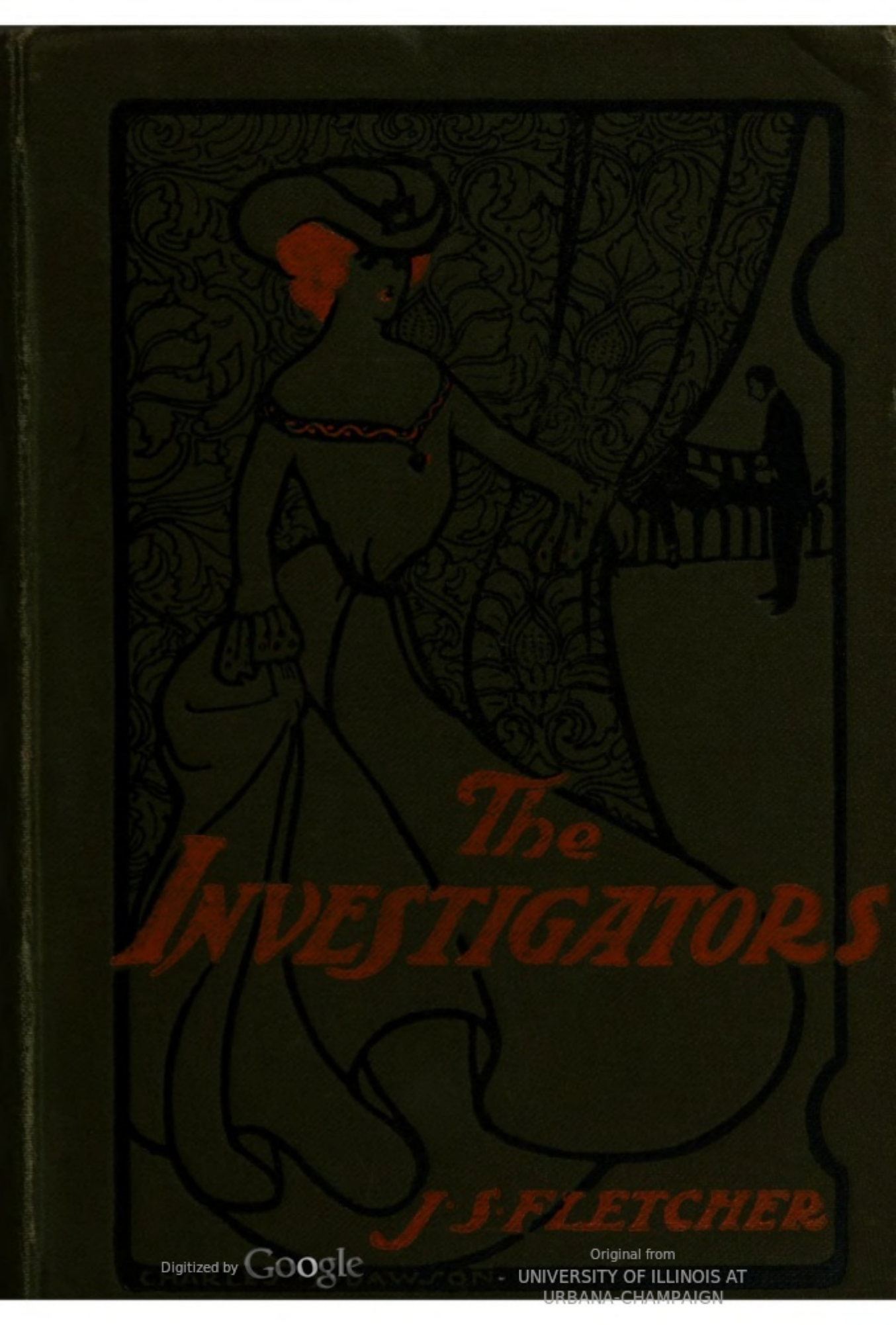

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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THE GOLDEN SPUR.
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3 Vols.

The Investigators

By

J. S. Fletcher

Author of

"When Charles the First was King," "The Harvesters"
"The Paths of the Prudent," "The Three Days' Terror,"
"The Golden Spur," etc.

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The Investigators

CHAPTER I

NAPTHALI HOPPS—EXPERT AND SPECIALIST

On a certain fine morning in the early summer of 1891 two young men sat at breakfast in the coffee-room of the Great Northern Hotel at King's Cross. They had chosen a quiet corner of the room, and the head waiter, who knew one of them to be a lover of privacy and solitude, took care that no chance comer should disturb them. Consequently they were left to converse with a freedom not always procurable in public places. Even the waiter detailed to wait upon them kept out of earshot, careful as he was not to escape the slightest glance or sign. He knew one of

his charges as a regular customer, open-handed and generous, and for regular customers of that description he had a genuine love, which preserved his vigilance and watchful respect. Thus they breakfasted in peace and comfort, and were as happy as Englishmen usually are under such favourable conditions.

The young man upon whom the waiter kept a watchful eye, and who sat with his back to the window overlooking the entrance to the station, was a tall, well-made fellow of twenty-four or five years, grey-eyed, fair-haired, open and pleasantly frank of countenance, not remarkable in any particular fashion, but simply a type of thousands of his countrymen. His bronzed face, strong and well-knit frame, clear gaze and general air of vigorous health seemed to indicate a life spent in the open air, amongst fields and woods, rather than on the pavements of a town. No observant person, in short, could have taken him for anything else than a young countryman of means and position. His grey tweed suit and stoutly-shod boots were distinctly

reminiscent of the country; the horse-shoe pin carelessly thrust into his white neck-cloth seemed to suggest horses, dogs, and the usual appanage of a rural establishment. Interrogated as to this young man's name and history, the highly-respectable head waiter might have informed you that he was Mr Leonard Charlesworth, the owner of a handsome estate in Lincolnshire, Master of the Danesford Foxhounds, a magistrate, and altogether an exceptionally fortunate individual. If he had been inclined to be more than usually confidential, he might further have mentioned that Mr Charlesworth was particularly fond of country life and of Danesford Manor, that he rarely came up to town, and that when he did so he invariably occupied his present quarters.

Mr Charlesworth's companion was neither tall, handsome, nor bucolic in appearance. He was young and short and fat. His round, clean-shaven face was almost boyish in its youthful freshness, and the monocle screwed into its right eye gave it an air of amusing imperturbability.

Meeting him in the street you would have said to yourself that there was a man who went through life smiling. Nevertheless, if you had looked closer you would have decided that the smile was a shrewd one, and that the youthful face had a very knowing expression stamped upon its every line. You might have been puzzled to give a name to the man's profession, calling and station. He was well and irreproachably attired in a quiet way, and the easy fit of his tweed garments showed that he studied comfort together with appearance. He, too, wore a white neckcloth and a horse-shoe pin, but it was obviously impossible to connect him with either dogs, horses or country life. He might have been a judicial humourist but for his youth, or an actor but for his eminently prosperous appearance. Whatever he was, according to the head waiter, who had never seen him before, and wondered as to his exact position in the world, there was no denying the fact that he was a very pleasant-faced gentleman and extremely witty.

"This," said the fat man, helping him-

self liberally to artistically-carved slices from a tempting York ham, "this is distinctly enjoyable. I have eaten cold boiled ham in almost every city in the world, but somehow it never seems quite so good as it does at home. Perhaps that is because English air gives one a keener appetite. Although I have only been in England twenty-four hours, I have developed an enormous capacity for food. It must be the air."

"Wait till you get down to Danesford," said Leonard Charlesworth. "We can give you some really fresh air there. This isn't air—it's smoke."

"I don't know," said the other, dubiously. "I always think the air is pretty fresh in London. I'm not a countryman, you know. Don't be surprised if I find the Lincolnshire swamps and flats rather oppressive."

"There's as much undulating country in Lincolnshire as in most other English counties," answered Leonard.

"Really? I thought you had nothing but meres and fogs and swamps and dikes down there. But, then

of course, I know so little of my native land. London, Paris, Chicago, Calcutta—I know them all, but I don't know Bullocksmithy."

"What a queer chap you are!" said Leonard.

"Am I? But, my dear fellow, what can you expect of a man whose name is Napthali Hopps? Dear me, what a really awful thing it is that fathers and mothers should be able to blight a man's existence by giving him outrageous names!"

"I don't think," said Leonard, "that your existence is much blighted."

"That depends. Look at it from my standpoint. My father began life as a navvy, or something of that sort. He made money — awfully curious phrase that is, by-the-bye. He became a railway king. Before he became a railway king I appeared on the scene. He named me Napthali. Horrible fate to go through life behind such a barbarous name! I endured agonies because of it both at Rugby and at Cambridge. When I came to man's estate I looked things in the face. I

decided that almost everything was closed to me. The Church—you couldn't very well make an archbishop of a man who signs himself Napthali Hopps. Napthali Cantuar—Napthali Ebor—they don't sound well, do they? The Bar—now, if I had gone to the Bar I should in time have been advanced to the Bench. Of course, they would have wished to make a knight of me. Sir Napthali Hopps—oh, it's too dreadful. Just the same with everything—my name closes every avenue. Even marriage."

"Why marriage?"

"My dear fellow, just imagine the feelings of a girl who is asked to become Mrs Napthali Hopps! If it had been Norman, or Nicholas, or Nugent, now—but Napthali! No—my name hangs about me like a millstone, and pulls me down to the undercurrent. You have no idea of my woes. I dare not go into society—simply dare not. Fancy a fellow bawling out, 'Mr Napthali Hopps.' And 'Mr N. Hopps' looks foolish and leads to questions. 'I have been wondering what your name is, Mr Hopps. I am sure it must be Norman.' Then

you've got to say, 'No, ma'am, it's plain Napthali.' You see how I am to be pitied."

"I daresay there are at least thirty millions of people in these islands who would cheerfully change places with you," said Leonard.

"That shows how remarkably twisted things are. But, seriously, my dear fellow, what can a man do with a name like mine? It's all very well for you, you know; you spring from a good old family, you're a lord of the soil and all that—no end of a swell altogether. But who and what am I? A millionaire? Oh, that doesn't count at all. There are almost as many millionaires as paupers nowadays. In fact, it's become a fixed law: the more paupers the more millionaires — the more millionaires the more paupers. Both of 'em to be pitied. Really, though, to be a millionaire and a nobody, and to be called Napthali Hopps is simply a succession of untoward events against which no man can stand. That's why I thought things over and decided upon a career of my own."

"That's something new, isn't it?" said Leonard. "When I last saw you, two years ago, you hadn't got any career in prospect, had you?"

"No—I had not. I evolved the notion out in China. I said to myself, I must have something to do. I can't marry, I can't become a public character, but I've got brains and energy—don't smile—and I must have an outlet for both. So I thought and worried, and lay awake three nights, and at last I had a happy notion. I decided to be an expert."

"What in? Handwriting?"

"Don't be frivolous. Can you imagine me sitting down to examine the caligraphic performances of forgers and the twice-crossed letters of young women in love? No—I am an expert in character. Seriously, I have had notions of taking rooms in London, and putting up a brass plate on the door—'N. Hopps, Specialist and Expert. Anybody's character diagnosed, and — if necessary — exposed. Terms moderate.'"

Leonard laughed.

"What a queer chap you are, Hopps," said he.

"No, but I'm serious. And I'm more than serious—I'm a success. I've been diagnosing character for over a year now, and I flatter myself that my methods are really successful. I had no end of fun coming back from Egypt the other day. I've got a book somewhere, in which I wrote down all my impressions and conclusions as to the characters and peculiarities of my fellow-travellers. Some day I shall develop the thing into an exact science, and write a monograph on it."

"But what good will it do?"

"My dear chap, what a question? You might as well ask what good does anything do. Just imagine the use I might be to somebody or other—yourself, for instance—in unravelling a mystery, or in letting you into the true character of some person whom you had reason to suspect. Suppose, for example, that you are a merchant, and some man whom you don't know wants to establish business connections with you. Under the present commercial system I

believe you would go to an inquiry office and find out if the man was to be trusted. Well, you know, I think that's nasty—you ought not to go asking questions about another fellow, ought you? But, then, you've got to find out all about the man somehow, haven't you? Well, you come to me. You say, 'I want to know everything about Jones—is he honest, straight; will he be able to meet his obligations? and so on.' Then I set to work. I cultivate the acquaintance of Jones. I sit next him at church or theatre, and I study his physiognomy. That done I report to you. Doesn't that promise exceeding well?"

Leonard laughed again. He was just a bit puzzled by his old friend's chatter. Nobody knew when Hopps was jesting or not. So he mildly remarked, for the third time, that Hopps was a queer chap, and that it was time they walked across to the train, to both of which propositions the self-constituted expert assented.

As they stood in the ticket-office, Leonard touched his companion's arm.

"Here's a chance for you," said he. "A

neighbour of mine is just booking. He will go down by our train. I'll introduce him —and if you can read his character, why, I'll believe there's something in it. Come along—we'll catch him on the platform."

CHAPTER II

DR WILLIAMS AND HIS NIECE

NAPTHALI HOPPS, following his friend's glance, saw a tall man, dressed in professional-looking black, disappear through the door which gave access to the platform. He had only just time to take in a rapid survey of the vanishing figure from the rear, but he immediately made up his mind on one point.

"Your friend is a medical man," said he, turning to Leonard.

"Quite true—he is. I suppose he looks like one too. That doesn't do you much credit, Hopps. I shall want some more convincing proof of your powers than that, if I am to believe in them."

"Oh," answered Hopps, "that was easy. Anybody could tell the man is a doctor.

You can tell some men by a mere glance at the parting of their hair. But come along and introduce me to this man. I am dying to exercise my talents."

When they reached the platform, however, the tall figure had disappeared. There was still a brief interval before the departure of the train, and they turned to the bookstall and bought such newspapers as seemed likely to afford them sufficient amusement for a two hours' journey. As they stood there the man of whom they had just been speaking came up hurriedly. He recognised Leonard and nodded.

"Good-morning, squire," said he. "Are you going down by this train?"

Leonard replied in the affirmative.

"I saw you outside," said he, "and tried to catch you, but you hurried away and disappeared."

"Yes, I am not alone. I have my niece with me. I am taking her to Danesford. Perhaps you will give us your company?"

Leonard looked at Hopps. The fat man was gazing benignantly upon the doctor. His eyeglass was the very realisation of

vacuousness, and his round, good-humoured face expressed nothing but general satisfaction. "I have a friend here," said Leonard. "Permit me—Mr Hopps—Dr Williams. Hopps, you are fond of scientific conversation; shall we go down with Dr Williams?"

"Simply delighted," said Hopps. "I hate railway journeys unless there is someone to talk to. I can't read in a railway carriage. I suppose it's the jolting."

Dr Williams led the way along the platform to a compartment carefully guarded by an expectant official. At sight of the doctor and his companions he opened the door. A young lady sat in the farther corner, dipping into a bundle of illustrated papers. As the three men entered she rose.

"Agatha," said Dr Williams, "let me introduce Mr Leonard Charlesworth, whom you will shortly know as king, lord and autocrat of Danesford. Also Mr Charlesworth's friend—Mr Hopps. My niece—Miss Agatha Burton."

Leonard felt somewhat astonished. Dr Williams was not exactly the sort of man whom anyone would expect to find travel-

ling with a young lady, niece, sister or cousin. Leonard wondered how he came to have a niece. He had looked upon Williams as a sort of hermit—a man utterly relationless, given up to science and reflection. It was a surprise to find him in female society. Leonard sat down and looked at Miss Burton with something of curiosity. Meanwhile Dr Williams and Mr Hopps settled themselves comfortably in opposite corners and studied each other.

"How wonderful it is," thought Hopps, "that people sort themselves so readily! Here are four of us. I've never seen Williams or his niece before. They've never seen me. The young lady has never seen Leonard. Three of us, then, are total strangers, and all four are partial strangers. Yet we instinctively sort ourselves. Leonard sits down by the girl—that's because they're both young. Williams prepares to talk to me—that's because we're both—shall I say clever? The arrangement is good in any case. I daren't talk to young ladies—simply daren't. That's because of my unfortunate name. Therefore I must turn

my attention to Williams. Now for him."

Hopps proceeded to examine the doctor's outward appearance with much care. He saw a tall, broad-shouldered man, whose age might be anything between forty and fifty. He saw a massive head, a clean-shaven, inscrutable face, eyes deeply set under a square forehead, and a mouth and chin indicative, if features can be indicative, of firmness, resolution and an iron will. Evidently Dr Williams was not an ordinary man, and, recognising this, Hopps proceeded to study him more carefully. Nothing in his own countenance expressed his interest. To all outward appearance he was a round-faced, good-tempered creature, at peace with himself and the world, and only lazily inclined to take a bland interest in anything.

If Hopps found the doctor interesting, Leonard found the doctor's niece very pleasant to look upon. She was young—he decided that she could scarcely be more than eighteen or nineteen—and she was pretty, with something more than mere

surface prettiness. Leonard was not skilled in analysing young ladies' looks, and after he had gazed at Agatha Burton for a moment he knew no more than that she had frank, smiling eyes, which seemed at one minute to be grey and at another blue; that her features, if not faultlessly regular, were daintily attractive; and that her complexion was delicate and fair as the petals of a monthly rose. He noticed the glint of her hair, clustering in tiny curls above her forehead, and he had a dim notion that her ears were small and beautifully shaped. Beyond all that he recognised, more from instinct than observation, that the doctor's niece was a young lady of decided character and originality—there was an alert movement of eyes and mouth which assured him of that.

"My niece," said Dr Williams, withdrawing his gaze from the bland countenance of Hopps and fixing it on Leonard, "is seeing England for the first time for some years. She is returning home from a French school. I am rather afraid that

she will be disappointed with Lincolnshire."

"I hope not," said Leonard.

"I am quite sure not," said the doctor's niece. "Do you know, Mr Charlesworth, I shall simply love to spend a summer in England. I have been looking forward with such pleasure to this visit. You know I have read so much about Lincolnshire—history, and Kingsley's *Hereward*, and all that, you know—and I am dying to see it. Isn't it all fens and meres, and dear old manor houses with moats round them, and herons standing on one leg, and that sort of thing? Oh, I know I shall have a delightful time—don't say I shall not, Uncle Henry, because I have made up my mind that I shall!"

"I suppose that's how girls take it nowadays," said Mr Hopps to himself. "I must study this type. Still school-girlish, and a little bit inclined to gush—but what a fresh, delightful voice she has."

"I'm afraid you are doomed to disappointment in certain respects," said Leonard, smiling. "Lincolnshire is not all meres

and fens, and I don't think there are many moated granges in our neighbourhood. However, we've got a moat round Danesford Manor House, and I shall be delighted to show it to you."

"Thanks, so much, Mr Charlesworth—I'm sure it will be delightful. You know my uncle has been entertaining me all the way from Paris with a description of Danesford. It was most melancholy, really, but I simply wouldn't believe it, you know. You can't expect a girl to look at things as a middle-aged bachelor gentleman looks at them, can you?"

"I'm afraid, my dear, that you don't realise how very dull and dismal the establishment of a middle-aged bachelor gentleman is," said Dr Williams.

"Oh, but I shall change all that, my dear uncle. You will please to understand that I am going to reform you altogether. I shall make everything nice and sweet and lovely, and you will have to do as I tell you in everything. What's the good of being young if one can't make other people feel young too? Don't you think so, Mr

Charlesworth? Oh, that's right—you and I will be such friends, won't we? Do you hunt and shoot, and play cricket, and all that sort of thing? Oh, do tell me about it—you have no idea of how simply horrid it is to live in France, where they can't play any decent outdoor game. Do you know, I don't think Frenchmen have any more muscle than a frog. And now do tell me about hunting and shooting—I'm dying to hear about anything English."

Leonard laughed, and began to talk about the Danesford hounds. It was a subject dear to his heart, and he presently waxed enthusiastic over a description of a brilliant run which took dogs and horses twenty miles across country. Dr Williams and Hopps listened for a moment, and then with a mutual impulse they turned their backs on the two younger folks and began to talk science—the doctor suggesting some topic from a casual glance at the *Times*, lying on his knee.

The time passed rapidly to Leonard, and he was suddenly surprised to find the train rolling into Grantham. He said to himself

that he had never enjoyed a railway journey more—the girl's fresh, sweet voice, her naïve, original comments and remarks had interested and amused him. He stood staring after the doctor's brougham as it drove away. Napthali Hopps tapped him on the shoulder.

"My dear fellow," said he, "you're dog-cart waits patiently. Do we stay here or do we go forward?"

"Oh—get in," said Leonard. "We've six miles before us. I say, what did you think of Williams?"

"What did you think of Williams's niece?"

"Oh, I don't know. Rather a nice girl, don't you think? Awfully dull it will be for her at Danesford."

"My dear chap, even an English village can't be dull to a released school-girl. But is Williams such a hermit?"

"A regular hermit. He has lived in Danesford, in a queer, rambling, old place called The Bower, for several years—twenty, I should think. He practises very little. I believe he has very considerable private

means, and he devotes himself to scientific experiments. Writing a book, you know—regular *magnum opus*. His house is more like a family vault than a habitable residence. But what did you think of him, Hopps?"

Mr Hopps took a cigar from his case and lighted it carefully.

"I think," he said, "that Dr Williams, in the expressive slang of the swell mob, is 'a wrong un.'"

"'A wrong un!' What makes you think that?"

"Pooh! How do I know? Another case of Dr Fell most likely. I must study him a little longer. At present I think he is diabolically cruel, that he has some awful secret on his mind, that he's the sort of man who would commit the most revolting murder without a pang of commiseration for his victim, and that altogether the young lady whom he is now driving home is much to be pitied."

"Great heavens! You're not serious, Hopps, are you?"

"Never more so, my dear fellow.

"But an eminently respectable practitioner!"

"Pooh! That's mere detail. I tell you, Charlesworth, that man is a criminal; he has a secret crime on his mind now; and I'll pledge my skill and knowledge of human character on what I say. Yes; Dr Williams is decidedly an interesting case. I must see more of him."

CHAPTER III

THE BOWER

Dr Williams, driving homewards in blissful unconsciousness of Mr Napthali Hopps's criticisms and conclusions, looked at his young charge, and wondered what he should do with her. She had been his charge for something like fifteen years—always, in fact, since his only sister Alice Burton and her husband had died far away in India, leaving their only child to Henry Williams's care. Until recently, however, the trust had been a light one. Agatha had so far spent her time in various scholastic establishments—first in London, then in a French convent, and her guardian had seen little of her for several years. This arrangement had suited him admirably. He felt himself bound to see that his dead sister's child was well cared for

and happy, but he would have objected strongly to take any active part in devising or superintending whatever arrangements were necessary for either object. Therefore he had contented himself with occasionally visiting his niece, satisfying himself that she was quite satisfied with her surroundings, and paying whatever bills were incurred on her behalf. To this Agatha had assented readily enough. As a child she was somewhat afraid of her uncle, whose stern, ascetic countenance and severely professional air rather awed than attracted her. Growing towards womanhood she lost some of this feeling; but, as she had no special affection for Dr Williams, she felt it no hardship to be constantly separated from him. She had a large circle of acquaintances amongst her school-fellows, and for several years had been in the habit of spending her holidays with one or other of them. Thus she had seen no little of the world, and was quite as familiar with Henley and with Brighton as with the white-capped Sisters to whom her education had lately been intrusted.

Now that Agatha was nearly twenty years of age, however, Dr Williams felt it necessary that she should come home to Danesford. It was obviously impossible to keep her at school any longer, and equally impossible that she should spend all her time in visiting. Some definite and fixed headquarters she must have, and where should they be but in her uncle's house? Glancing at her from behind his newspaper, Dr Williams wondered how this unavoidable arrangement would work. He was a lonely and retiring man, and there were reasons why his solitude must never be disturbed. Certainly there was room enough in The Bower for himself and half-a-dozen young ladies. He saw no reason why he should not make Agatha comfortable there without destroying his own comfort.

"Besides," said he to himself, as he reflected upon these matters, "she is sure to marry before long. She is so bright and lively and pretty, that some man is sure to fall in love with her and marry her. She will no doubt visit a good deal,

and her girl friends will have brothers and cousins, and ere long I shall have to consider a proposal on her behalf. And even when she is at home she will not interfere with me."

And then the brougham drove into the grounds of The Bower and stopped at the door, and Dr Williams got down and formally welcomed his niece to her new home.

"I am afraid you will find The Bower a very dreary and dismal place, my dear," he said with a touch of regret in his voice. "But, you see, it suits me so well that I have acquired a sort of affection for it, and I should not like to leave it, even for a more desirable residence."

"But why should you think of such a thing?" asked Agatha, looking about her. "Why, I think it is delightful! Such a dear old place, and such fine trees. And your garden—why, Uncle Henry, the whole place is lovely!"

"Wait till you see it in winter," said the doctor. "Fog and snow and rain make a vast difference. The place looks at its best just now."

In truth, there was no reason why anyone should have spoken slightingly of The Bower, judging by its appearance that summer morning. Closed in from the village street by a high wall, thickly covered with ivy, the house stood in a large, old-fashioned garden, liberally studded with ancient elms and ashes, and arranged after the somewhat formal style of eighteenth-century horticulture. It was a rather large house, four square, built of red brick, most of which was hidden by ivy and jessamine, and it gave Agatha the impression of solidity and strength. It was the very house in which she would have expected to find her uncle situated. Its solid, sober proportions, the mathematically correct blinds and curtains in the windows, the scrupulously neat appearance of the walks and flower-beds seemed the fitting surroundings of Dr Williams. No one could have taken The Bower for anything but the residence of a grave, middle-aged bachelor. Its outward appearance suggested silence and decorum and infinite respectability.

Dr Williams led the way into the house. In the wide entrance-hall stood a tall, somewhat determined-looking woman, very well dressed in black, who saluted the doctor respectfully, and glanced curiously at his companion.

"Good-morning, Mrs Hargreaves," said Dr Williams. "Here is my niece, you see, at last. Agatha, this is my housekeeper, Mrs Hargreaves. I suppose Miss Burton's rooms have been prepared?"

"They are quite ready, sir," answered the woman, with a formal curtesy to Agatha.

"Then we will show her the way," said the doctor.

Mrs Hargreaves produced a key from a bunch hanging at her waist, and preceded them up the staircase and along a corridor. "She reminds me of a gaoler," thought Agatha; "and why on earth does she carry the key of my room on that great bunch?"

"I have had two or three rooms specially prepared for you, my dear," said Dr Williams, as they followed the housekeeper.

"Of course, the whole house is open to you, but I thought that you would like to have a corner of your own."

Mrs Hargreaves stopped before a door at the end of the corridor. She was about to insert the key in the lock when the doctor took it from her and prepared to open the door himself.

"Thank you, Mrs Hargreaves," he said. "I will show Miss Burton the rooms, and perhaps you will be good enough to send up her luggage. I think the spring-cart followed us pretty closely."

The housekeeper bowed and withdrew. "I don't like that woman," said Agatha to herself. "She watches me as if I were a natural history specimen."

"There," said the doctor, opening the door. "This is the entrance to your own domain, Agatha. This, you see, is your sitting-room; beyond that is a bedroom, dressing-room and bathroom, and there is also a room for your maid."

Agatha was enchanted. She darted to the window and looked out. The room faced the south, and the windows afforded

a prospect which was just then nothing short of beautiful. Before the house lay a velvet-like stretch of lawn, with here and there a gay-coloured parterre of flowers. A magnificent copper beech stood in one corner, and beyond the dank fence, which terminated the lawn, stretched a wide park, bounded in the distance by thick woods. Dr Williams stood by Agatha's side and looked out.

"That is Danesford Park, Mr Charlesworth's property," he said. "The Manor House, his residence, is farther to the left. The cattle you see there are part of his famous breed of shorthorns."

"Oh!" said Agatha; "it is too lovely. You don't know how much I like it. I shall simply love to sit in this window and look out. And this room—what a sweet, cosy little nest. Uncle Henry, you are really too good. I must kiss you, oh, I must indeed! There — one — two — three kisses! Now, do let me see all the rest of this domain of mine."

Agatha flew through the other rooms, and the doctor, slowly following her, heard

her exclamations of delight with something of a smile. He had never been accustomed to the society of young people, and his niece amused and interested him more than he had thought possible.

"Everything is perfect," said Agatha, flying back into the sitting-room, "you have thought of everything. Piano—bookcases—pictures—work-table—however did you think of all these things?"

"I'm afraid Mrs Hargreaves did most of the thinking, my dear," answered the doctor. "An old dry-as-dust fellow like me can't be expected to understand all these things, you know."

"Never mind—the suggestion came from you, of course. Really, it is too good and kind. Now you shall see what a model young woman I am, and now and then, when you are very good, you shall come up here and have tea, and I will play to you. Oh, do let me try the piano!"

"What a chatterbox she is!" thought the doctor, as Agatha rattled over the keys. "And what a dull house for her to come into!"

"It's beautiful," said Agatha. "I mean to practise two hours a day. Oh, I shall become quite a prodigy. I—"

A tap at the door interrupted her. "Come in," said the doctor. A young woman, remarkably pretty and eminently rustic, appeared. "This is your maid, Agatha," said Dr Williams. "Patty, this is your young mistress, Miss Burton."

Miss Agatha laughed and nodded to Patty, who stared at her open-eyed.

"How do you do, Patty?" she said. "I do hope you'll like me—I'm sure I shall like you tremendously. But, oh, Uncle Henry, just fancy giving me a maid! I sha'n't know what to do with her—simply I sha'n't. You'll have to teach your mistress her duties, Patty—you will, really. But, then, I do learn things very quickly. Now, what shall we do first?"

"Unpack your boxes, I should say," remarked the doctor. "And after that Patty will show you the way to the dining-room, where you will find me ready for luncheon."

For the next hour Agatha busied herself

in exploring her new surroundings and in superintending the unpacking of her numerous trunks. She never ceased talking to Patty for a moment, and the latter eventually took refuge in negatives and affirmatives, content to let her mistress talk herself out. Agatha, however, never did talk herself out; she was never tired of anything, and her tongue flew as nimbly as her feet. In ten minutes she had reduced her new maid to a condition of hopeless bewilderment. Patty decided that she had never met a young lady who talked so much, laughed so merrily, or who whisked here, there and everywhere like a whirlwind.

The doctor was waiting in the dining-room when Agatha entered.

"It's positively delightful to have a maid, Uncle Henry," she said. "Whatever made you think of it?"

"Crabbed age and youth, you know, my dear. I am surrounded by old folk here—even the housemaids are of a certain age. I thought it well that you should have something young and attractive about you,

and so I instructed Mrs Hargreaves to engage Patty. Remember that she is to be your own servant, and that she will take all her instructions from you."

"Do you know, Uncle Henry, that makes me feel so important! I'm afraid you're going to spoil me terribly. I shall have my brain turned with so much kindness. Fancy a poor little school-girl having her own rooms and her own maid, and being her own mistress," and Agatha laughed merrily.

Mrs Hargreaves, passing the dining-room, heard, and looked grimmer than ever. "It's a long time since anybody laughed in this house," she said to herself.

CHAPTER IV

THE BEGINNING OF A MYSTERY

It seemed to Dr Williams that he could not do better after luncheon than show his niece the rest of the house and grounds. These matters once explained to her, she would be free to go here and there according to her own liking, and there would be no need to trouble him with questions. The meal over, therefore, he explained his views to Agatha. For an hour he was at her service, and would act as guide and cicerone to whatever she wished to see.

"That," said Agatha, "will be delightful. I do so long to explore that dear old garden. But are you quite sure, my dear uncle, that you can waste so much time? Won't your patients be wanting you, poor dear things? I always understood that

medical men are, oh, so frightfully busy—never a moment to spare for anything, you know."

"I believe that is the case with some of us," answered Dr Williams, "but I may as well tell you that I practise very little. I have a few patients here and there, but they give me little trouble. There is a youthful medical practitioner in the village who attends to the old women's aches and pains. I fancy he has little to do—this is a healthy place, except for the ague, which comes periodically with the mists and fogs. But, at anyrate, he leaves me free to devote myself to my experiments and researches."

"I love experiments," said Agatha, as they went into the hall. "We used to do them at school. You put all sorts of funny little powders into dear little glass tubes, don't you, and warm them over a spirit lamp, and they turn into gases and things, and if you don't mind you blow yourself up, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I have scarcely arrived at that stage," said the doctor, laughing.

"And my experiments are of a slightly different nature. And now let us look round this gloomy house of mine."

Agatha, following the doctor from room to room, was bound to confess that the epithet was tolerably well deserved. Everything was solid, heavy, and sober of hue and aspect. The rooms looked as if nobody lived in them. There were no evidences of life anywhere. The drawing-room was a positive vault, the dining and breakfast rooms were wildernesses of mahogany and Brussels carpet, and in all these there was nothing out of place. It seemed as though somebody had originally mapped out the entire house on strictly mathematical lines, placing every chair and table on exact spots, from which nothing had been allowed to remove them. Agatha began to grow restless as she looked about her. The formal, precise air irritated her. She longed to upset chairs and tables, rearrange pictures, and generally remodel the whole establishment.

"I suppose the whole place sadly needs a woman's taste and energy," said Dr

Williams, with something like a sigh. "Mrs Hargreaves's notions are somewhat old fashioned. However, I seldom look into any room in the house except the dining-room. I spend most of my time in this room—my study."

Agatha noticed that the approach to Dr Williams's own regions was very carefully guarded. First came a heavy oak door opening from the hall, then a green baize one, and after that a third door giving access to the study.

"It is necessary that I should enjoy perfect quiet," explained the doctor, noticing Agatha's astonishment. "When these doors are closed I cannot hear a sound from other quarters of the house. And, now, how do you like my sanctum?"

Agatha looked about her in astonishment. She stood in a large room literally lined with books. A huge desk in the centre was covered with papers; a table under the window held a heterogeneous collection of instruments, jars, bottles and scientific apparatus. Through an open door she saw a further apartment, evidently used as

a laboratory. She peeped into this with a sort of awe-struck curiosity.

"What a tremendously clever-looking place!" she said. "And do you really sit here with all these skulls and bones and skeletons for company? And what are those strange objects in the jars and bottles? It looks like a witches' den. Why don't you hang up a horse-shoe over the door and a snake's skin above the fireplace?"

"Then you wouldn't like to spend your time in these rooms?" said the doctor.

"To be candid, my dear uncle, I must say that I don't think I should. In half an hour I should get simply creepy. I should expect those dry bones to live and talk. Do you ever sit here at night—I mean quite late at night?"

"I often sit here the whole night through, my dear."

"How dreadful! And don't you see things—I mean awful horrible things? Oh, just imagine being here with all those fearful objects at midnight—your nerves must be made of iron. I should simply scream if I were you."

The doctor laughed and said nothing. He went across to his desk, and stood there as if in deep thought, while Agatha explored the room, looking at the instruments, reading the titles of the books, and generally investigating things in her own way.

"Agatha," said Dr Williams, suddenly, "there is another inmate of my house whom you have not seen, and to whom I think I had better introduce you. I have an old friend living with me. He has been my constant companion for nearly twenty years. He is an invalid—almost always ill — and I have to take great care of him."

"How very good and kind of you!" said Agatha.

"Would you care to see him?" asked the doctor. "He is not particularly well to-day, but it might do him good to see a young face. I am afraid things are very gloomy in this house."

"Oh, do let me see him, please," said Agatha. "I am quite fond of visiting sick people. Dr Michot used to say I did his patients more good than all his medicine."

"I have no doubt of it," said the doctor. "Well, come this way."

He opened a door in the corner of the study and entered, motioning Agatha to follow him. The girl, stepping softly behind him, looked up and saw before her a room, more brightly furnished than the other apartments of the house. There were books and papers in abundance, and a canary in his cage in the window was singing blithely as she entered. Her glance, however, only swept over these things and passed on swiftly to the man who half rose from his easy-chair to meet her. He was of well-made proportions, almost as tall and broad as Dr Williams, and had evidently at some time possessed considerable strength, but now his frame was worn and wasted, and his clothes hung on him loosely. His face was the colour of parchment, and the thin hair on his head was almost white. But, for all that, Agatha felt certain that he was not an old man.

Dr Williams led Agatha up to the invalid's side.

"Charles," he said, "you have heard me

speak of my niece, Agatha Burton—poor Alice's daughter. Here she is—come to ask how you are. Agatha, this gentleman is Mr Charles Ashley."

Agatha put her hand within the sick man's wasted fingers. He held it for a moment and looked earnestly in her face.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Yes, I see it very well. You'll see it too, Henry—the likeness to her mother. Yes, it's very clear. Sit down, my dear; sit down. I'm glad to see you—yes, very glad. I knew your mother a long time ago. We were friends—great friends. You've got her eyes and her mouth. Poor Alice! She was such a bright, lively girl—always laughing and talking. Do you remember, Henry?"

"Yes, I remember," said Dr Williams.

He stood near the window, watching the wan, worn face and the bright, healthy one so close to it. Agatha had taken a seat at the sick man's side and was watching him with pitying eyes.

"How nice," she said, "that you should know my mother, Mr Ashley. You and I will talk about her, won't we? And I dare-