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J. S. FLETCHER

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THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

BY

J. S. FLETCHER

NEW YORK

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MCMXXIII

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Published September, 1923

321674

Set up, electrotyped, and printed by the Vail-Ballou Co., Binghamton, N. Y.
Paper furnished by W. F. Etherington & Co., New York.
Bound by H. Wolff Estate, New York.

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CHAPTER I

TWO WANDERERS RETURN

Braxfield, who had been butler to Sir Anthony Markenmore, Baronet, of Markenmore Court, for thirty years, was a man of method. All his life he had cultivated the habit of doing certain things at certain times: the older he grew (and he was now a little over sixty) the more this habit grew upon him. Virtually, he was master of the house; Sir Anthony was an invalid who kept his room; Mr. Guy Markenmore, the elder son, had never crossed his father's threshold for some years; Mr. Harry Markenmore, the younger son, preferred anybody but himself to exercise merely domestic authority; Miss Valencia Markenmore, the only daughter, had been but recently released from the schoolroom; accordingly, Braxfield, one way and another, and without seeming to do so, wielded a mild, unobtrusive autocracy. He had many good rules, and some others that were little better than fads—amongst the last was his trick of locking up the house at precisely eight o'clock every evening.

Had anybody questioned Braxfield as to this curious regulation, the old butler would have given what he believed to be good reasons for his insistence upon it. Markenmore Court was a very old and a very large house, originally built in the last years of Queen Elizabeth, added to during the reign of Charles

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the Second, and finally restored and modernized in the time of George the Fourth. It stood on the slope of a gently-rising hill, a mile out of a village which had taken its name from the Markenmore family—a family that had been settled in those parts since the early days of the Norman Conquest; with the exception of a lodge at the entrance gates, there was no dwelling very near it. It possessed an unusual number of doors; doors opening on the terrace, on the courtyard, on the gardens, on the lawns, on the stables, on private walks that wound through the thick shrubberies; it had also corridors, galleries, chambers, little used by the family and the servants.

The family was small; the servants were few; for the Markenmores were comparatively poor, and kept up next to nothing of their ancient state. But poor though they were, they possessed a considerable share of gold and silver plate, of rare china, of valuable glass; there were also pictures in the house that were worth a fortune, and there was scarcely an apartment in which some easily removable thing that would have fetched a handsome price in the sale-room was not openly displayed.

Braxfield, a highly conscientious man, felt himself to be custodian of these family treasures, and he lived in perpetual, nervous fear of their being stolen. Had he been able to have his own way, he would have long since constructed a strong-room, fire-proof, thief-proof, and bundled into it everything of value that the old house contained. But the Markenmores, easily as they allowed their butler to rule them in certain things, were folk who would not permit interference with time-honoured custom and arrangement, and so gold cups and silver salvers,

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meticulously polished and carefully dusted, glittered in careless profusion on the massive oak sideboards, and rare ivories and priceless china stood on the open presses and ancient cabinets—as if, said Braxfield plaintively, they were of no more value than the trumpery things arranged in the museum of the neighbouring market-town. And therefore he locked up the house at eight o'clock every night, and carried the keys of some baker's dozen of doors to his butler's pantry: whoever, master or man, maid or mistress, desired to walk out of Markenmore Court, after that hour, had to apply to Braxfield for the means of egress.

On a certain evening in the third week of April, in the year 1912, Braxfield, the simple dinner to which Mr. Harry Markenmore and his sister Valencia sat down every night at seven o'clock, being well over, set out on his usual round of the doors. He always began with the smaller ones and ended up with the great triple door that opened on the terrace. And here came in another of his fads—before finally locking and bolting that door, Braxfield invariably stepped out on the terrace, crossed it to the balustrade which fenced it in from the widespreading park that stretched in front, and took a view of all that lay before him: he did this irrespective of the seasons; sometimes, therefore, as in the case of dark winter evenings, he saw nothing but gloom: in summer he saw a great deal of beauty. On this particular occasion he saw the twilight settling upon the old elms and beeches, and over the undulating meadows which lay between Markenmore and the level lands to the southward. The twilight was settling fast, then: within the few minutes during

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which Braxfield stood there, looking about him, he saw it through the dusk; the woods and coverts became blurred and indistinct shapes, and beyond them, a mile away, the lights of the village began to twinkle in the darkness. At that he turned towards the door—and then suddenly stopped. Somewhere behind him, a man, taking long rapid strides, was advancing across the lawn beneath the terrace.

There was a powerful lamp just within the big doorway: its rays spread fanwise across the terrace and over the steps which led to the lawn. As Braxfield lingered, wondering who it was that approached (for visitors of any sort were rare at Markenmore Court in those days) a tall figure strode into this arc of light and moved hurriedly up the steps, making for the door—the figure of a big, athletic man, whose evening clothes were only partly concealed by a light, unbuttoned overcoat. That he had not come far seemed evident from the fact that he was bareheaded; he looked, indeed, like a man who has hastily risen from his own dinner-table to hurry to a neighbour's house. Yet the butler gave voice to a sharp, surprised exclamation at the sight of him.

"God bless my life and soul!" he said, as he started out of the shadow in which he was standing. "Mr. John Harborough? Welcome back, sir—I'd no idea you were home again."

The man thus accosted, now in the full glare of the lamp, turned a bronzed face and a pair of keen, dark, deep-set eyes on the round cheeks and well-filled figure of the old butler. He stretched out his right hand, laughing.

"Hello, Braxfield!" he said cheerily, in the tone of one who greets an ancient acquaintance. "That

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you? Still going it as strong as ever, eh? You don't look a day older."

"Men don't alter much at my age, sir," replied Braxfield, shaking the offered hand respectfully. "That comes a bit later, Mr. Harborough. But—you're really back, sir? I hadn't heard of it—still, we don't hear very much our way, now—quieter than ever at Markenmore Court, sir."

"I only got home this afternoon, Braxfield," answered Harborough. "And just as I was finishing my dinner I heard that Sir Anthony was ill, so I came straight across to hear about him? Is it serious?"

"Well, sir, he's been a bit bad this last day or two," said Braxfield. "He varies—of course, it's now a good two years since he ever left his room. Between you and me, Mr. Harborough, he might go any time—any time. So the doctors say, sir."

"Who's here?" asked Harborough, glancing at the lighted windows in front.

"Nobody but Mr. Harry and Miss Valencia," replied the butler. "Mr. Guy—ah, we haven't seen him at Markenmore for—aye, it must be quite seven years. He went off—why, just about the time that you did, Mr. Harborough, and he's never been back—never once! I don't know where he is—I don't believe they do, either."

"Um!" said Harborough. "Harry, now—he was a boy when I went away, and Valencia—she was a slip of a girl."

"Aye, sir," said Braxfield, "but Mr. Harry's now a young man of three-and-twenty, and Miss Valencia—she's a young lady of well over nineteen. You've been away a long time, sir! But come in,

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Mr. Harborough, come in!—glad to see you at Markenmore again, sir.''

Harborough followed the old butler inside the house, and through the ancient stone hall, ornamented with deers' antlers, foxes' masks, old muskets, and other trophies of the chase and of country life, to a room which he remembered well enough—one which the family now used as a usual gathering-place. There was a bright fire of logs in the hearth; Braxfield pulled up a chair to it.

"Never use the drawing-room nowadays, Mr. Harborough,'' he whispered confidentially. "This room does for everything—dining-room, sitting-room, and so on. Not as well off as we used to be, sir—eh? But—we've still a glass of rare good port wine for old friends! Can I get you anything, Mr. Harborough?—say the word, sir !''

"Nothing, nothing, Braxfield, thank you,'' replied Harborough. He looked round and nodded at various objects. "I remember it all,'' he murmured. "Nothing changed! Well, tell the young folks I'm here, Braxfield.''

He stood up by the mantelpiece—a heavily-built, finely-carved piece of old oak—when the butler had gone, and looked once more round the room. He had known that room when he was a boy, nearly thirty years before: it was then the breakfast and morning-room, and the most comfortable place in the big, rambling house. It was comfortable now, with its old furniture, old pictures, old books—everything in it suggested the antiquity of the family to whom it belonged. But in spite of the comfort, homely and sufficient, Harborough's sharp eyes and

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acute perceptions noticed an atmosphere which he summed up in one word, Decay!—its evidences were all around him. Everything was wearing out, slowly, no doubt, but surely.

He looked up suddenly from the threadbare carpet on which he stood to see the door open, and a girl enter and come towards him with outstretched hand —a tall, lissome-figured girl, dark as all the Markenmores were, handsome, and somehow, in a way he could not immediately define, suggestive of life and spirit. She was a young beauty, and her freshness was all the more striking in those ancient surroundings: it struck Harborough so much, indeed, that he became tongue-tied, and held her hand and stared incredulously at her for a full minute before he found a word.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed at last, looking down at her, tall as she was, from his six-foot-two of feet and inches. "Are—are you Valencia?"

"Nobody else—that I'm aware of!" she answered, with a laugh. "Didn't you know me? I knew you."

"Ah!" said Harborough. "I was already an oldish sort of chap when I went away!—nearly thirty. But you, then, you were——"

"Thirteen," she broke in, with another laugh. "All legs and wings, I suppose. And so you have really come home again?"

She pointed to a chair, dropping into one herself, and Harborough sat down too, and continued to look at her, still marvelling that what he remembered as a somewhat plain and awkward child should have been transformed into this bright young creature.

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"Only today," he answered; "and as soon as I heard of your father's illness I came straight across to enquire."

"Thank you," she said simply. "But I don't think he is worse than he has been for a long time. He has bad days, of course—he was not so well yesterday—that's no doubt why you came to hear anything. He is very old now, you know—and very feeble."

"If there's anything I can do?" suggested Harborough. "You see—I've come home for good. Nearly seven years of wandering."

"You must have seen a great deal," said Valencia.

"No end," assented Harborough. "In all corners of the globe! But—I thought I'd never seen anything half so attractive as my own old house when I reached it, today! And I'm not going to leave it again. Settle down, you know."

"Greycloister is a beautiful place," said Valencia. "I have often walked through your park during your absence—and wondered how you could leave it so long."

"I had reasons," said Harborough. "However, here I am again, and very glad to see everybody once more. I've brought home a tremendous collection of all sorts of things—I hope you'll come across and see them, soon?"

"Delighted!" replied Valencia. "I suppose you'll make a sort of museum?"

"Give a lot of 'em away, I think," said Harborough. "No end of things from one place or another. But—bless me, is this Harry?"

The door had opened again, and a young man had come quietly into the room. He was tall, thin, dark;

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he wore spectacles, and had a shy, reserved look about him that suggested the student. He smiled slightly as he shook hands with the visitor, but said nothing.

"Harry to be sure," assented Valencia. "Changed, no doubt, as much as—as I have. Still—you remember him?"

"I remember that he went out shooting with me, in my woods, a day or two before I cleared off," said Harborough. He looked from brother to sister with a ruminative inquisitiveness. These two were the younger lot, he was thinking: Guy Markenmore, their elder brother, son of Sir Anthony's first marriage, was several years their senior; he would now be about Harborough's own age. "Done a lot of shooting since those days, no doubt?" he continued, glancing at the brother. "Used to be famous, your lands, for game of all sorts."

Harry Markenmore smiled again, and again said nothing; his sister replied for him.

"Harry's not much of a sportsman," she said. "He's all for books and for business. He's making an effort to—to pull things round. Somehow or other, the estate's got into a poor way. There may be hares and rabbits and pheasants and partridges in plenty—perhaps—but there's precious little money!"

"We had a bad steward," remarked Harry Markenmore, finding his tongue, and giving Harborough a significant glance. "He let things slide. I've taken it over myself, during the last two years. But—all our land's let too reasonably: the rents ought to be raised."

"Stiff proposition, that," said Harborough.

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"Most of 'em want their rents reducing, instead of raising. I expect I shall have to go into matters of that sort myself—perhaps we can put our heads together."

"Ah, but you aren't dependent on your farm rents!" said Valencia with a knowing look. "You've got town property. You see what a knowing young woman I am! All we've got is rent from our farms—and we landed folk are doomed: we aren't as well off as the people we let our land to. If Harry and I could do what we'd like, we'd sell, and be done with it."

"A good way—sometimes," said Harborough. "Why not?"

The brother and sister looked at each other.

"It's entailed," said Valencia.

She glanced at Harborough with meaning in her eyes, and Harborough nodded.

"Just so," he remarked. "But—that could be got over if—if your elder brother was agreeable."

Once more the other two exchanged glances.

"We don't know where Guy is," said Harry. "Nobody does—at least, nobody that we know. He's never been heard of for—I think it's nearly seven years."

"It is seven years," remarked Valencia. "I remember." She looked again at Harborough. "He went away, suddenly, just before you did," she added. "And that's seven years ago."

Harborough moved a little uneasily in his chair. He had no wish to be drawn into discussion of the Markenmore family secrets. But he felt a certain curiosity.

"Do you mean that—literally?" he asked.

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"Absolutely!" replied Valencia. "None of us—and no one connected with us—have heard a word of him since then."

"But—money matters?" suggested Harborough. "He'd want money. Has he never applied for any?—some allowance, for instance?"

"He'd money of his own," said Harry. "His mother's money all came to him at her death. No—it's as Val says, we've never heard anything of him since he left Markenmore, and we don't know where he is. I wish we did!—my father can't last long."

Harborough rose from his chair.

"Well, I must go," he said. "You'll be sure to let me know if there's anything I can do? But you say Sir Anthony's not in immediate danger?"

"Not immediate," replied Harry. "But—any time. And, as he's fidgety about not being left, you'll excuse me if I go back to him? If he seems a bit stronger tomorrow, I'll tell him you're home again, and no doubt you can see him when you look in. You'll come again soon?"

"Surely!" said Harborough. He walked into the hall with Valencia when Harry had gone, and once more gave her an admonitory look. "You'll not forget to send for me if I can ever give any help?" he continued. "I'm not to be treated as a mere neighbour, you know—now that I'm back!"

"I'll not forget," she answered. She glanced round: at the far end of the shadow-laden hall Braxfield was just appearing, key in hand; she motioned Harborough aside. "There's something I want to ask you," she whispered. "Have you any idea why my brother Guy left home, and why he's never returned? You!—yourself?"

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Her eyes, big and dark, were fixed upon him with a peculiar earnestness, and she saw him start a little and compress his lips.

"Tell—me!" she said. "Me!"

Harborough, too, glanced at Braxfield: the old butler, unconscious of this intimate question—and—answer, was drawing nearer.

"I may know—something," murmured Harborough. "If—if I think—on reflection—I ought to tell you—I will. Later."

She gave him an understanding nod, a whispered word of thanks, and went away up the dark staircase behind them. And Braxfield, after a word or two with Harborough, let the visitor out, and locked the big door, and drew across it a weighty chair which had done duty in that respect for many a generation of Markenmores. The house was secured for the night.

Braxfield went back to his pantry—a snug and comfortable sitting-room at the end of the big main corridor. There was a bright fire there, and his easy, well-cushioned arm-chair placed by it. Now was his time of rest and recreation. All done, all quiet, he would smoke his pipe, read the newspaper, and enjoy his glass of whisky. His pipe lay ready to hand: the newspaper flanked it; he went to the cupboard to get out his decanter and his glass. And just as he laid hands on these things, Braxfield heard a sound. His fingers relinquished their hold, dropped to his side, began to tremble. For Braxfield knew that sound—it was familiar enough to him, though it was seven years since he had heard it last. He stood, listening—it came again; a tap, light but firm, three times repeated on the pantry window. And at that

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he left the room, turned down a side-passage, and opened a door that admitted to the rose garden. A man stepped in, and in the dim light of a neighbouring lamp the butler saw his face.

"Good Lord ha' mercy!" he exclaimed, shrinking back against the wall. "Mr. Guy?"

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CHAPTER II

THE BUTLER'S PANTRY

The man whom Braxfield thus addressed, and who, in spite of the well-remembered signal on the pantry window was the last person in the world he had thought of seeing, turned a sharp, inquisitive, suspicious glance down the narrow passage, which opened on the main corridor of the house. It shifted just as sharply to the old butler's amazed and troubled face—and the question that followed on it was equally sharp.

"The rest of 'em—in bed?"

Braxfield was beginning to tremble. In the old days, he had often let Guy Markenmore in, late at night, at that very door; the thrice-repeated tap was an arranged signal between them. And in those days he had had that very question put to him more times than he could remember. It had not troubled him then, but now, hearing it again, after the questioner's unexplained absence of seven years, it frightened him. Why did the heir to the Markenmore baronetcy and estates come sneaking to his father's house, late at night, seeking secret entrance, obviously nervous about something? Braxfield looked at him doubtfully.

"Gone to their rooms, Mr. Guy," he answered. "Or—they may be in your father's. Sir Anthony's about—at his end, sir."

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Again Guy Markenmore looked along the passage. While he looked, Braxfield looked at him. He had altered little, thought Braxfield. He had always been noted since boyhood, for his good looks: he was still good-looking at thirty-five; tall, slim, dark, intense of gaze; the sort of man to attract and interest women. But he looked like a man who had lived hard; a man who had seen things on the seamy side of life, and there was a sinister expression about his fine eyes and the lines of the mouth, scarcely concealed by a carefully kept dark moustache, which would have warned watchful observers to put little trust in him. Eyes and lips alike were wary and keen as they turned again on the butler.

"Come on to your pantry, Braxfield," he said quietly. "Fasten that door."

He walked rapidly up the passage and turned into the corridor when he had issued the order: when the butler, after discharging it, followed him, he stood just within the pantry, holding the door in his hand. And after Braxfield, still upset and wondering, had entered, Guy put the door to and turned the key.

"Look here!" he said in a low voice, motioning Braxfield to the fireside and its cheery blaze, "I want to know something—I thought I saw somebody as I came along. You'll know. Is John Harborough home again?"

Braxfield felt his perceptions quicken at the tone of this question. He nodded, searching Guy's face.

"Yes, sir!" he answered. "Came home today—this very afternoon."

"Has he been here?" demanded Guy.

"Yes, sir—this evening."

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"Why? What did he come for?"

"He'd heard your father was ill, Mr. Guy—he came to ask about him."

"Did he mention me?"

"Not—not to my knowledge, sir. He—he saw Mr. Harry and Miss Valencia."

"Has he come back for—for good? To settle down?"

"I understand that he has, sir."

Braxfield was wondering what these questions meant, and his face showed his wonder. But Guy's face had become sphinx-like. He turned away from the butler, took off his smart hat, overcoat, and gloves, threw them into an easy chair in a corner, and drawing a case from his breast-pocket, selected a cigar, and leisurely lighted it. Braxfield knew enough of cigars to know that that was an expensive one; he knew, too, that as far as appearances went the lost son, of seven years' silence had not come home like a prodigal. Guy was dressed in the height of fashion; his grey tweed suit, bearing the unmistakable stamp of Savile Row, stood out in striking contrast to the worn and ancient garments in which Harry Markenmore went about the old place. And on the hand which raised a match to the cigar glittered a fine diamond ring, acting as a sort of keeper to another ring, of curious workmanship and appearance, on the third finger.

"Look here!" said Guy again. "Another question. I've heard that Mrs. Tretheroe—who was Miss Veronica Leighton—is in these parts again. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir," replied Braxfield. "She's come back, too—quite recently. She's taken the Dower House,

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Mr. Guy—you know, sir, at the bottom of our park. She took it a month or so ago, from Mr. Harry—he acts in everything now, sir—and she's moved into it."

"She took it?" exclaimed Guy, with emphasis on the personal pronoun. "She! What? . . . is Colonel Tretheroe dead, then?"

"Died out in India, sir—so I'm given to understand—a year since," answered Braxfield. "So—she returned home and came looking for a house about here, and, as I say, has got our Dower House. And she looks no older, Mr. Guy—not a bit! Handsomer than ever, sir."

Braxfield was regaining his confidence, and his tongue. He wanted to talk, now.

"They say she's a very wealthy young widow, Mr. Guy," he went on. "Colonel Tretheroe, he left her everything—and he was a rich man, I'm told. Seems like it, too—she's got a fine staff of servants, and she's spent a lot of money on the house already, and is spending more. Got a house-party there just now—London people I believe. Seems inclined to enjoy herself, I think, sir."

"Are there any children?" asked Guy.

"No children, sir," replied Braxfield. "Never been any, so I'm told."

Guy looked around at the familiar features of the old butler's sanctum. Nothing seemed to have changed. His glance rested on the decanter which Braxfield had set on the table just before hearing the tap at the window.

"Give me a drink, Braxfield," he said suddenly. "I guess you've some of our old whisky left, even after seven years. And some soda-water. Get one yourself—it's a long time since you and I had

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a drink together—though we've had many a one in this very room in the old days!''

He laughed cynically as he lifted the glass which Braxfield presently handed to him—but there was no answering laugh from the old butler. Braxfield, indeed, respectfully raising his own glass with a murmured expression of his good wishes, seemed inclined to become sentimental.

"It is a very long time, sir," he said. "Yes, a very long time, Mr. Guy! But I humbly trust it's over, sir—I hope you're coming home for good."

"Then your hopes are doomed to disappointment, Braxfield," replied Guy, with another cynical laugh. "I'm not! No more Markenmore Court for me. I've done very nicely without it and I don't propose to grow cabbages here when I can grow more profitable things elsewhere. No, Braxfield. I'm not coming back."

"But, Mr. Guy—your father?" said the old butler. "He can't last long, sir. And—the title—and the estates, Mr. Guy!"

"I can't help succeeding to the baronetcy, Braxfield, though I don't care twopence about it," answered Guy; "and as for the estates, they can be managed well enough without my help or presence. As a matter of fact, I don't want 'em! I'm a well-to-do man—I've been on the Stock Exchange, Braxfield, for over six years, and made a pot of money. But now look here," he continued, interrupting the old butler's congratulations, "you say that Harry is acting as a sort of steward; does he do well?"

"Very well indeed, sir, as far as I can judge," replied Braxfield. "Charlesworth—our old steward—you remember him, well enough, Mr. Guy—he let

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things get into a bad way, and your father didn't check him. But when your brother became of age, he and your father made some arrangement, and Mr. Harry took hold of things, and he pensioned Charlesworth off, and since that he's seen to everything. Helped a good deal, of course, sir, by Miss Valencia —a very clever young lady your sister's turned out, Mr. Guy. You'll—you'll let me fetch them down, sir, before you go to bed?"

Guy finished the contents of his glass, mixed himself another drink, and sitting down in a big chair by the blazing logs, shook his head.

"I'm not going to bed, Braxfield," he answered. "I came down from town on special business, and I'm going to return to town by a very early morning train, which I shall catch at Mitbourne station. But I shall see the two youngsters—in fact, my business is with them. First of all, though, I want you to tell me one or two things: then you can go and tell them I'm here—quietly, and not disturbing Sir Anthony—I don't want him to know I'm anywhere about. Now, first—you say Mrs. Tretheroe has a house-party at the Dower House?"

"Yes, sir," replied Braxfield. "A biggish one."

"Then they're not likely to keep very early hours there just now," observed Guy.

"I hear that they keep very late ones, sir," said Braxfield. "Dancing—and so on."

"Very well," continued Guy. "Now then—does Mrs. Wrenne still keep the Sceptre Inn, in the village?"

Braxfield's plump countenance changed colour—he blushed, like any young girl.

"Well, sir," he faltered, with a shy laugh. "She

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doesn't. The fact is, sir—you'll laugh at me, Mr. Guy—Mrs. Wrenne and me, sir, we got married, four years ago, sir. So Mrs. Wrenne is now Mrs. Braxfield."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Guy. "Caught you at last, eh, Braxfield? Then I suppose Mrs. Braxfield is—here?"

"No, sir, and never has been," replied the old butler. "I live here, as usual. But my wife, sir, and her daughter—you remember Poppy, Mr. Guy? a pretty girl that's now a handsome young woman—they live at Woodland Cottage, across our park. My wife took it, sir, when she left the Sceptre."

"Oh!" said Guy. "Then—who has the Sceptre, now?"

"Man named Grimsdale, sir—he was groom to Sir James Marchant, formerly. He's improved it a good bit, sir; since all this motoring began, there's a lot of traffic along our main road."

Guy nodded and drew out his watch.

"Not yet ten o'clock," he muttered. He sat for a minute or two, evidently deep in thought, while Braxfield watched him with curiosity. "All right, Braxfield," he said at last, looking up from the hearth. "Go and tell the two youngsters I'm here. Quietly mind!—impress upon them that my father is not to know anything."

"Very good, sir," assented Braxfield. "They may be with him—or one of them may be—but I'll manage it. There's a trained nurse in the house, Mr. Guy, so she'll attend to Sir Anthony while they come down."

Guy made no answer, and Braxfield went away through the silent house and upstairs to Harry Mark-

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enmore's room. The room was lighted, but empty. Harry, said Braxfield to himself, would be with his father. He crossed the corridor and knocked gently at Valencia's door. Valencia answered the summons at once and came out in a dressing-gown; something in the old butler's face made her glance apprehensively at him. But Braxfield shook his head.

"It's not that, Miss Valencia," he hastened to say. "You—you mustn't be alarmed—the fact is, Mr. Guy's downstairs! He came just after you and Mr. Harry had come up, and he wants to see you, both. But—Sir Anthony's not to know."

Valencia's face hardened. She had no recollection of any childish affection for her elder brother, and as far as she could remember she had never heard any good of him: certainly, for seven years, he had treated his family as if it had no existence. She looked doubtfully and hesitatingly at Braxfield.

"What does he want?" she asked.

"I can't say, miss," replied the old butler, "except that he says he's come down to see you and Mr. Harry on special business and doesn't want your father to know."

Valencia glanced from Braxfield along the gloomy corridor. Innumerable doorways, admitting to cavernous chambers, were ranged there—two or three dozen of guests could have been put up in Markenmore Court, but she knew that not one of those rooms could be prepared in less than twenty-four hours; each was damp, cold, out of use.

"Where on earth are you going to put him, Braxfield?" she said. "There isn't a bed in the place that's fit to give him."

"He's not stopping, Miss Valencia," answered

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Braxfield. "I—I don't quite understand his movements, but he's going, I believe, as soon as he's seen you and Mr. Harry. He spoke of a very early morning train from Mitbourne."

Valencia hesitated a moment: then she moved off in the direction of her father's sick-room.

"Tell him we'll both come down in a few minutes," she whispered to Braxfield. "Where is he—in the morning-room?"

"No, miss—in the butler's pantry," answered Braxfield.

Valencia nodded and turned away, and Braxfield went back to the visitor.

"Coming in a minute or two, sir," he answered. "Both!"

"I suppose they've changed," remarked Guy unconcernedly.

"Oh, a good deal, sir," said Braxfield. "Seven years, sir, is a long time—at their ages."

"Let's see," continued Guy. "Harry'll be—what is it?—twenty-three, and Valencia's about twenty—nearly twenty. Um! Has my sister any love-affairs?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir," replied Braxfield. "Miss Valencia, sir, is a young lady that hasn't seemed to favour the society of gentlemen, so far, sir. Outdoor life, Mr. Guy, is what appeals to her, I think —gardening, games, walking, bit of rabbit-shooting, and so on. A very healthy young lady, sir. I hear them coming, sir—I'd better leave you."

"Stop where you are, Braxfield," said Guy quietly. "I want you there."

He rose from his chair as his brother and sister entered the room, and remaining on the hearth-rug,

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nodded unconcernedly to both, as if he had seen them but a day before. But as they came up and shook hands with him, his nod of greeting changed to one of approval, and he smiled at his sister.

"How do you do, Harry—how do you do, Valencia!" he said. "Both changed a great deal! And you, Val—grown into a beauty, of course! All you ugly little girls do! Well—that's right. I suppose, in the character of heavy-brother, I ought to express a pious hope that you're as good as you're good-looking!"

"Spare yourself the trouble!" retorted Valencia. She gave him a keen look as she took the chair that Guy had risen from. "I hope you are," she said. "Though—I doubt it!"

Guy glanced at his brother, including Valencia in a side-glance.

"So—she's got a tongue, this sister of ours, eh, Master Harry?" he said, with a half-amused, half-cynical laugh. "Never mind!—all the women of our family always have, I believe. Well—aren't you glad to see me?"

"Why should we be?" demanded Valencia. "You've never been near us, and never once written to any of us, for seven years? You may be our brother—half-brother, rather—but you're a stranger."

Braxfield, standing diffidently between the table and the door, retreated into a far corner of the room, and Harry Markenmore turned on his sister.

"Don't, Val," he muttered. "Not quite that, you know." He glanced at his elder brother, who was regarding Valencia from his position on the hearth-rug with speculative, smiling eyes. "Valencia is a

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bit outspoken," he said deprecatingly. "Of course, we're glad to see you, Guy."

"All right, Harry, my lad!" responded Guy. "I'll take it that you are—of course."

"I don't know why we should be," asserted Valencia. "As I said—we're strangers. Surely, you didn't expect me to know you?"

"You'll know me better, perhaps, my girl, in quite another way, before long," answered Guy. "Come! there's enough of these pleasant family exchanges. I came down especially to see you two," he went on, seating himself. "I'd better go straight to business. Look here, both of you—in the ordinary course of things our father can't last long, and I shall succeed to title and estates. Eh?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"The title I can't help," continued Guy. "The estates I don't want. I've made enough of my own, and I shall make more. I don't know how things can be done, legally, but anyhow, as soon as I come into the property I intend to make it over, somehow or other—we'll set the lawyers to work—to you two. You can look on it as your own, from this out. Understand?"

Harry started and looked at his sister. But Valencia was looking at Guy.

"Generous of you!" she said suddenly. "But—why do you come to tell us this, now?"

"Because I'm going off to America, on business—New York, two or three other places, in a day or two, and shan't be back for quite a year—maybe more," answered Guy. "And I wanted you to know, in case anything happens. If my father dies—well, Harry'll just carry on, and when I come back we'll do things

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legally. Markenmore is to be yours—I don't want it. You hear?—and you hear, too, Braxfield?"

"I hear, sir," answered the butler.

"There's nothing of Markenmore that I want," continued Guy, "except one thing—and I want that now. Harry," he went on, pulling out a small key, "you know my old room? Run up there, unlock the right-hand drawer of the bureau in the corner, and bring me a green leather pocket-book that you'll see there—that's what I want. Good boy!" He glanced at Valencia when Harry had taken the key and gone, and saw that she was staring hard at his right hand. "Well?" he asked, with a light laugh. "What are you looking at?"

Valencia remained silent for a moment. Then she spoke—abruptly.

"I'm looking at that queer ring on your third finger!" she answered.

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CHAPTER III

GREY DAWN

Braxfield, who, from his retired position in the background was watching Guy Markenmore with inquisitive eyes, saw him start a little at Valencia's direct intimation. The start was followed by a laugh which was not exactly spontaneous.

"Well?" said Guy. "What about the ring? It's —simply a ring."

"Just so—a ring," remarked Valencia. "But—a peculiar one. And I know somebody who has one that's a precise duplicate of it."

"Who?" asked Guy.

"Mrs. Tretheroe," replied Valencia. "She always wears it. I thought it was some ring she'd picked up in India. But—yours is just the same. Odd!—that you should both have rings which are exactly alike."

"So Mrs. Tretheroe comes here?" suggested Guy.

"Of course! Didn't we all know her before she was married," answered Valencia. "So far as I remember, you and she used to go about together a good deal."

Guy yawned, but it seemed to his sister that the yawn was affected.

"Forgotten pretty nearly everything about those days!" he said, with an attempt at unconcern. "Long time ago—and I've been otherwise engaged since I left here."

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Valencia turned and looked at Braxfield.

"See if anything's being wanted upstairs, Braxfield," she said, with a meaning glance. "You might sit with Sir Anthony a bit—make some excuse if he wants either of us."

Braxfield took the hint and disappeared, and Valencia turned to her brother.

"Guy," she said, calling him by name for the first time, "I'm sorry if I seemed to be ungracious just now. But—but you haven't treated us well, nor kindly. And I want to know why you've never been here, all this time—and why you ever left here at all. Can't you tell me?"

There was a certain earnestness in the girl's tone that made Guy, inclined to be restive at first under her questioning, change his mood and become reflective. He threw away his cigar, rose from his chair, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, began to pace the room, evidently in deep thought.

"I might tell you some day," he said at last. "Perhaps—later on—after thinking it over, I will."

"That's the second time tonight I've had that answer to that very question!" exclaimed Valencia. "In practically the same words!"

Guy stopped short in his perambulations and stared at her.

"Whose answer was the first?" he asked abruptly.

"Harborough's," replied Valencia. "He, too, has come back. He was here this evening. I knew that you and he were friends, once. I asked him if he knew why you left home. He answered—just what you've answered."

"Well?" asked Guy, with something very like a growl. "Well?"

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"I suppose he does know," said Valencia.

Guy began to walk about again. He had taken several turns before he spoke.

"I'll give you a piece of advice about John Harborough," he said at last. "He's a man—if certain conditions arise—of a black and fierce temper. You be careful. Otherwise——"

"What?" demanded Valencia.

"Otherwise I've nothing to say against him," concluded Guy. "And now—that's enough! I didn't come here to be questioned. I've told you and Harry why I came, and I mean to do well and fairly by both of you on the lines I've suggested. Never you mind why I left Markenmore, nor why I stayed away!"

"I wish you'd tell me just one thing, though," persisted Valencia. "Had it anything to do with Veronica Leighton, as she was then?—Mrs. Treroe?"

"I'm not going to tell you anything," answered Guy peremptorily. "It's nothing to do with you nor with anybody, now. I started out on a line of my own when I left here, and I've done with this. I shall never come near the place again when I leave it tonight; henceforth it's yours and Harry's. When I come back from America, you can both come and see me in London, whenever and as often as you like. But Markenmore will see me no more—I hate it!"

"Your father?" suggested Valencia.

Guy, still pacing the room, shook his head.

"You were too young to realize things," he answered. "But my father and I never got on—from the first we never got on. He never treated me well, and it was worse after he married your mother. If it hadn't been for her, I'd have run away from this

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when I was a boy. But your mother was a good sort—she did treat me well, right up to the time she died, when you and Harry were children. It's because I remember her and her kindness that I'm going to make Markenmore over to you now."

"Thank you!" said Valencia. "We'll remember. But Guy—your father's at the end of things. Won't you see him?"

"No!" answered Guy sharply. "No! I'm dead to him—and what's the good of upsetting a dying man? Let things be, Valencia—as I said just now, perhaps you'll know more and understand more, later on. At present——"

The door opened just then, and Harry came back into the room. In his right hand he carried a lighted candle; in the left, the pocket-book, an old-fashioned thing of faded green leather, for which his brother had sent him. With a muttered word of thanks Guy took both pocket-book and candle from him, and crossing the room to its furthest side set down the candle on an oak press, and by its light proceeded to examine the pocket-book, while Harry and Valencia watched him. The examination was brief: Guy, after a quick glance at some of the papers which he drew from the old case, transferred certain of them to a wallet which he produced from a hip-pocket; this done he put wallet and pocket-book together and placed them where the wallet had come from. He blew out the candle and turned to his brother and sister.

"Some old papers there that I wanted," he said unconcernedly. "Nothing of any importance, but I wanted to have them." He sat down again and lighted another cigar. "Now," he went on, "as I

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haven't much time, just let us talk business. Tell me, Harry, exactly how things stand about the estate: what you're doing with it, and so on.''

During the next half-hour, Valencia, listened to the two men as they discussed matters of rent, repairs, income, outgoings, realized that whatever else Guy might be, he was a shrewd business man; she realized, too, that he was honestly anxious to give Harry sound advice as to his future management of the Markenmore properties. Finally, he pulled out and handed to his younger brother a card.

''There's my business address in London,'' he said, ''and on the other side is an address in New York, to which you can write at any time during the next twelve months. Let me know how things go—everything. And now, I must be off.''

He jumped to his feet and made for his hat and overcoat. Valencia glanced at the clock.

''But why must you go now?'' she asked. ''You say you're going to get the early morning train at Mitbourne? That doesn't leave till after four o'clock. And it's now only half-past ten.''

Guy had already got into his overcoat. He smiled at Valencia's questioning look.

''Just so!'' he answered. ''But there's somebody else in this neighbourhood that I've got to see—on business. Appointment, you understand?—already made. I must be off, or I shall be late for it.''

''But—you ought to have had some supper—or something,'' protested Valencia.

''That'll be ready where I'm going,'' replied Guy. ''There—don't bother yourselves! Call Braxfield down—good old chap, that, and I must say good-bye to him.''

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Five minutes later he had said good-bye to all three, and Braxfield had let him out by the door at which he had entered. The old butler went back to his pantry to find his young mistress standing by the fire, evidently in deep thought. She looked up as he entered.

"Braxfield," she said, "which way did Mr. Guy go?"

"Towards the village, miss," replied Braxfield. "Turned through the shrubbery."

Braxfield was the sort of man to whom everybody is confidential. Valencia saw no reason for keeping back what was in her mind.

"He said he had a business appointment with somebody in the neighbourhood," continued Valencia. "With whom could it be, Braxfield?"

"That I couldn't say, miss," answered the old butler. "But Mr. Guy—he knew a lot of people hereabouts—in the old days."

"But at this time of night?" said Valencia. "Besides, who is there, anywhere about here? I mean, anybody he'd be likely to want to see? There are only two or three farmers—and the Vicar."

"He did mention the Sceptre Inn to me, miss," observed Braxfield, "in a way that made me wonder if he'd some idea of calling there. But——"

The light tinkle of a bell, very gently pulled, interrupted Braxfield at the beginning of whatever suggestion he was going to offer. At its sound he and Valencia stared and looked at each other.

"He must be back again!" exclaimed Valencia.

"No, miss," said Braxfield; "Mr. Guy would come to the garden entrance—always his way, that. This is our front door bell."

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He picked up an old-fashioned lantern as he spoke, lighted the candle with it, and went out. Valencia followed him. The corridor and the big hall were in darkness; the turning of the key and withdrawing of the bolts made a harsh, grating sound in the silence that had long since fallen on the old house. And when Braxfield opened the door, the night outside showed black, and there, on the steps beneath the portico, they saw in the light of the lantern, cloaked and veiled, a woman. But in spite of the wraps, Valencia knew who the visitor was.

"Mrs. Tretheroe!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Tretheroe answered with a low, half-excited, half-nervous laugh. She stepped inside, passed Braxfield, laid a hand on Valencia's arm, and pushed her gently towards the end of the hall, where a faint gleam of light penetrated from the open door of Braxfield's pantry.

"Hush!" she whispered. "I want a word with you, Valencia. Tell the butler to wait there—I'm going again in a minute."

"Stay there, Braxfield," said Valencia. "Mrs. Tretheroe'll want letting out presently. Come along here," she continued, going towards the lighted room. "What is it?"

Mrs. Tretheroe followed the girl inside the pantry, half closed the door, and threw back her veil and her heavy cloak. In spite of her wonder, Valencia could not avoid staring at her in admiration. Mrs. Tretheroe was in her finest feathers, a wonderful dinner-gown, the like of which Valencia had never seen; diamonds were in her chestnut-hued hair and at her white throat; her violet eyes were alive with excitement; her scarlet lips were slightly parted; Valencia

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realized that this was a much more beautiful woman than she had previously thought her to be. And for the first time she began to realize, too, that she was a dangerous one.

The violet eyes looked sharply round the room before settling on the girl's face. There was a question in them—her lips repeated it.

"Your brother—Guy? Is he here?"

"No!" answered Valencia. "He's not!"

Mrs. Tretheroe's fine eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown.

"But—my coachman, Burton, tells me that he saw him, this evening, coming here?" she said half-petulantly. "He must be here!"

"He isn't," retorted Valencia. "He's been here—and he's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"I don't know," said Valencia. "What do you want?"

Mrs. Tretheroe laughed, and as she laughed she drew her cloak and veil about her.

"I wanted to see him again, to be sure," she answered defiantly. "Why not? However, I suppose he'll come to see me tomorrow."

"No!" declared Valencia. "He's gone. Back to London."

"There's no train to London at this time of night, child," said Mrs. Tretheroe. She laughed a little maliciously. Then the note in her voice turned to one of sudden knowingness. "Ah!" she exclaimed. "I see!—no doubt he's gone to call on me, now! I've missed him. Bye-bye, Valencia; sorry I have disturbed you."

She was out of the room and flying up the corridor

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and across the hall before Valencia could reply; a moment later the front door closed on her. Braxfield came back.

"Is there anything I can do upstairs, miss?" he asked. "The nurse, now?—is there anything she'll be requiring for the night?"

"I don't know of anything, Braxfield, thank you," said Valencia. She was leaving the room then, but suddenly she paused, hesitated, and turned back to the old butler. "Braxfield," she continued, with a look of confidence, "you've been in our family a long time, haven't you?"

"Most of my life, miss," replied Braxfield. "Footman, ten; butler, thirty years."

"And you know a lot of our affairs," said Valencia. "And no doubt more than I've any idea of. So—I wish you'd tell me something. Was there ever any love affair between my brother Guy and Mrs. Tretheroe—when she was Miss Leighton? I want to know, Braxfield."

Braxfield, in his turn, hesitated. He laughed, a little nervously—the laugh, too, of a man disposed to be indulgent towards memories of old days.

"Well, you know, miss, of course a man in my position sees and hears a good deal," he said at last. "Miss Leighton, as she was then—Mrs. Tretheroe, as she is now—was a great beauty, and, to be sure, a good deal run after. There was talk about her and Mr. Guy—they were about together, hunting, racing, and what not. But then—there were others after her."

"What others?" demanded Valencia.

"Well, miss, there was Mr. Harborough—that was here tonight," continued Braxfield. "He seemed

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very much taken at one time—you were away at your school in those days, miss, or you'd recollect. Yes, there was him—in fact, people used to wonder which it was going to be—Mr. Guy or Mr. Harborough. There were others—several of 'em—but those two were what you might call first and second favourites, to all appearance."

"Then why didn't she marry one of them?" asked Valencia. "Do you know, Braxfield?"

"I don't, miss—no, I know nothing on that point. All I do know is that all of a sudden, without notice, as it were, both young gentlemen left these parts. Mr. Guy, he went off—very sudden, indeed—and we've heard nothing of him till now. Then Mr. John Harborough, off he went too—travelling in foreign countries. And they hadn't been gone long—not a fortnight, I think—before it was given out that Miss Leighton was going to be married to Colonel Tretheroe. He was in command of his regiment, miss, at Selcaster Barracks. I mind him well enough: a red-faced gentleman."

"Older than herself?" asked Valencia.

"Old enough to be her father, miss. But a very wealthy gentleman. They were married here in our church, soon after that, and a bit later the regiment was ordered out to India, and, of course, she went with her husband. Queer, isn't it, miss," continued Braxfield, with a shy glance at his young mistress, "that these people which knew each other well in the old days, Mrs. Tretheroe and the two gentlemen, Mr. Guy and Mr. Harborough, should all turn up again—here—about the same time? What they call coincidence—though, to be sure, Mrs. Tretheroe's been back a month or so. But those other two—both

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coming here tonight—it gave me quite a turn."

"I suppose it was mere coincidence," said Valencia.

She bade the old man good night and went away upstairs. At the door of her father's room she met Harry. Sir Anthony, he said, had fallen on a light sleep; the nurse was with him, and there was nothing they could do. They turned off to their own rooms.

"Who came to the front door?" whispered Harry as they went along the corridor.

"Mrs. Tretheroe," answered Valencia.

"Mrs. Tretheroe! At this time? What did she want?"

"Guy!"

"Guy? Who told her he was here?"

"Her coachman had seen him coming here."

"Well?" asked Harry, after a pause. "What then?"

"I told her he'd gone. She went, then. Went in a hurry, too. Harry!"

"What?"

"It strikes me there's something going on underneath these sudden reappearances. I don't know what—but something. Mrs. Tretheroe was just mad to see Guy! And—I don't trust her. She's—oh, I don't know what she is! Never mind—let's go to bed."

Valencia went to bed, but it was a long time before she slept, and when at last she did sleep, her slumbers were light and troubled. She woke suddenly in the end—the grey dawn was breaking, and through her open windows she heard the hooting of owls—ominous and fearsome sound—in the woods beyond the park. Something impelled her to rise, throw up her blinds,

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and look out of the window. Her room faced the east; far away across the park and the low range of hills beyond the fringe of old woodland that enclosed it, a broad belt of red was slowly widening. And already thrush and blackbird were piping in the coverts, and a lark was rising from the home meadow.

Somewhere in the neighbouring plantations a shot suddenly rang out: its echoes sounded loud from the thick woods. Valencia was wondering what took their one gamekeeper abroad so early when a tap came at her door; the door opened, and Harry looked in. One glance at his face told her his news. She went hurriedly towards him, a question in her eyes. Harry bent his head in answer.

"In his sleep," he whispered.

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CHAPTER IV

MARKENMORE HOLLOW

About half a mile to the north-east of Markenmore Court, flanked by a narrow, deep-set lane that ran up from the main road of the village to the overhanging downs, and backed by the woods and coverts which lay between the foot of those downs and the level lands beneath, stood a small, comfortable, picturesque old house called The Warren. It had been built in the middle of the eighteenth century by the fifth baronet, Sir Geoffrey Markenmore, as a residence for his steward, and had been occupied by successive stewards until recent years, when they were relegated to a more convenient house in the centre of the village. Since then The Warren had been let to tenants; its position, its fine outlook over park, meadows, and sea made it a desirable property for any man of quiet tastes. Its present occupant was Mr. Samuel Fransemmery, a middle-aged bachelor, by profession a barrister-at-law, who, once taking a holiday in these regions, had found The Warren to let and had immediately snapped it up on a twenty-one years' lease. It was, indeed, the very place for which Mr. Fransemmery had been looking for some time; barrister though he was (of the Middle Temple) he had scarcely ever held a brief in his life, and the law had no particular attraction for him. Nor was

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he in any way dependent upon it: he possessed very ample private means, which enabled him to gratify his particular tastes to the full. Those tastes were simple. Mr. Fransemmery's days were passed in collecting books and antiquities, doing a little flower-cultivation in his charming gardens, and taking long walks in the country. He was a bit of a botanist, and a bit of a geologist: what with one thing and another his time went pleasantly—and uneventfully.

In outward appearance, Mr. Fransemmery was a cheerful little person. Somewhat under medium height, he was inclined to portliness; like many little men, he carried himself very erect, and was proud of the fact that he was as straight of back and square of shoulder at fifty as he had been at twenty-five. His clean-shaven face was round and rosy; his eyes were bright behind his big gold-mounted spectacles; he had beautiful teeth and plentiful light-brown hair; scrupulous to a fault about his personal appearance, he always looked, said the village folk, as if he had just come out of a band-box, by which they meant that he was perfectly groomed. There was, indeed, an air of perpetual youth and freshness about Mr. Fransemmery: each spring seemed to find him younger than the last. People chaffed him about his juvenility; if he ever troubled himself to explain it, he did so by solemnly repeating the old saying—"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Mr. Fransemmery, since his arrival at The Warren, and his beginning of a truly rural existence, had always gone to bed at half-past nine o'clock and risen with the lark.

He was up with the lark on this particular morning; was rising, as a matter of fact, at the very mo-

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ment wherein, half a mile away at Markenmore Court, Harry Markenmore was quietly telling his sister Valencia that their father had died in his sleep. Mr. Fransemmery, of course, knew nothing of that; his thoughts were not of death but of life. He, too, drew his blinds and saw the red dawn, and heard the thrushes and blackbirds in the neighbouring plantations; he smelled the scent of the springtide, and longed to be out of doors. It was his custom to go for a long walk every morning before his nine-o'clock breakfast; he was going to keep to it this morning. But first there were things to be done. His servants were never up before six: Mr. Fransemmery did things for himself. He was a great man for labour-saving devices; in his house at any hour of the day or night, hot water was ready in any sleeping chamber. Accordingly Mr. Fransemmery could get his bath and his shaving water by merely twisting a tap; he had a patent stove, too, in his own bedroom whereon he would make tea or coffee in a few minutes. So now, long before his housekeeper, his parlourmaid, and his housemaid had opened their eyes, he was bathing, shaving, dressing, and in due time sipping his fragrant Mocha and nibbling digestive biscuits. At precisely six o'clock, clad in a smart suit of grey tweed, and shod in stout shooting boots, strong enough to meet the searching morning dews, he went downstairs, picked up an ash-plant stick in his hall, and putting a rakish-looking cap on his head, set out across the high lands across The Warren.

Mr. Fransemmery's first steps took him out of his own trim surroundings and across a little well-stocked orchard—planted by himself—to the lane which ran

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up from Markenmore to the crest of the downs. This was one of those lanes peculiar to the south of England, and rarely found elsewhere. It was deep-set in the land; high banks on either side shut it in; each bank was topped by an equally high hedgerow of hawthorne, holly, and elder-bush, liberally mixed with bramble, gorse, and honeysuckle. The road-surface, rough and rutty, lay deep down beneath these prodigalities of vegetation; in winter it was usually a mass of mud; in summer it was ankle-deep in dust. But Mr. Fransemmery did not propose to follow the lane: he descended into it by a rustic stairway of logs, set in the bank, crossed the ruts at the bottom, and ascended the opposite bank by a similar series of steps. There he climbed a stile and betook himself along a narrow footpath hedged in on either side by laurel shrubs; this led him to the palings of a smart little garden at the back of which stood a commodious dwelling house, Woodland Cottage, the residence of Mrs. Braxfield. And there, on a bit of open ground at the side of the garden, flinging corn to her fowls, Mr. Fransemmery saw Mrs. Braxfield herself.

Mr. Fransemmery had known Mrs. Braxfield for some years. He had once or twice stayed at the Sceptre Inn before he came to live at The Warren. In those days Mrs. Braxfield was Mrs. Wrenne, relict of Peter Wrenne, deceased. She was a clever, bustling, managing woman, who knew how to do things. Peter had left her money and one child—a girl named Poppy, who from the days of short frocks bade fair to be a beauty, and had made good her promise. Mrs. Wrenne continued to make money at the Sceptre; folks said she was putting by a for-

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tune for Poppy—certainly Poppy was being brought up like a lady, sent to smart boarding schools, and such like. And then, all of a sudden, Mrs. Wrenne retired from business, took Woodland Cottage, and married Braxfield. Why she married him, nobody ever knew; Braxfield continued to live in his accustomed fashion at Markenmore Court, and if he ever visited his spouse, it was only for an hour or two of an afternoon or evening, or for a very occasional week-end. But, as people of the neighbourhood said, Braxfield, too, would retire sometime, probably when Sir Anthony died—and then, no doubt, he would go home to Woodland Cottage and his wife for good.

Mr. Fransemmery looked approvingly at Mrs. Braxfield as he drew near to her and her chickens. He admired her. Being a little man himself, he had a keen eye for women of the somewhat massive order. Mrs. Braxfield was a big, strong, handsome woman of forty-seven or so, who looked quite five years younger—she had an excellent figure, fine hair, teeth, and colouring, and a pair of quick, shrewd, hazel eyes, in which there was still a spice of roguishness. She smiled at Mr. Fransemmery as he put his fingers to his rakish shepherd's-plaid cap, and Mr. Fransemmery smiled back.

"The top of the morning to you, ma'am!" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. "Many of 'em, too! Ah, Mrs. Braxfield, you and I are the only sensible people about here, I think. Here we are, fresh and rosy—and in your case, beautiful as the day itself—enjoying fresh air and these delightful country sights and sounds while most of our neighbours—forgetful

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of Dr. Watts and his little hymn—are snoring in their beds. You're a wise woman, ma'am!"

Mrs. Braxfield laughed, showing her white teeth, and bringing a dimpled chin into play.

"Why that's as may be, Mr. Fransemmery," she retorted, coquettishly. "But perhaps I'd lie snoring —not that I ever do snore that I know of—in my bed, if I'd the chance. You get up early because you like it—I get up because I've things to do. If I'd three strong women servants, as you have, I'd not get up at five o'clock of a morning, nor yet at six, I'd promise you—not I! I could do with more bed than I get."

"In that case, ma'am," said Mr. Fransemmery, "I should do one of two things. Either I should get a stout serving-lass into the house, or I should request Miss Poppy to rise and feed the fowls."

Mrs. Braxfield emptied her sieve of corn amongst the chickens and drew nearer to the hedge.

"Oh well," she said. "Poppy's not a bad one for getting up and doing her bit. But she's away just now, visiting one of her old school friends, so I'm alone. And as to having a girl, Mr. Fransemmery, I'd rather not be bothered with one—they're more bother than they're worth. Of course, I've a woman comes every day to do the rough work—what else there is to do, Poppy and me can manage well enough. I don't know how it'll be though, when Braxfield comes to live here—a man makes a difference, and I suppose we shall have to keep a servant or two when he retires."

"He's expecting to retire, then?" asked Mr. Fransemmery, who had a weakness for village gossip. "Had enough of it, eh?"

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"He'll not retire while Sir Anthony lives," answered Mrs. Braxfield.

"From what I hear that won't be long," observed Mr. Fransemmery. "When I called at the Court, yesterday morning, to enquire, as I do every day, ma'am, I understood from Miss Markenmore that according to the doctors her father might go any time."

"He's a very old man, Mr. Fransemmery," said Mrs. Braxfield. "He was near sixty when he married the second time. However, whether he lasts long or little, Braxfield'll stop with him till the end."

"Good old faithful servant, Braxfield," observed Mr. Fransemmery. "Well—when he does retire, ma'am, you've got a very cozy nest for him to come to! Lucky man!—pleasant home, delightful surroundings, and—the handsomest woman in the South Country! Eh, ma'am?"

"Lord, Mr. Fransemmery, what a flatterer you are!" said Mrs. Braxfield with a conscious laugh. "Go away with you!—you'll be turning my head."

Mr. Fransemmery laughed too, and went. He had a trick of teasing people, and derived great pleasure from it; its exercise kept him in good spirits. He was in high good spirits now, and he began to whistle when he had passed Woodland Cottage and had stepped out on the open downs beyond. But before he had gone far across the springy turf his whistling stopped abruptly. Rounding a corner of the undulating surface Mr. Fransemmery suddenly saw that which made him pause. A hundred yards or so in front, a little to the left of the broad grass-covered foot-track which led from Markenmore Court to Mitbourne, a village on the further side of the downs, lay

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a deep depression in the land, locally known as Markenmore Hollow. It was, in reality, a long-disused chalk pit of unusual extent, but since its workings had been given up, a hundred years previously, thick under-growth of gorse and bramble had accumulated there beneath a cluster of old Scotch fir, and the place was now a wilderness as lonely as it was wild. But it was not lonely at that moment. Standing by one of the Scotch firs, in close proximity to a great clump of gorse, were men—one of them, from his uniform, Mr. Fransemmery immediately recognized as the Markenmore village policeman; another, from his velveteen coat, as Sir Anthony Markenmore's gamekeeper; the third was a farm-labourer whom Mr. Fransemmery often met of a morning as the man crossed the downs on his way to work in the village.

But it was not the sight of these three men that made Mr. Fransemmery suddenly halt and stop his blithe whistle and catch his breath. He was familiar with the three men—to his eyes they were known. But as they moved, he saw that at their feet there was lying something that was unknown. That something looked like the figure of a man, supine, motionless, covered by some wrap, a coat or overcoat, thrown carefully across its immobility. And it was with a sudden sense of he scarcely knew what, that Mr. Fransemmery, grave and silent enough by that time, went down into the Hollow.

The village policeman, a sharp-eyed fellow, who had once confided to Mr. Fransemmery that he had ambitions and meant to rise in the force, came towards him. His face betokened a good deal, and he shook his head slightly as he put his fingers to his peaked cap.

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"What's all this?" asked Mr. Fransemmery in a hushed voice. "Something wrong?"

"Something very wrong, sir," replied the policeman. He drew nearer, and turning, pointed to the shrouded figure. "Gentleman lying there dead, sir. Shot through the head!—but whether its murder or suicide, I can't say, sir. Murder I think—anyhow, there's no revolver lying near. And it's been a revolver."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. "Why—who was he?"

The policeman gave him a sharp look.

"I couldn't have said, sir," he replied. "I've only been here three years, so of course I don't know him. But these other two men, they do: Mr. Guy Markenmore, sir."

Mr. Fransemmery started.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Sir Anthony's elder son? You don't mean it."

"They say so, sir, and they know him well enough," answered the policeman. "That man, Hobbs, the ploughman, found him. He ran down to the keeper's cottage, and to me, and we came up at once. But before coming I telephoned to Selcaster, and the Chief Constable himself is coming along—they said he was starting out then, with the doctor. Come and look at him, sir."

Mr. Fransemmery nerved himself to this sad task, and went nearer. The keeper and the labourer touched their caps; the policeman drew aside the cloak which the labourer had taken from his shoulders and laid over the dead man. And Mr. Fransemmery, wondering what all this meant, bent down. Dead enough, he thought. And peaceful enough.

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A calm, bloodless face, neither smile nor frown on it—nothing but a little drawing together of the finely marked eyebrows, a slightly puzzled expression. Otherwise, so still. . . .

"It must have been murder, sir," whispered the policeman, "and at close quarters. Look there!—the skin over his temples slightly burnt. And——"

"They're coming," said the keeper suddenly. "Two or three of them."

Mr. Fransemmery straightened himself and looked across the downs. A dog-cart, driven at considerable speed, was coming along the grass-track from the direction of Selcaster, the tall spire of whose cathedral showed above the woods which lay between the downs and the old city. In the gleam of the rapidly rising sun he caught the glint of the silver and blue uniform of the county police, and as the keeper had said, the dog-cart, driven by a policeman, seemed filled with men. And presently it raced up the sward to the lip of the hollow, and the Chief Constable, a military-looking man of middle age, jumped out and followed by two other men, one the police-surgeon, the other obviously a plain-clothes officer, came hurrying down to the little group beneath the Scotch firs. He nodded to Mr. Fransemmery, whom everybody in the district knew, and turned sharply on the village constable.

"Who found this man?" he asked quickly.

The ploughman came forward, with evident distaste.

"I did, sir!" he answered. "James Hobbs—work at Mr. Marrow's."

"When—and how?" asked the Chief Constable.

"About an hour ago, sir—maybe a bit more," replied Hobbs. "I come this way to my work every

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morning. I caught sight of him as I was passing the top there, and I came down to take a look at him. Then I saw he was dead, so I covered him up with my coat and ran along to the village to tell the policeman there."

"He was dead when you found him?" asked the Chief Constable.

"Made out he was dead enough, sir! I touched his hand and his face—stone cold they was, both of 'em."

The Chief Constable turned to the police-surgeon, who went forward and removed the cloak. He stooped down and made a hasty examination; then rose and spoke with decision.

"He's been dead from, I should say, two to three hours—perhaps a little longer," he said. "Shot dead—a revolver, presumably."

"Found anything of that sort?" asked the Chief Constable of the policeman.

"Nothing, sir. I've looked carefully all round. There's nothing."

"Murder then!" muttered the Chief Constable. He went nearer and looked intently at the dead man. "I suppose this is Mr. Guy Markenmore?" he said, glancing at the keeper and the policeman. "I've never seen him, you know—he'd left before I came to Selcaster."

"This is Guy Markenmore, without a doubt," said the police-surgeon. "I knew him well enough. He's very little altered, either. You knew him, too, of course," he continued, with a look at the keeper. "You can recognize him?"

"Oh, I know him, sir," exclaimed the keeper.

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"That's Mr. Guy, right enough, that is! I'd know him anywhere—poor gentleman!"

The Chief Constable looked round. Markenmore Court caught his eye, lying amongst its elms and beeches three-quarters of a mile away across the shelving hill-side. He shook his head.

"This is a bad business," he muttered. "Who on earth should want to murder him? Been away for—seven years, isn't it? Well, he'll have to be removed, and we shall have to inform the coroner at once. Blick," he continued, turning to the plain-clothes man, "you take charge of this. Send down to the village for help—have the body brought down to the Court; the inquest can be held there. Let Hobbs there run down to the village—send Walshaw back in the dog-cart to Selcaster for the other policeman—and have all round here thoroughly examined for footmarks, and so on. Docter, will you stay by and come down with them to the Court when they're ready to remove him?—you'll no doubt want to make a more careful examination. Now then—we've got to break the news to the family. Mr. Fransemmery, I think you know them all pretty well—will you walk down with me? A painful duty, but it's got to be done."

Mr. Fransemmery bowed his head, and he and the Chief Constable set off at a smart pace across the downs. For awhile they walked in silence: the Chief Constable broke it.

"I understand that Sir Anthony's about at his last end," he said. "This—hello, what's that?"

The two men stopped, staring at each other. Then, with a mutual understanding, they turned

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sharply towards the valley. From the tower of Markenmore Church came the deep, booming note of a bell; a moment passed and it was repeated.

"The minute bell!" muttered the Chief Constable. "Then—Sir Anthony Markenmore's gone!"

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CHAPTER V

DENOUNCED

Listening, against their will, to the monotonous tolling of the death bell, the two men crossed the deep-set lane into which Mr. Fransemmery had tripped only an hour before in high spirits, never anticipating tragedy and gloom, and took their way across the sunlit park towards Markenmore Court. For awhile neither spoke: each was occupied with his own thoughts. But suddenly the Chief Constable turned to his companion.

"A remarkable thing, Mr. Fransemmery," he said, "that if Sir Anthony is dead—and I make no doubt of it, for there's nobody else in the village that they'd toll a minute bell for—he and his elder son should come to their deaths on the same morning! And now, I suppose, the title passes to Mr. Harry Markenmore—of course."

But Mr. Fransemmery had been thinking on lines of his own, and he shook his head.

"Maybe," he answered, as if in doubt.

"Aye?" said the Chief Constable. "But why maybe. He's the next, isn't he?"

"Well," replied Mr. Fransemmery. "Guy Markenmore, so I'm told, left home seven years ago, and has never been there since—I know that much. Now, the probabilities are that during those seven years,

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Guy Markenmore married—it's likely, anyway. And in that case, if he'd a son, the title—and the estates, for I happen to know that the Markenmore property is strictly entailed—will pass to him. That, of course, will have to come out."

"A lot will have to come out," muttered the Chief Constable. "That Guy Markenmore has been murdered I haven't the least doubt! But why? Evidently he has returned to the old place—summoned to see his father, I should think—and here he's found shot dead, first thing in the morning! It will take some working out. Luckily, I had that man Blick in Selcaster when I heard the news, and I roused him out of his hotel, immediately, and brought him along."

"Who is Blick?" asked Mr. Fransemmery.

"A C. I. D. man," replied the Chief Constable. "One of the smartest men they've got at New Scotland Yard just now—detective-sergeant already, and likely to rise still higher. He's been down in Selcaster for a day or two in connection with a case of fraud that's given us a lot of trouble—now I shall get him switched off on to this affair. From what I've seen of him already—and heard of him, previously—he's all the qualities of a human ferret."

"He'll need them, I think," remarked Mr. Fransemmery. "There's all the semblance of some extraordinary mystery about this morning's work, and apparently no clue on the spot. But we may hear more presently."

They were now walking up the drive to the front of the house; as they came within a hundred yards of the terrace they saw a tall man emerge from the shrubberies, approach the front door and enter.

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"I shouldn't wonder if that's Mr. John Harborough, of Greycloister, the big house on the other side of the village," said Mr. Fransemmery. "I heard from my housekeeper last night that he's come home at last. Like Guy Markenmore, he's been away a long time—the same time, indeed. Seven years—hunting, shooting big game, in all parts of the world. I've never met him and I suppose you haven't."

"Heard of him," replied the Chief Constable. "Belongs to the big banking firm—Harborough, Chettle, and Fairweather, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but it's as a sleeping partner," said Mr. Fransemmery. "He's never taken any active part in the business. A very rich man, I understand. Well, here we are—and I wish we came on any other matter than this."

The front door of Markenmore Court stood open, and just inside the inner hall the two new arrivals caught sight of a little group—the tall man they had just seen, an elderly man of professional appearance, and Braxfield.

"Here's Chilford, Sir Anthony's solicitor, here already," whispered the Chief Constable, as he and Mr. Fransemmery advanced without ceremony. "We'd better tell him before letting the boy and girl know. Fortunately I don't see either of them."

The three men in the hall gazed at the Chief Constable's semi-military uniform with evident astonishment; the elderly man came hastily forward. The Chief Constable gave him a warning look and got in the first word.

"Young people anywhere about, Chilford?" he asked. "No? Then let Braxfield take us into some room for a minute or two—to ourselves." He bent

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and whispered in the solicitor's ear. "Some bad news."

Chilford stared as if unable to understand the communication; he in his turn whispered to Braxfield; the old butler threw open a door and ushered the group into a dimly-lighted room, one of the many in Markenmore Court that were rarely used. He was closing the door on them when the Chief Constable called him back.

"Don't go, Braxfield," he said. "Come in—close the door. Am I right in supposing that your old master's dead?" he continued, motioning the butler to join the group. "Mr. Fransemmery and I heard the death bell, so we thought——"

"Sir Anthony died in his sleep early this morning, sir," replied Braxfield mournfully. "The exact time I couldn't say."

"Well, I want to ask you a question or two, Braxfield," continued the Chief Constable. "Was Mr. Guy Markenmore here?"

"Here, sir? When his father died? No—no, he was not."

"Has he been here? Was he here yesterday?"

"Mr. Guy Markenmore, sir—Sir Guy as he is now, to speak correct—was here last night. He was here for a while—left about half-past ten, sir."

"Left for where?"

"That I can't exactly say, sir. He had a call to make on some one in the neighbourhood, but I don't know who the person was. His intention, sir—Sir Guy's—was to catch the early morning train for London at Mitbourne."

The Chief Constable glanced at Mr. Fransemmery.

"Markenmore Hollow is on the side of the downs'

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path to Mitbourne,'' he whispered, in an aside. "You've not seen or heard of him since he went out of this house at ten-thirty, then, Braxfield?'' he went on, turning again to the old butler. "Heard—nothing?''

"I, sir? No, sir. Neither seen nor heard.''

"What is all this?'' asked the solicitor suddenly. "Has something happened?''

"I'd better tell you straight out,'' answered the Chief Constable. He glanced at the door and lowered his voice. "I don't want the young people to be alarmed,'' he said. "You must break it gently to them, Chilford, as you're the family solicitor. The fact is, Guy Markenmore's body has been found, up there on the downs, at the place called Markenmore Hollow. He——''

Braxfield let out a sharp cry. His usually rosy face paled.

"Body!'' he exclaimed. "Then——''

"Steady, my friend!'' said the Chief Constable. "Keep calm! Yes—he's dead—and I'm afraid—in fact—there's no doubt about it—he's been murdered!''

Braxfield burst into tears. And Mr. Fransemmery, gently taking the old man by the arm, led him away into one of the deep window-places, soothing him. Meanwhile, the Chief Constable rapidly narrated the events of the morning to Chilford and Harborough. The solicitor's grave face grew still graver.

"You're sure—from what you've seen already—that it's a case of murder?'' he asked at last.

"Haven't one doubt,'' affirmed the Chief Constable. "Murder! We shall have to go deeply into his doings, his whereabouts, between half-past ten

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last night and early this morning. According to the police-surgeon he was shot about four o'clock. What was he doing?—where was he?—in that interval? You live in Markenmore, Chilford, don't you?"

"Outskirts," answered Chilford, "but he never came to see me, if that's what you're thinking of. I didn't know he'd been here, till just now."

"I suppose he didn't come to see you, Mr. Harborough?" asked the Chief Constable.

"No," said Harborough. "Certainly not."

"I thought you'd probably known each other before he left home," said the Chief Constable. "Well, there's a lot to do, Chilford; you'd better go and tell his brother and sister and prepare them. His body will be brought here—presently—and the inquest will be held here. Break it to them—they've got to know."

Chilford nodded, and silently left the room. Braxfield, wiping his eyes, came back.

"You'll excuse my emotion, gentlemen," he said. "Forty years' service in this family, you know—like my own, if I may say so. Come to the morning-room, gentlemen, if you please—there's a good fire there, by now; this room's never used, and it's too cold to stay in."

The three men followed the old butler across the hall to the room in which Harborough had talked to Harry and Valencia the previous evening. And there, escorted by Chilford, the brother and sister presently joined them. One glance at their faces made the Chief Constable turn to Mr. Fransemmery with a sigh of relief.

"Good!" he whispered. "Cool as cucumbers!

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Know how to control their feelings!—sure sign of old blood and good breeding that! That's your sort, Fransemmery—true stuff!"

Then, next minute, he found himself quietly explaining matters to Harry and Valencia, who listened attentively, taking in each of the preliminary details that he could give them.

"At present," he concluded, looking from one to the other, "the first thing is to find out where your brother was between half-past ten, when, I'm told by your butler, he left here, and early in the morning. You've no idea?"

"None," said Harry. "He told us nothing."

But Valencia shook her head.

"Scarcely that," she said. "He told us something. Don't you remember, Harry—just before he went?"

"Nothing definite," replied Harry. "I gained no definite idea, anyway."

"What did he tell you, Miss Markenmore?" inquired the Chief Constable.

"I remember perfectly," answered Valencia. "He said he must go, because he had a business appointment in the neighbourhood. He said that where he was going, supper would be ready for him. But—that was all."

"Not a hint as to where he was going—nor as to whom it was to see?"

"None!"

The group presently broke up into sections. Harborough and Mr. Fransemmery drew off into one corner of the room; Chilford and Harry into another; the Chief Constable and Valencia remained on the hearth, talking in low tones. Suddenly the door was

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thrown open, and Braxfield, still lachrymose, announced, in a half-whisper:

"Mrs. Tretheroe!"

Everybody looked round as Mrs. Tretheroe—who had not forgotten the conventions and presented herself in a tailor-made gown of dead black habit-cloth—came rapidly into the room and made for Valencia. But one man shared his observation between her and his immediate company: Mr. Fransemmery, while giving Mrs. Tretheroe and her beauty a quick, admiring glance was sharp enough to see that at sight of her John Harborough not only started, but turned pale, and then red, and then pale again, compressing his firm lips. Another in the room saw all that, too—Valencia.

But Mrs. Tretheroe saw nothing—or seemed to see nothing. She was obviously excited; her cheek had more than its usual glow; her lips were slightly parted; she looked, thought at least three of the men there, as if she had come to receive congratulations rather than to offer condolence. But as she approached Valencia she moulded her mobile face into an expression of decorous sympathy.

"My poor Valencia!" she said in a soft, cooing voice. "Your dear father!—I came at once, the very moment I heard, to tell you and Harry how sorry I am, and to see what I could do. But—you'd expected it, hadn't you?—and he was so very, very old, to be sure. And another thing—of course, you'll let Sir Guy know at once—I—the fact is, Valencia, I saw Guy last night after—after I was here, you know—and—well, he's altered his plans, and the address he gave you in London won't find him for

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a few days. But I know where to find him—and hadn't you better wire him at once? You see——"

She had run on so rapidly that neither Valencia nor any of the men had been able to get in a word. But now, as she was pulling out a scrap of paper from her muff, Harry Markenmore broke in, sharply.

"Stop her, somebody!" he said half-angrily. "Tell her!"

Chilford moved across to the hearth, holding up a hand.

"Mrs. Tretheroe!" he said quietly. "I—the fact is, you are not aware of what has occurred this morning. You'd better hear. It's not only that Sir Anthony is dead—his son is dead, too. He——"

"Look out!" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery, keenly watchful. "She's going to faint!"

The Chief Constable stretched out a hand. But Mrs. Tretheroe pushed it aside. She had turned pale to her lips; her eyes blazed as she fixed them on Chilford.

"Dead?" she said intensely. "Guy Markenmore! Dead! It's a lie!"

"Unfortunately, ma'am, it's the strict truth," retorted Chilford, as if a little nettled, and not a little scornful. "Mr. Guy Markenmore was found dead this morning, on the way between here and Mitbourne, and there's no doubt that he was murdered."

Mrs. Tretheroe gasped and started back against the big table that filled the centre of the room. Leaning heavily against it she lifted a hand towards her throat, as if something began to choke her. Her eyes, growing wild and desperate, fixed themselves on one face after another; finally they rested on Harbor-

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ough, who was watching her intently. And then, with a cry that was half a scream, she lifted her hand still higher, pointing at him.

"Murdered?" she said. "Guy!—murdered? Then—then—there's the man who murdered him!—I know it! Dare to say you didn't, John Harborough!—you know you did! You threatened—seven years ago—to kill him whenever, wherever, you and he next met—and now—now—you've done it! Guy?—dead? —I—oh, God—I—I promised—last night—only a few hours ago—to—to marry him! We—Valencia!—we were going to be married—at once!"

"Now she *is* fainting!" muttered Mr. Fransemmery. "Good God!—what revelations!"

He started forward as Mrs. Tretheroe, with a sharp moan, slid heavily to the ground; with the help of Chilford and Valencia he got her out of the room, and sent Braxfield for the housekeeper. Leaving her and Valencia with Mrs. Tretheroe, he and Chilford went back to the other three men. The Chief Constable, his hands behind him, was leaning against the big mantelpiece; Harborough, very white, faced him from the other side of the table; Harry Markenmore stood a little way off, glancing doubtfully from one to the other.

"An awkward—but a decidedly definite accusation, Mr. Harborough," the Chief Constable was saying. "She seemed to have no hesitation in making it!"

"You saw that she made it in a moment of intense excitement," said Harborough. "And of—of grief."

"It's precisely in these moments—in my experience—that truth gets blurted out," observed the Chief Constable drily. "However, as she said it before the lot of us, perhaps you'll tell me something

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for your own sake. Did you ever make such a threat as that she spoke of?—did you ever threaten to kill Guy Markenmore, whenever and wherever you next met?"

Chilford gave a dry, deprecatory cough.

"I'm not Mr. Harborough's solicitor," he said, "but if I were, I should strongly advise him not to answer that question, Chief Constable. You know."

"This isn't a court of law," retorted the Chief Constable. "It's a private conversation between gentlemen. As Mrs. Tretheroe said what she did before us, Mr. Harborough has the right to say his say —before us."

"I will say!" exclaimed Harborough suddenly. "I did make such a threat—years ago. It was made under great provocation—the greatest provocation. But—all that's died out, long since—I mean the feeling of anger—and so on—has died out in me. If I'd met Guy Markenmore, now—or any time these last four or five years—I'd have shaken hands with him."

"Good!" said the Chief Constable. He pointed to Harry, and looked at Harborough. "For his—and his sister's—satisfaction," he went on, "tell me—when did you last see Guy Markenmore?"

Harborough, too, looked at Harry. And as he looked, Valencia came back into the room. He turned towards her.

"I'll tell you," he said quietly. "I've never set eyes on Guy Markenmore for seven years. I know nothing whatever of the circumstances of his death—nothing!"

The Chief Constable nodded; the other men made no remark. But Valencia looked at Harborough

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steadily for a moment; he, too, looked at her; it seemed to Mr. Fransemmery's keenly watchful eyes that a glance of intelligence passed between them. Then she went up to her brother, tapped him on the arm, and turned to the Chief Constable.

"Aren't there things to be done?—preparations to make?" she asked. "Will you tell me about them?"

The Chief Constable went off with the brother and sister; Harborough went away, too, without further word; Chilford and Mr. Fransemmery were left alone. Presently they walked out on the terrace, and began to pace up and down, at first in silence.

"I imagine," said Mr. Fransemmery at last, "that what we heard just now from Mrs. Tretheroe originally arose out of some early love-affair? I suppose Harborough and Guy Markenmore were rivals, eh?"

"Everybody knows that, my dear sir!" answered Chilford. "When Mrs. Tretheroe was Veronica Leighton—her father was Vicar of Markenmore, you know—she was a decided and incorrigible flirt, and she'd no end of young men running after her. But these two were first in the running, and I've always felt that it was through her, and because of her, that both of them left home as they did. She either married old Colonel Tretheroe out of pique, or for his money—money, I should say. There's some mystery about what happened at that time—some strange mystery that's never been made clear."

"And now there's another!" said Mr. Fransemmery. "And—she seems to be in it."

"Aye!" observed the solicitor with a dry laugh. "She let things out just now. But Markenmore was with her last night. Now, where?—and how long?"

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Mr. Fransemmery made no reply. He had caught sight of something, and he lifted a hand, pointing to it. The men carrying Guy Markenmore's dead body were just emerging from the fringe of wood.

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CHAPTER VI

THE CORONER SITS

Two days later, Mr. Fransemmery summoned to discharge the functions of a juror at that ancient institution, a Coroner's inquest, found himself acting as foreman of twelve good men and true in the old dining-hall of Markenmore Court. That venerable apartment had been specially prepared and fitted up for the occasion; it was the first time, observed Braxfield mournfully, that it had ever been used since the grand state dinner which Sir Anthony had given to his friends and neighbours when Guy came of age. It was a room of vast size: baronial in appearance, and in its time there had been many gay and striking scenes in it. But never, since its first building by a dead and gone Markenmore, had it been so filled with folk of various degree as on this bright spring morning. There were jurymen and police and witnesses; there was Chilford, representing the family, and another solicitor representing Harborough; there was a London barrister in charge of the case as it presented itself to the authorities; there were officials of many sorts; there were reporters from the local Press, and two or three representatives sent specially from London newspapers. But all these were as nothing to the crowd of spectators—village folk; county family folk; folk from near and far.

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Already, decided Mr. Fransemmery, as he adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles and looked around him, the Markenmore problem bade fair to be a *cause célèbre.*

Mr. Fransemmery at that moment could truly say that he and his fellow-jurymen brought open, unbiassed, and uninformed minds to that important enquiry. During the forty-eight (to be exact, fifty-two) hours which had elapsed since the discovery of Guy Markenmore's dead body, nothing further had leaked out to the general public. Much had been going on. Police had been drafted into the usually quiet village in considerable numbers; they had been searching woods, towns, all the immediate surroundings of the crime. Blick, with two or three lesser satellites, had been pursuing enquiries all round the neighbourhood; there was scarcely a soul in a side area round Markenmore that had not been questioned for news.

But all through these investigations those who made them had preserved an unusually strict silence, and outside the police there was not a soul in the big dining-hall, now transformed into a court, who had the faintest notion of what was about to be revealed. Yet one thing was known. Mrs. Tretheroe had not been content with her denunciation of John Harborough before the brother and sister and the men assembled in the morning-room. She had denounced him again—to the Vicar; to the village folk; to other people; it was already well and widely known that she firmly believed that Harborough had killed Guy Markenmore. Naturally, therefore, she was the object of great interest as she sat near the big tables arranged in the centre of the room, attired,

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somewhat theatrically, in deep mourning. She was not alone; although her house-party had dispersed on the day of the tragedy, two of her friends had remained with her; one, a Mrs. Hamilton, a middle-aged woman of fashion: the other, a Baron von Eckhardstein, a handsome and well-preserved man of fifty who was said to be a great European financier. These two sat on either side of Mrs. Tretheroe; a little distance away Harborough sat, grave and imperturbable, by the side of Mr. Walkinshaw, his solicitor.

Mr. Fransemmery and his eleven companions went automatically through the usual dismal preliminaries: and the gruesome duty of viewing the dead man's body. They listened respectfully to the Coroner's opening remarks, conscious all the time that this was routine—the real thing to be considered was the evidence. And suddenly the Coroner brought his remarks to an abrupt conclusion, and jury and spectators settled down to the real business—the hearing of what could be said towards clearing up, one way or another, the all-important problem: Who killed Guy Markenmore?

The first stages of the enquiry yielded little that was new or exciting. Harry Markenmore identified the body as that of his elder brother, Guy, who, he said, was thirty-five years of age. He was not aware if Guy was married or not. Guy had left Markenmore Court seven years before, and had never been seen or heard of by his family since, until the evening before the murder, when he had turned up unexpectedly. He detailed the doings of the short visit, and said that his brother had left the house at about half-past ten. He had spoken of having an appoint-

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ment in the neighbourhood, and had mentioned that supper would be awaiting him where he was going. He had no idea whatever as to where Guy then went. He did not return to Markenmore Court—no one there ever saw him again until his dead body was carried in, early next morning.

Hobbs, the ploughman, gave evidence as to finding the dead man, whom he had at once recognized, and detailed what he had done to get assistance. He had seen no one about in that part of the downs, nor noticed anything suspicious near the scene of the crime.

The village policeman spoke as to the investigations made round about Markenmore Hollow: there was no sign whatever of any struggle, and there were no footprints—the turf, thereabouts, he said, was very wiry, close-knit, and full of spring: there had been no recent rain, and the closest examination had failed to yield anything in the shape of such prints. No weapon of any sort had been found near the place, nor in the adjacent undergrowth. This witness, too, gave evidence as to the examination of the dead man's clothing, made when the body was brought down to the Court. There was a considerable sum of money in notes, gold, and silver. There was a gold watch, chain, and locket. There were three rings—two of them set with diamonds. There were several small items—a silver cigar-case, silver match-box, and so on; and there were two pocket-books. All these were now in possession of the police. He was sure that, when he was brought to the Hollow by the last witness, the body had not been interfered with in any way, and that the clothing, and the various objects he had just mentioned, had not been touched.

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From these facts and from the additional fact that the dead man had a large sum of money on him, he had at once formed the impression that the murder had not been committed for the sake of robbery.

There was more interest in the evidence of the police-surgeon. It was, he said, about twenty minutes to seven o'clock when he, with the Chief Constable and Detective-Sergeant Blick, reached Markenmore Hollow. He saw at once that Guy Markenmore had been shot dead, and his impression was that he had then been dead between two or three hours—nearer three than two. His opinion remained unaltered—he should fix the actual time of death at about four o'clock. Death had been instantaneous. From a subsequent post-mortem examination he had ascertained that the bullet—produced—fired, in his opinion, at close quarters from a revolver, had entered the head at the right temple, passed through the brain in a curving downward direction and finally lodged in the muscles a little below the left ear.

"This," suggested the Coroner, "could have been a self-inflicted wound?"

"Certainly," replied the witness.

"But in that case, the weapon would have been found close at hand?"

"In that case, I should have expected to find him still grasping the weapon. The probability in such case is that a man who shoots himself grips his revolver very tightly in the act, and his fingers would tighten their grip as the shot took effect."

"As there was no revolver near, you came to the conclusion that this was a case of murder?"

"Yes—murder!"

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