrent of warning, of painful pleading, in her toneless voice which penetrated in some way to the brain of the lodger, for Mr. Sleuth looked up, and

an uneasy, watchful look came into his luminous grey eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs. Bunting. But I think I'll take your advice. That is, I will stay quietly at home. I am never at a loss to know what to do with myself so long as I can study the Book of Books."

"Then you're not afraid about your eyes, sir?" said Mrs. Bunting curiously. Somehow she was beginning to feel better. It comforted her to be up here, talking to Mr. Sleuth, instead of thinking about him downstairs. It seemed to banish the terror which filled her soul—aye, and her body, too—at other times. When she was with him Mr. Sleuth was so gentle, so reasonable, so—so grateful.

Poor kindly, solitary Mr. Sleuth! This kind of gentleman surely wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone a human being. Eccentric—so much must be admitted. But Mrs. Bunting had seen a good deal of eccentric folk, eccentric women rather than eccentric men, in her long career as useful maid.

Being at ordinary times an exceptionally sensible, well-balanced woman, she had never, in old days, allowed her mind to dwell on certain things she had learnt as to the aberrations of which human nature is capable—even well-born, well-nurtured, gentle human nature—as exemplified in some of the households where she had served. It would, indeed, be unfortunate if she now became morbid or—or hysterical.

So it was in a sharp, cheerful voice, almost the voice in which she had talked during the first few days of Mr. Sleuth's stay in her house, that she ex-

claimed, "Well, sir, I'll be up again to clear away in about half an hour. And if you'll forgive me for saying so, I hope you will stay in and have a rest to-day. Nasty, muggy weather—that's what it is! If there's any little thing you want, me or Bunting can go out and get it."

It must have been about four o'clock when there came a ring at the front door.

The three were sitting chatting together, for Daisy had washed up—she really was saving her stepmother a good bit of trouble—and the girl was now amusing her elders by a funny account of Old Aunt's pernicky ways.

"Whoever can that be?" said Bunting, looking up. "It's too early for Joe Chandler, surely."

"I'll go," said his wife, hurriedly jumping up from her chair. "I'll go! We don't want no strangers in here."

And as she stepped down the short bit of passage she said to herself, "A clue? What clue?"

But when she opened the front door a glad sigh of relief broke from her. "Why, Joe? We never thought 'twas you! But you're very welcome, I'm sure. Come in."

And Chandler came in, a rather sheepish look on his good-looking, fair young face.

"I thought maybe that Mr. Bunting would like to know——" he began, in a loud, cheerful voice, and Mrs. Bunting hurriedly checked him. She didn't want the lodger upstairs to hear what young Chandler might be going to say.

"Don't talk so loud," she said a little sharply. "The lodger is not very well to-day. He's had a cold," she added hastily, "and during the last two or three days he hasn't been able to go out."

She wondered at her temerity, her—her hypocrisy, and that moment, those few words, marked an epoch in Ellen Bunting's life. It was the first time she had told a bold and deliberate lie. She was one of those women—there are many, many such—to whom there is a whole world of difference between the suppression of the truth and the utterance of an untruth.

But Chandler paid no heed to her remarks. "Has Miss Daisy arrived?" he asked, in a lower voice.

She nodded. And then he went through into the room where the father and daughter were sitting.

"Well?" said Bunting, starting up. "Well, Joe? Now you can tell us all about that mysterious clue! I suppose it'd be too good news to expect you to tell us they've caught him?"

"No fear of such good news as that yet awhile. If they'd caught him," said Joe ruefully, "well, I don't suppose I should be here, Mr. Bunting. But the Yard are circulating a description at last. And—well, they've found his weapon!"

"No?" cried Bunting excitedly. "You don't say so! Whatever sort of a thing is it? And are they sure 'tis his?"

"Well, 'tain't sure, but it seems to be likely."

Mrs. Bunting had slipped into the room and shut the door behind her. But she was still standing with her back against the door, looking at the group in front of her. None of them were thinking of her—she

thanked God for that ! She could hear everything that was said without joining in the talk and excitement.

" Listen to this ! " cried Joe Chandler exultantly. " 'Tain't given out yet—not for the public, that is—but we was all given it by eight o'clock this morning. Quick work that, eh ? " He read out :

" WANTED

" A man, of age approximately 28, slight in figure, height approximately 5 ft. 8 in. Complexion dark. No beard or whiskers. Wearing a black diagonal coat, hard felt hat, high white collar, and tie. Carried a newspaper parcel. Very respectable appearance."

Mrs. Bunting walked forward. She gave a long, fluttering sigh of unutterable relief.

" There's the chap ! " said Joe Chandler triumphantly. " And now, Miss Daisy "—he turned to her jokingly, but there was a funny little tremor in his frank, cheerful-sounding voice—" if you knows of any nice, likely young fellow that answers to that description—well, you've only got to walk in and earn your reward of five hundred pounds."

" Five hundred pounds ! " cried Daisy and her father simultaneously.

" Yes. That's what the Lord Mayor offered yesterday. Some private bloke—nothing official about it. But we of the Yard is barred from taking that reward, worse luck. And it's too bad, for we has all the trouble, after all ! "

" Just hand that bit of paper over, will you ? " said Bunting. " I'd like to con it over to myself."

Chandler threw over the bit of flimsy.

A moment later Bunting looked up and handed it back. "Well, it's clear enough, isn't it?"

"Yes. And there's hundreds—nay, thousands—of young fellows that might be a description of," said Chandler sarcastically. "As a pal of mine said this morning, 'There isn't a chap will like to carry a newspaper parcel after this.' And it won't do to have a respectable appearance—eh?"

Daisy's voice rang out in merry, pealing laughter. She greatly appreciated Mr. Chandler's witticism.

"Why on earth didn't the people who saw him try and catch him?" asked Bunting suddenly.

And Mrs. Bunting broke in, in a lower voice, "Yes, Joe—that seems odd, don't it?"

Joe Chandler coughed. "Well, it's this way," he said. "No one person did see all that. The man who's described here is just made up from the description of two different folk who *think* they saw him. You see, the murders must have taken place—well, now, let me see—perhaps at two o'clock this last time. Two o'clock—that's the idea. Well, at such a time as that not many people are about, especially on a foggy night. Yes, one woman declares she saw a young chap walking away from the spot where 'twas done; and another one—but that was a good bit later—says The Avenger passed by her. It's mostly her they're following in this 'ere description. And then the boss who has charge of that sort of thing looked up what other people had said—I mean when the other crimes was committed. That's how he made up this 'Wanted.'"

"Then The Avenger may be quite a different sort of man?" said Bunting slowly, disappointedly.



" Well, of course he *may* be. But, no ; I think that description fits him all right," said Chandler ; but he also spoke in a hesitating voice.

" You was saying, Joe, that they found a weapon ? " observed Bunting insinuatingly.

He was glad that Ellen allowed the discussion to go on—in fact, that she even seemed to take an intelligent interest in it. She had come up close to them, and now looked quite her old self again.

" Yes. They believe they've found the weapon what he does his awful deeds with," said Chandler. " At any rate, within a hundred yards of that little dark passage where they found the bodies—one at each end, that was—there was discovered this morning a very peculiar kind o' knife—' keen as a razor, pointed as a dagger '—that's the exact words the boss used when he was describing it to a lot of us. He seemed to think a lot more of that clue than of the other—I mean than of the description people gave of the chap who walked quickly by with a newspaper parcel. But now there's a pretty job in front of us. Every shop where they sell or might a' sold, such a thing as that knife, including every eating-house in the East End, has got to be called at ! "

" Whatever for ? " asked Daisy.

" Why, with an idea of finding out if anyone saw such a knife fooling about there any time, and, if so, in whose possession it was at the time. But, Mr. Bunting"—Chandler's voice changed ; it became businesslike, official—" they're not going to say anything about that—not in the newspapers—till tomorrow, so don't you go and tell anybody. You see,

we don't want to frighten the fellow off. If he knew they'd got his knife—well, he might just make himself scarce, and they don't want that! If it's discovered that any knife of that kind was sold, say a month ago, to some customer whose ways are known, then—then——”

“What'll happen then?” said Mrs. Bunting, coming nearer.

“Well, then, nothing 'll be put about it in the papers at all,” said Chandler deliberately. “The only objec' of letting the public know about it would be if nothink was found—I mean if the search of the shops, and so on, was no good. Then, of course, we must try and find out someone—some private person-like, who's watched that knife in the criminal's possession. It's there the reward—the five hundred pounds will come in.”

“Oh, I'd give anything to see that knife!” exclaimed Daisy, clasping her hands together.

“You cruel, bloodthirsty girl!” cried her stepmother passionately.

They all looked round at her, surprised.

“Come, come, Ellen!” said Bunting reprovingly.

“Well, it *is* a horrible idea!” said his wife sullenly.

“To go and sell a fellow-being for five hundred pounds.”

But Daisy was offended. “Of course I'd like to see it!” she cried defiantly. “I never said nothing about the reward. That was Mr. Chandler said that! I only said I'd like to see the knife.”

Chandler looked at her soothingly. “Well, the day may come when you *will* see it,” he said slowly.

A great idea had come into his mind.

"No! What makes you think that?"

"If they catches him, and if you comes along with me to see our Black Museum at the Yard, you'll certainly see the knife, Miss Daisy. They keeps all them kind of things there. So if, as I say, this weapon *should* lead to the conviction of The Avenger—well, then, that knife 'ull be there, and you'll see it!"

"The Black Museum? Why, whatever do they have a museum in your place for?" asked Daisy wonderingly. "I thought there was only the British Museum——"

And then even Mrs. Bunting, as well as Bunting and Chandler, laughed aloud.

"You are a goosey girl!" said her father fondly. "Why, there's a lot of museums in London; the town's thick with 'em. Ask Ellen there. She and me used to go to them kind of places when we was courting—the weather was bad."

"But our museum's the one that would interest Miss Daisy," broke in Chandler eagerly. "It's a regular Chamber of 'Orrors!"

"Why, Joe, you never told us about that place before," said Bunting excitedly. "D'you really mean that there's a museum where they keeps all sorts of things connected with crimes? Things like knives murders have been committed with?"

"Knives?" cried Joe, pleased at having become the centre of attention, for Daisy had also fixed her blue eyes on him, and even Mrs. Bunting looked at him expectantly. "Much more than knives, Mr. Bunting! Why, they've got there, in little bottles, the real poison what people have been done away with."

"And can you go there whenever you like?" asked Daisy wonderingly. She had not realised before what extraordinary and agreeable privileges are attached to the position of a detective member of the London Police Force.

"Well, I suppose I *could*—" Joe smiled. "Anyway, I can certainly get leave to take a friend there." He looked meaningly at Daisy, and Daisy looked eagerly at him.

But would Ellen ever let her go out by herself with Mr. Chandler? Ellen was so prim, so—so irritatingly proper. But what was this father was saying? "D'you really mean that, Joe?"

"Yes, o' course I do!"

"Well, then, look here! If it isn't asking too much of a favour, I should like to go along there with you very much one day. I don't want to wait till The Avenger's caught"—Bunting smiled broadly. "I'd be quite content as it is with what there is in that museum o' yours. Ellen, there"—he looked across at his wife—"don't agree with me about such things. Yet I don't think I'm a bloodthirsty man! But I'm just terribly interested in all that sort of thing—always have been. I used to positively envy the butler in that Balham Mystery!"

Again a look passed between Daisy and the young man—it was a look which contained and carried a great many things backwards and forwards, such as—"Now, isn't it funny that your father should want to go to such a place? But still, I can't help it if he does want to go, so we must put up with his company, though it would have been much nicer for us to

go just by our two selves." And then Daisy's look answered quite as plainly, though perhaps Joe didn't read her glance quite as clearly as she had read his: "Yes, it *is* tiresome. But father means well; and 'twill be very pleasant going there, even if he does come too."

"Well, what d'you say to the day after to-morrow, Mr. Bunting? I'd call for you here about—shall we say half-past two?—and just take you and Miss Daisy down to the Yard. 'Twouldn't take very long; we could go all the way by bus, right down to Westminster Bridge." He looked round at his hostess: "Wouldn't you join us, Mrs. Bunting? 'Tis truly a wonderful interesting place."

But his hostess shook her head decidedly. "'Twould turn me sick," she exclaimed, "to see the bottle of poison what had done away with the life of some poor creature! And as for knives——!" a look of real horror, of startled fear, crept over her pale face.

"There, there!" said Bunting hastily. "Live and let live—that's what I always say. Ellen ain't on in this turn. She can just stay at home and mind the cat,—I beg his pardon, I mean the lodger!"

"I won't have Mr. Sleuth laughed at," said Mrs. Bunting darkly. "But there! I'm sure it's very kind of you, Joe, to think of giving Bunting and Daisy such a rare treat"—she spoke sarcastically, but none of the three who heard her understood that.

## CHAPTER IX

THE moment she passed through the great arched door which admits the stranger to that portion of New Scotland Yard where throbs the heart of that great organism which fights the forces of civilised crime, Daisy Bunting felt that she had indeed become free of the Kingdom of Romance. Even the lift in which the three of them were whirled up to one of the upper floors of the huge building was to the girl a new and delightful experience. Daisy had always lived a simple, quiet life in the little country town where dwelt Old Aunt, and this was the first time a lift had come her way.

With a touch of personal pride in the vast building, Joe Chandler marched his friends down a wide, airy corridor.

Daisy clung to her father's arm, a little bewildered, a little oppressed by her good fortune. Her happy young voice was stilled by the awe she felt at the wonderful place where she found herself, and by the glimpses she caught of great rooms full of busy, silent men engaged in unravelling—or so she supposed—the mysteries of crime.

They were passing a half-open door when Chandler suddenly stopped short. "Look in there," he said, in a low voice, addressing the father rather than the

daughter, "that's the Finger-Print Room. We've records here of over two hundred thousand men's and women's finger-tips! I expect you know, Mr. Bunting, as how, once we've got the print of a man's five finger-tips, well, he's done for—if he ever does anything else, that is. Once we've got that bit of him registered he can't never escape us—no, not if he tries ever so. But though there's nigh on a quarter of a million records in there, yet it don't take—well, not half an hour, for them to tell whether any particular man has ever been convicted before! Wonderful thought, ain't it?"

"Wonderful!" said Bunting, drawing a deep breath. And then a troubled look came over his stolid face. "Wonderful, but also a very fearful thought for the poor wretches as has got their finger-prints in there, Joe."

Joe laughed. "Agreed!" he said. "And the cleverer ones knows that only too well. Why, not long ago, one man who knew his record was here safe, managed to slash about his fingers something awful, just so as to make a blurred impression—you takes my meaning? But there, at the end of six weeks the skin grew all right again, and in exactly the same little creases as before!"

"Poor devil!" said Bunting under his breath, and a cloud even came over Daisy's bright, eager face.

They were now going along a narrower passage, and then again they came to a half-open door, leading into a room far smaller than that of the Finger-Print Identification Room.

"If you'll glance in there," said Joe briefly, "you'll see how we find out all about any man whose finger-tips has given him away, so to speak. It's here we keep an account of what he's done, his previous convictions, and so on. His finger-tips are where I told you, and his record in there—just connected by a number."

"Wonderful!" said Bunting, drawing in his breath.

But Daisy was longing to get on—to get to the Black Museum. All this that Joe and her father were saying was quite unreal to her, and, for the matter of that, not worth taking the trouble to understand. However, she had not long to wait.

A broad-shouldered, pleasant-looking young fellow, who seemed on very friendly terms with Joe Chandler, came forward suddenly, and, unlocking a commonplace-looking door, ushered the little party of three through into the Black Museum.

For a moment there came across Daisy a feeling of keen disappointment and surprise. This big, light room simply reminded her of what they called the Science Room in the public library of the town where she lived with Old Aunt. Here, as there, the centre was taken up with plain glass cases fixed at a height from the floor which enabled their contents to be looked at closely.

She walked forward and peered into the case nearest the door. The exhibits shown there were mostly small, shabby-looking little things, the sort of things one might turn out of an old rubbish cupboard in an untidy house—old medicine bottles, a soiled



neckerchief, what looked like a child's broken lantern, even a box of pills. . . .

As for the walls, they were covered with the queerest-looking objects; bits of old iron, odd-looking things made of wood and leather, and so on.

It was really rather disappointing.

Then Daisy Bunting gradually became aware that, standing on a shelf just below the first of the broad, spacious windows which made the great room look so light and shadowless, was a row of life-size white plaster heads, each head slightly inclined to the right. There were about a dozen of these, not more—and they had such odd, staring, helpless, *real*-looking faces.

"Whatever's those?" asked Bunting in a low voice.

Daisy clung a thought closer to her father's arm. Even she guessed that these strange, pathetic, staring faces were the death-masks of those men and women who had fulfilled the awful law which ordains that the murderer shall be, in his turn, done to death.

"All hanged!" said the guardian of the Black Museum briefly. "Casts taken after death."

Bunting smiled nervously. "They don't look dead somehow. They look more as if they were listening," he said.

"That's the fault of Jack Ketch," said the man facetiously. "It's his idea—that of knotting his patient's necktie under the left ear! That's what he does to each of the gentlemen to whom he has to act valet on just one occasion only. It makes them lean just a bit to one side. You look here——?"

Daisy and her father came a little closer, and the speaker pointed with his finger to a little dent imprinted on the left side of each neck ; running from this indentation was a curious little furrow, well ridged above, showing how tightly Jack Ketch's necktie had been drawn when its wearer was hurried through the gates of eternity.

" They looks foolish-like, rather than terrified, or—or hurt," said Bunting wonderingly.

He was extraordinarily moved and fascinated by those dumb, staring faces.

But young Chandler exclaimed in a cheerful, matter-of-fact voice, " Well, a man would look foolish at such a time as that, with all his plans brought to naught—and knowing he's only got a second to live—now wouldn't he ? "

" Yes, I suppose he would," said Bunting slowly.

Daisy had gone a little pale. The sinister, breathless atmosphere of the place was beginning to tell on her. She now began to understand that the shabby little objects lying there in the glass case close to her were each and all links in the chain of evidence which, in almost every case, had brought some guilty man or woman to the gallows.

" We had a yellow gentleman here the other day," observed the guardian suddenly ; " one of those Brahmins—so they calls themselves. Well, you'd 'a been quite surprised to see how that heathen took on ! He declared—what was the word he used ?"—he turned to Chandler.

" He said that each of these things, with the exception of the casts, mind you—queer to say, he left

them out—exuded evil, that was the word he used ! Exuded—squeezed out it means. He said that being here made him feel very bad. And 'twasn't all nonsense either. He turned quite green under his yellow skin, and we had to shove him out quick. He didn't feel better till he'd got right to the other end of the passage ! ”

“ There now ! Who'd ever think of that ? ” said Bunting. “ I should say that man 'ud got something on his conscience, wouldn't you ? ”

“ Well, I needn't stay now,” said Joe's good-natured friend. “ You show your friends round, Chandler. You knows the place nearly as well as I do, don't you ? ”

He smiled at Joe's visitors, as if to say good-bye, but it seemed that he could not tear himself away after all.

“ Look here,” he said to Bunting. “ In this here little case are the tools of Charles Peace. I expect you've heard of him.”

“ I should think I have ! ” cried Bunting eagerly.

“ Many gents as comes here thinks this case the most interesting of all. Peace was such a wonderful man ! A great inventor they say he would have been, had he been put in the way of it. Here's his ladder ; you see it folds up quite compactly, and makes a nice little bundle—just like a bundle of old sticks any man might have been seen carrying about London in those days without attracting any attention. Why, it probably helped him to look like an honest working man time and time again, for on being arrested he declared most solemnly he'd always carried that ladder openly under his arm.”

"The daring of that!" cried Bunting.

"Yes, and when the ladder was opened out it could reach from the ground to the second storey of any old house. And, oh! how clever he was! Just open one section, and you see the other sections open automatically; so Peace could stand on the ground and force the thing quietly up to any window he wished to reach. Then he'd go away again, having done his job, with a mere bundle of old wood under his arm! My word, he was artful! I wonder if you've heard the tale of how Peace once lost a finger. Well, he guessed the constables were instructed to look out for a man missing a finger; so what did he do?"

"Put on a false finger," suggested Bunting.

"No, indeed! Peace made up his mind just to do without a hand altogether. Here's his false stump; you see, it's made of wood—wood and black felt? Well, that just held his hand nicely. Why, we consider that one of the most ingenious contrivances in the whole museum."

Meanwhile, Daisy had let go her hold of her father. With Chandler in delighted attendance, she had moved away to the farther end of the great room, and now she was bending over yet another glass case. "Whatever are those little bottles for?" she asked wonderingly.

There were five small phials, filled with varying quantities of cloudy liquids.

"They're full of poison, Miss Daisy, that's what they are. There's enough arsenic in that little whack o' brandy to do for you and me—aye, and for your father as well, I should say."

"Then chemists shouldn't sell such stuff," said Daisy,