Footprints in the Jungle

W. Somerset Maugham

THERE is no place in Malaya that has more charm than Tanah Merah. It lies on the sea, and the sandy shore is fringed with casuarinas. The government offices are still in the old Raad Huis that the Dutch built when they owned the land, and on the hill stand the grey ruins of the fort by aid of which the Portuguese maintained their hold over the unruly natives. Tanah Merah has a history and in the vast labyrinthine houses of the Chinese merchants, backing on the sea so that in the cool of the evening they may sit in their loggias and enjoy the salt breeze, families dwell that have been settled in the country for three centuries. Many have forgotten their native language and hold intercourse with one another in Malay and pidgin English. The imagination lingers here gratefully, for in the Federated Malay States the only past is within the memory for the most part of the fathers of living men.

Tanah Merah was for long the busiest mart of the Middle East and its harbour was crowded with shipping when the clipper and the junk still sailed the China seas. But now it is dead. It has the sad and romantic air of all places that have once been of importance and live now on the recollection of a vanished grandeur. It is a sleepy little town and strangers that come to it, losing their native energy, insensibly drop into its easy and lethargic ways. Successive rubber booms bring it no prosperity and the ensuing slumps hasten its decay.

The European quarter is very silent. It is trim and neat and clean. The houses of the white men-government servants and agents of companies-stand round an immense padang, agreeable and roomy bungalows shaded by great cassias, and the padang is vast and green and well cared for, like the lawn of a cathedral close, and indeed there is in the aspect of this corner of Tanah Merah something quiet and delicately secluded that reminds you of the precincts of Canterbury.

The club faces the sea; it is a spacious but shabby building; it has an air of neglect and when you enter you feel that you intrude. It gives you the impression that it is closed really, for alterations and repairs, and that you have taken indiscreet advantage of an open door to go where you are not wanted. In the morning you may find there a couple of planters who have come in from their estates on business and are drinking a gin-sling before starting back again; and latish in the afternoon a lady or two may perhaps be seen looking with a furtive air through old numbers of the Illustrated London News. At nightfall a few men saunter in and sit about the billiard-room watching the play and drinking sukas. But on Wednesdays there is a little more animation. On that day the gramophone is set going in the large room upstairs and people come in from the surrounding country to dance. There are sometimes no less than a dozen couples and it is even possible to make up two tables of bridge.

It was on one of these occasions that I met the Cartwrights. I was staying with a man called Gaze who was head of the police and he came into the billiard-room, where I was sitting, and asked me if I would make up a four. The Cartwrights were planters and they came in to Tanah Merah on Wednesdays because it gave their girl a chance of a little fun. They were very nice people, said Gaze, quiet and unobtrusive, and played a very pleasant game of bridge. I followed Gaze into the card-room and was introduced to them. They were already seated at a table and Mrs Cartwright was shuffling the cards. It inspired me with confidence to see the competent way in which she did it. She took half the pack in each hand, and her hands were large and strong, deftly inserted the corners of one half under the corners of the other, and with a click and a neat bold gesture cascaded the cards together.

It had all the effect of a conjuring trick. The card-player knows that it can be done perfectly only after incessant practice. He can be fairly sure that anyone who can so shuffle a pack of cards loves cards for their own sake.

“Do you mind if my husband and I play together?” asked Mrs Cartwright. “It’s no fun for us to win one another’s money.”

“Of course not.”

We cut for deal and Gaze and I sat down.

Mrs Cartwright drew an ace and while she dealt, quickly and neatly, chatted with Gaze of local affairs. But I was aware that she took stock of me. She looked shrewd, but good-natured.

She was a woman somewhere in the fifties (though in the East, where people age quickly, it is difficult to tell their ages), with white hair very untidily arranged, and a constant gesture with her was an impatient movement of the hand to push back a long wisp of hair that kept falling over her forehead. You wondered why she did not, by the use of a hairpin or two, save herself so much trouble. Her blue eyes were large, but pale and a little tired; her face was lined and sallow; I think it was her mouth that gave it the expression which I felt was characteristic of caustic but tolerant irony. You saw that here was a woman who knew her mind and was never afraid to speak it. She was a chatty player (which some people object to strongly, but which does not disconcert me, for I do not see why you should behave at the card-table as though you were at a memorial service) and it was soon apparent that she had an effective knack of badinage. It was pleasantly acid, but it was amusing enough to be offensive only to a fool. If now and then she uttered a remark so sarcastic that you wanted all your sense of humour to see the fun in it, you could not but quickly see that she was willing to take as much as she gave. Her large, thin mouth broke into a dry smile and her eyes shone brightly when by a lucky chance you brought off a repartee that turned the laugh against her.

I thought her a very agreeable person. I liked her frankness. I liked her quick wit. I liked her plain face. I never met a woman who obviously cared so little how she looked. It was not only her head that was untidy, everything about her was slovenly; she wore a high-necked silk blouse, but for coolness had unbuttoned the top buttons and showed a gaunt and withered neck; the blouse was crumpled and none too clean, for she smoked innumerable cigarettes and covered herself with ash. When she got up for a moment to speak to somebody I saw that her blue skirt was rather ragged at the hem and badly needed a brush, and she wore heavy, low-heeled boots. But none of this mattered. Everything she wore was perfectly in character.

And it was a pleasure to play bridge with her. She played very quickly, without hesitation, and she had not only knowledge but flair. Of course she knew Gaze’s game, but I was a stranger and she soon took my measure. The team-work between her husband and herself was admirable; he was sound and cautious, but knowing him, she was able to be bold with assurance and brilliant with safety. Gaze was a player who founded a foolish optimism on the hope that his opponents would not have the sense to take advantage of his errors, and the pair of us were no match for the Cartwrights. We lost one rubber after another, and there was nothing to do but smile and look as if we liked it.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with the cards,” said Gaze at last, plaintively. “Even when we have every card in the pack we go down.”

“It can’t be anything to do with your play,” answered Mrs Cartwright, looking him full in the face with those pale blue eyes of hers, “it must be bad luck pure and simple. Now if you hadn’t had your hearts mixed up with your diamonds in that last hand you’d have saved the game.”

Gaze began to explain at length how the misfortune, which had cost us dear, occurred, but Mrs Cartwright, with a deft flick of the hand, spread out the cards in a great circle so that we should cut for deal. Cartwright looked at the time.

“This will have to be the last, my dear,” he said.

“Oh, will it?” She glanced at her watch and then called to a young man who was passing through the room. “Oh, Mr Bullen, if you’re going upstairs tell Olive that we shall be going in a few minutes.” She turned to me. “It takes us the best part of an hour to get back to the estate and poor Theo has to be up at the crack of dawn.”

“Oh, well, we only come in once a week,” said Cartwright, “and it’s the one chance Olive gets of being gay and abandoned.”

I thought Cartwright looked tired and old. He was a man of middle height, with a bald, shiny head, a stubbly grey moustache, and gold-rimmed spectacles. He wore white ducks and a black-and-white tie. He was rather neat and you could see he took much more pains with his clothes than his untidy wife. He talked little, but it was plain that he enjoyed his wife’s caustic humour and sometimes he made quite a neat retort. They were evidently very good friends. It was pleasing to see so solid and tolerant an affection between two people who were almost elderly and must have lived together for so many years.

It took but two hands to finish the rubber and we had just ordered a final gin and bitters when Olive came down.

“Do you really want to go already, Mumsey?” she asked.

Mrs Cartwright looked at her daughter with fond eyes.

“Yes, darling. It’s nearly half past eight. It’ll be ten before we get our dinner.”

“Damn our dinner,” said Olive gaily.

“Let her have one more dance before we go,” suggested Cartwright.

“Not one. You must have a good night’s rest.”

Cartwright looked at Olive with a smile.

“If your mother has made up her mind, my dear, we may just as well give in without any fuss.”

“She’s a determined woman,” said Olive, lovingly stroking her mother’s wrinkled cheek.

Mrs Cartwright patted her daughter’s hand, and kissed it.

Olive was not very pretty, but she looked extremely nice. She was nineteen or twenty, I suppose, and she had still the plumpness of her age; she would be more attractive when she had fined down a little. She had none of the determination that gave her mother’s face so much character, but resembled her father; she had his dark eyes and slightly aquiline nose, and his look of rather weak good nature. It was plain that she was strong and healthy. Her cheeks were red and her eyes bright. She had a vitality that he had long since lost. She seemed to be the perfectly normal English girl, with high spirits, a great desire to enjoy herself, and an excellent temper.

When we separated. Gaze and I set out to walk to his house.

“What did you think of the Cartwrights?” he asked me.

“I liked them. They must be a great asset in a place like this.”

“I wish they came oftener. They live a very quiet life.”

“It must be dull for the girl. The father and mother seem very well satisfied with one another’s company.”

“Yes, it’s been a great success.”

“Olive is the image of her father, isn’t she?”

Gaze gave me a sidelong glance.

“Cartwright isn’t her father. Mrs Cartwright was a widow when he married her. Olive was born four months after her father’s death.”

“Oh!”

I drew out the sound in order to put in it all I could of surprise, interest, and curiosity. But Gaze said nothing and we walked the rest of the way in silence. The boy was waiting at the door as we entered the house and after a last gin pahit we sat down to dinner.

At first Gaze was inclined to be talkative. Owing to the restriction of the output of rubber there had sprung up a considerable activity among the smugglers and it was part of his duty to circumvent their knavishness. Two junks had been captured that day and he was rubbing his hands over his success. The go-downs were full of confiscated rubber and in a little while it was going to be solemnly burnt. But presently he fell into silence and we finished without a word. The boys brought in coffee and brandy and we lit our cheroots. Gaze leaned back in his chair. He looked at me reflectively and then looked at his brandy. The boys had left the room and we were alone.

“I’ve known Mrs Cartwright for over twenty years,” he said slowly. “She wasn’t a bad-looking woman in those days. Always untidy, but when she was young it didn’t seem to matter so much. It was rather attractive. She was married to a man called Bronson. Reggie Bronson. He was a planter. He was manager of an estate up in Selantan and I was stationed at Alor Lipis. It was a much smaller place than it is now; I don’t suppose there were more than twenty people in the whole community, but they had a jolly little club, and we used to have a very good time. I remember the first time I met Mrs Bronson as though it was yesterday. There were no cars in those days and she and Bronson had ridden in on their bicycles. Of course then she didn’t look so determined as she looks now. She was much thinner, she had a nice colour, and her eyes were very pretty-blue, you know-and she had a lot of dark hair. If she’d only taken more trouble with herself she’d have been rather stunning. As it was she was the best-looking woman there.”

I tried to construct in my mind a picture of what Mrs Cartwright-Mrs Bronson as she was then-looked like from what she was now and from Gaze’s not very graphic description. In the solid woman, with her well-covered bones, who sat rather heavily at the bridge-table, I tried to see a slight young thing with buoyant movements and graceful, easy gestures. Her chin now was square and her nose decided, but the roundness of youth must have masked this: she must have been charming with a pink-and-white skin and her hair, carelessly dressed, brown and abundant. At that period she wore a long skirt, a tight waist, and a picture hat. Or did women in Malaya still wear the topees that you see in old numbers of the illustrated papers?

“I hadn’t seen her for-oh, nearly twenty years,” Gaze went on. “I knew she was living somewhere in the F.M.S., but it was a surprise when I took this job and came here to run across her in the club just as I had up in Selantan so many years before. Of course she’s an elderly woman now and she’s changed out of all recognition. It was rather a shock to see her with a grown-up daughter, it made me realize how the time had passed; I was a young fellow when I met her last and now, by Jingo, I’m due to retire on the age limit in two or three years. Bit thick, isn’t it?”

Gaze, a rueful grin on his ugly face, looked at me with faint indignation, as though I could help the hurrying march of the years as they trod upon one another’s heels.

“I’m no chicken myself,” I replied.

“You haven’t lived out East all your life. It ages one before one’s time. One’s an elderly man at fifty and at fifty-five one’s good for nothing but the scrap-heap.”

But I did not want Gaze to wander off into a disquisition on old age.

“Did you recognize Mrs Cartwright when you saw her again?” I asked.

“Well, I did and I didn’t. At the first glance I thought I knew her, but couldn’t quite place her. I thought perhaps she was someone I’d met on board ship when I was going on leave and had known only by sight. But the moment she spoke I remembered at once. I remembered the dry twinkle in her eyes and the crisp sound of her voice. There was something in her voice that seemed to mean: You’re a bit of a damned fool, my lad, but you’re not a bad sort and upon my soul I rather like you.”

“That’s a good deal to read into the sound of a voice,” I smiled.

“She came up to me in the club and shook hands with me. ‘How do you do, Major Gaze? Do you remember me?’ she said.

“‘Of course I do.’

“‘A lot of water has passed under the bridge since we met last. We’re none of us as young as we were. Have you seen Theo?’

“For a moment I couldn’t think whom she meant. I suppose I looked rather stupid, because she gave a little smile, that chaffing smile that I knew so well, and explained.

“‘I married Theo, you know. It seemed the best thing to do. I was lonely and he wanted it.’

“‘I heard you married him,’ I said. ‘I hope you’ve been very happy.’

“‘Oh, very. Theo’s a perfect duck. He’ll be here in a minute. He’ll be so glad to see you.’

“I wondered. I should have thought I was the last man Theo would wish to see. I shouldn’t have thought she would wish it very much either. But women are funny.”

“Why shouldn’t she wish to see you?” I asked.

“I’m coming to that later,” said Gaze. “Then Theo turned up. I don’t know why I call him Theo; I never called him anything but Cartwright, I never thought of him as anything but Cartwright. Theo was a shock. You know what he looks like now; I remembered him as a curly-headed youngster, very fresh and clean-looking. He was always neat and dapper, he had a good figure, and he held himself well, like a man who’s used to taking a lot of exercise. Now I come to think of it he wasn’t bad-looking, not in a big, massive way, but graceful, you know, and lithe. When I saw this bowed, cadaverous, bald-headed old buffer with spectacles I could hardly believe my eyes. I shouldn’t have known him from Adam. He seemed pleased to see me, at least, interested; he wasn’t effusive, but he’d always been on the quiet side and I didn’t expect him to be.

“‘Are you surprised to find us here?’ he asked me.

“‘Well, I hadn’t the faintest notion where you were.’

“‘We’ve kept track of your movements more or less. We’ve seen your name in the paper every now and then. You must come out one day and have a look at our place. We’ve been settled there a good many years, and I suppose we shall stay there till we go home for good. Have you ever been back to Alor Lipis?’

“‘No, I haven’t,’ I said.

“‘It was a nice little place. I’m told it’s grown. I’ve never been back.’

“‘It hasn’t got the pleasantest recollections for us,’ said Mrs Cartwright.

“I asked them if they’d have a drink and we called the boy. I dare say you noticed that Mrs Cartwright likes her liquor; I don’t mean that she gets tight or anything like that, but she drinks her stengah like a man. I couldn’t help looking at them with a certain amount of curiosity. They seemed perfectly happy; I gathered that they hadn’t done at all badly, and I found out later that they were quite well off. They had a very nice car, and when they went on leave they denied themselves nothing. They were on the best of terms with one another. You know how jolly it is to see two people who’ve been married a great many years obviously better pleased with their own company than anyone else’s. Their marriage had evidently been a great success. And they were both of them devoted to Olive and very proud of her. Theo especially.”

“Although she was only his step-daughter?” I said.

“Although she was only his step-daughter,” answered Gaze. “You’d think that she would have taken his name. But she hadn’t. She called him Daddy, of course, he was the only father she’d ever known, but she signed her letters, Olive Bronson.”

“What was Bronson like, by the way?”

“Bronson? He was a great big fellow, very hearty, with a loud voice and a bellowing laugh, beefy, you know, and a fine athlete. There was not very much to him, but he was as straight as a die. He had a red face and red hair. Now I come to think of it I remember that I never saw a man sweat as much as he did. Water just poured off him, and when he played tennis he always used to bring a towel on the court with him.”

“It doesn’t sound very attractive.”

“He was a handsome chap. He was always fit. He was keen on that. He hadn’t much to talk about but rubber and games, tennis, you know, and golf and shooting; and I don’t suppose he read a book from year’s end to year’s end. He was the typical public-school boy. He was about thirty-five when I first knew him, but he had the mind of a boy of eighteen. You know how many fellows when they come out East seem to stop growing.”

I did indeed. One of the most disconcerting things to the traveller is to see stout, middle-aged gentlemen, with bald heads, speaking and acting like schoolboys. You might almost think that no idea has entered their heads since they first passed through the Suez Canal. Though married and the fathers of children, and perhaps in control of a large business, they continue to look upon life from the standpoint of the sixth form.

“But he was no fool,” Gaze went on. “He knew his work from A to Z. His estate was one of the best managed in the country and he knew how to handle his labour. He was a damned good sort, and if he did get on your nerves a little you couldn’t help liking him. He was generous with his money, and always ready to do anybody a good turn. That’s how Cartwright happened to turn up in the first instance.”

“Did the Bronsons get on well together?”

“Oh, yes, I think so. I’m sure they did. He was good-natured and she was very jolly and gay. She was very outspoken, you know. She can be damned amusing when she likes even now, but there’s generally a sting lurking in the joke; when she was a young woman and married to Bronson it was just pure fun. She had high spirits and liked having a good time. She never cared a hang what she said, but it went with her type, if you understand what I mean; there was something so open and frank and careless about her that you didn’t care what she said to you. They seemed very happy.

“Their estate was about five miles from Alor Lipis. They had a trap and they used to drive in most evenings about five. Of course it was a very small community and men were in the majority. There were only about six women. The Bronsons were a god-send. They bucked things up the moment they arrived. We used to have very jolly times in that little club. I’ve often thought of them since and I don’t know that on the whole I’ve ever enjoyed myself more than I did when I was stationed there. Between six and eight-thirty the club at Alor Lipis twenty years ago was about as lively a place as you could find between Aden and Yokohama.

“One day Mrs Bronson told us that they were expecting a friend to stay with them and a few days later they brought Cartwright along. It appeared that he was an old friend of Bronson’s, they’d been at school together, Marlborough, or some place like that, and they’d first come out East on the same ship. Rubber had taken a toss and a lot of fellows had lost their jobs. Cartwright was one of them. He’d been out of work for the greater part of a year and he hadn’t anything to fall back on. In those days planters were even worse paid than they are now and a man had to be very lucky to put by something for a rainy day. Cartwright had gone to Singapore. They all go there when there’s a slump, you know. It’s awful then, I’ve seen it; I’ve known of planters sleeping in the street because they hadn’t the price of a night’s lodging. I’ve known them stop strangers outside the Europe and ask for a dollar to get a meal, and I think Cartwright had had a pretty rotten time.

“At last he wrote to Bronson and asked him if he couldn’t do something for him. Bronson asked him to come and stay till things got better, at least it would be free board and lodging, and Cartwright jumped at the chance, but Bronson had to send him the money to pay his railway fare. When Cartwright arrived at Alor Lipis he hadn’t ten cents in his pocket. Bronson had a little money of his own, two or three hundred a year, I think, and though his salary had been cut, he’d kept his job, so that he was better off than most planters. When Cartwright came Mrs Bronson told him that he was to look upon the place as his home and stay as long as he liked.”

“It was very nice of her, wasn’t it?” I remarked.

“Very.”

Gaze lit himself another cheroot and filled his glass. It was very still and but for the occasional croak of the chik-chak the silence was intense. We seemed to be alone in the tropical night and heaven only knows how far from the habitations of men. Gaze did not speak for so long that at last I was forced to say something.

“What sort of a man was Cartwright at that time?” I asked. “Younger, of course, and you told me rather nice-looking; but in himself?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I never paid much attention to him. He was pleasant and unassuming. He’s very quiet now, as I dare say you noticed; well, he wasn’t exactly lively then. But he was perfectly inoffensive. He was fond of reading and he played the piano rather nicely. You never minded having him about, he was never in the way, but you never bothered very much about him. He danced well and the women rather liked that, but he also played billiards quite decently and he wasn’t bad at tennis. He fell into our little groove very naturally. I wouldn’t say that he ever became wildly popular, but everyone liked him. Of course we were sorry for him, as one is for a man who’s down and out, but there was nothing we could do, and, well, we just accepted him and then forgot that he hadn’t always been there. He used to come in with the Bronsons every evening and pay for his drinks like everyone else, I suppose Bronson had lent him a bit of money for current expenses, and he was always very civil. I’m rather vague about him, because really he didn’t make any particular impression on me; in the East one meets such a lot of people, and he seemed very much like anybody else. He did everything he could to get something to do, but he had no luck; the fact is, there were no jobs going, and sometimes he seemed rather depressed about it. He was with the Bronsons for over a year. I remember his saying to me once:

“‘After all I can’t live with them for ever. They’ve been most awfully good to me, but there are limits.’

“‘I should think the Bronsons would be very glad to have you,’ I said. ‘It’s not particularly gay on a rubber estate, and as far as your food and drink go, it must make precious little difference if you’re there or not.’”

Gaze stopped once more and looked at me with a sort of hesitation.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’m afraid I’m telling you this story very badly,” he said. “I seem to be just rambling on. I’m not a damned novelist, I’m a policeman, and I’m just telling you the facts as I saw them at the time; and from my point of view all the circumstances are important; it’s important, I mean, to realize what sort of people they were.”

“Of course. Fire away.”

“I remember someone, a woman, I think it was, the doctor’s wife, asking Mrs Bronson if she didn’t get tired sometimes of having a stranger in the house. You know, in places like Alor Lipis there isn’t very much to talk about, and if you didn’t talk about your neighbours there’d be nothing to talk about at all.” “‘Oh, no,’ she said, ‘Theo’s no trouble.’ She turned to her husband, who was sitting there mopping his face. ‘We like having him, don’t we?’

“‘He’s all right,’ said Bronson.

“‘What does he do with himself all day long?’

“‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Mrs Bronson. ‘He walks round the estate with Reggie sometimes, and he shoots a bit. He talks to me.’

“‘He’s always glad to make himself useful,’ said Bronson. ‘The other day when I had a go of fever, he took over my work and I just lay in bed and had a good time.’”

“Hadn’t the Bronsons any children?” I asked.

“No,” Gaze answered. “I don’t know why, they could well have afforded it.”

Gaze leant back in his chair. He took off his glasses and wiped them. They were very strong and hideously distorted his eyes. Without them he wasn’t so homely. The chik-chak on the ceiling gave its strangely human cry. It was like the cackle of an idiot child.

“Bronson was killed,” said Gaze suddenly.

“Killed?”

“Yes, murdered. I shall never forget that night. We’d been playing tennis, Mrs Bronson and the doctor’s wife, Theo Cartwright and I; and then we played bridge. Cartwright had been off his game and when we sat down at the bridge-table Mrs Bronson said to him: ‘Well, Theo, if you play bridge as rottenly as you played tennis we shall lose our shirts.’

“We’d just had a drink, but she called the boy and ordered another round.

“‘Put that down your throat,’ she said to him, ‘and don’t call without top honours and an outside trick.’

“Bronson hadn’t turned up, he’d cycled in to Kabulong to get the money to pay his coolies their wages and was to come along to the club when he got back. The Bronsons’ estate was nearer Alor Lipis than it was to Kabulong, but Kabulong was a more important place commercially, and Bronson banked there.

“‘Reggie can cut in when he turns up,’ said Mrs Bronson.

“‘He’s late, isn’t he?’ said the doctor’s wife.

“‘Very. He said he wouldn’t get back in time for tennis, but would be here for a rubber. I have a suspicion that he went to the club at Kabulong instead of coming straight home and is having drinks, the ruffian.’

“‘Oh, well, he can put away a good many without their having much effect on him,’ I laughed.

“‘He’s getting fat, you know. He’ll have to be careful.’

“We sat by ourselves in the card-room and we could hear the crowd in the billiard-room talking and laughing. They were all on the merry side. It was getting on to Christmas Day and we were all letting ourselves go a little. There was going to be a dance on Christmas Eve.

“I remembered afterwards that when we sat down the doctor’s wife asked Mrs Bronson if she wasn’t tired.

“‘Not a bit,’ she said. ‘Why should I be?’.

“I didn’t know why she flushed.

“‘I was afraid the tennis might have been too much for you,’ said the doctor’s wife.

“‘Oh, no,’ answered Mrs Bronson, a trifle abruptly, I thought, as though she didn’t want to discuss the matter.

“I didn’t know what they meant, and indeed it wasn’t till later that I remembered the incident.

“We played three or four rubbers and still Bronson didn’t turn up.

“‘I wonder what’s happened to him,’ said his wife. ‘I can’t think why he should be so late.’

“Cartwright was always silent, but this evening he had hardly opened his mouth. I thought he was tired and asked him what he’d been doing.

“‘Nothing very much,’ he said. ‘I went out after tiffin to shoot pigeon.’

“‘Did you have any luck?’ I asked.

“‘Oh, I got half a dozen. They were very shy.’

“But now he said: ‘If Reggie got back late, I dare say he thought it wasn’t worth while to come here. I expect he’s had a bath and when we get in we shall find him asleep in his chair.’

“‘It’s a good long ride from Kabulong,’ said the doctor’s wife.

“‘He doesn’t take the road, you know,’ Mrs Bronson explained. ‘He takes the short cut through the jungle.’

“‘Can he get along on his bicycle?’ I asked.

“‘Oh, yes, it’s a very good track. It saves about a couple of miles.’

“We had just started another rubber when the bar-boy came in and said there was a police-sergeant outside who wanted to speak to me.

“‘What does he want?’ I asked.

“The boy said he didn’t know, but he had two coolies with him.

“‘Curse him,’ I said.

“‘I’ll give him hell if I find he’s disturbed me for nothing.’

“I told the boy I’d come and I finished playing the hand. Then I got up.

“‘I won’t be a minute,’ I said. ‘Deal for me, will you?’ I added to Cartwright.

“I went out and found the sergeant with two Malays waiting for me on the steps. I asked him what the devil he wanted. You can imagine my consternation when he told me that the Malays had come to the police-station and said there was a white man lying dead on the path that led through the jungle to Kabulong. I immediately thought of Bronson.

“‘Dead?’ I cried.

“‘Yes, shot. Shot through the head. A white man with red hair.’

“Then I knew it was Reggie Bronson, and indeed, one of them naming his estate said he’d recognized him as the man. It was an awful shock. And there was Mrs Bronson in the card-room waiting impatiently for me to sort my cards and make a bid. For a moment I really didn’t know what to do. I was frightfully upset. It was dreadful to give her such a terrible and unexpected blow without a word of preparation, but I found myself quite unable to think of any way to soften it. I told the sergeant and the coolies to wait and went back into the club. I tried to pull myself together. As I entered the card-room Mrs Bronson said: ‘You’ve been an awful long time.’ Then she caught sight of my face. ‘Is anything the matter?’ I saw her clench her fists and go white. You’d have thought she had a presentiment of evil.

“‘Something dreadful has happened,’ I said, and my throat was all closed up so that my voice sounded even to myself hoarse and uncanny. ‘There’s been an accident. Your husband’s been wounded.’

“She gave a long gasp, it was not exactly a scream, it reminded me oddly of a piece of silk torn in two.

“‘Wounded?’ “She leapt to her feet and with her eyes starting from her head stared at Cartwright. The effect on him was ghastly, he fell back in his chair and went as white as death.

“‘Very, very badly, I’m afraid,’ I added.

“I knew that I must tell her the truth, and tell it then, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell it all at once.

“‘Is he,’ her lips trembled so that she could hardly form the words, ‘is he-conscious?’

“I looked at her for a moment without answering. I’d have given a thousand pounds not to have to.

“‘No, I’m afraid he isn’t.’

“Mrs Bronson stared at me as though she were trying to see right into my brain.

“‘Is he dead?’

“I thought the only thing was to get it out and have done with it.

“‘Yes, he was dead when they found him.’

“Mrs Bronson collapsed into her chair and burst into tears.

“‘Oh, my God,’ she muttered. ‘Oh, my God.’

“The doctor’s wife went to her and put her arms round her. Mrs Bronson with her face in her hands swayed to and fro weeping hysterically. Cartwright, with that livid face, sat quite still, his mouth open, and stared at her. You might have thought he was turned to stone.

“‘Oh, my dear, my dear,’ said the doctor’s wife, ‘you must try and pull yourself together.’ Then, turning to me, ‘Get her a glass of water and fetch Harry.’

“Harry was her husband and he was playing billiards. I went in and told him what had happened.

“‘A glass of water be damned,’ he said. ‘What she wants is a good long peg of brandy.’

“We took it in to her and forced her to drink it and gradually the violence of her emotion exhausted itself. In a few minutes the doctor’s wife was able to take her into the ladies’ lavatory to wash her face. I’d made up my mind now what had better be done. I could see that Cartwright wasn’t good for much; he was all to pieces. I could understand that it was a fearful shock to him, for after all Bronson was his greatest friend and had done everything in the world for him.

“‘You look as though you’d be all the better for a drop of brandy yourself, old man,’ I said to him.

“He made an effort.

“‘It’s shaken me, you know,’ he said. ‘I … I didn’t …’ He stopped as though his mind was wandering; he was still fearfully pale; he took out a packet of cigarettes and struck a match, but his hand was shaking so that he could hardly manage it.

“‘Yes, I’ll have a brandy.’

“‘Boy,’ I shouted, and then to Cartwright: ‘Now, are you fit to take Mrs Bronson home?’

“‘Oh, yes,’ he answered.

“‘That’s good. The doctor and I will go along with the coolies and some police to where the body is.’

“‘Will you bring him back to the bungalow?’ asked Cartwright.

“‘I think he’d better be taken straight to the mortuary,’ said the doctor before I could answer. ‘I shall have to do a P.M.’ “When Mrs Bronson, now so much calmer that I was amazed, came back, I told her what I suggested. The doctor’s wife, kind woman, offered to go with her and spend the night at the bungalow, but Mrs Bronson wouldn’t hear of it. She said she would be perfectly all right, and when the doctor’s wife insisted-you know how bent some people are on forcing their kindness on those in trouble-she turned on her almost fiercely.

“‘No, no, I must be alone,’ she said. ‘I really must. And Theo will be there.’

“They got into the trap. Theo took the reins and they drove off. We started after them, the doctor and I, while the sergeant and the coolies followed. I had sent my seis to the police-station with instructions to send two men to the place where the body was lying. We soon passed Mrs Bronson and Cartwright.

“‘All right?’ I called.

“‘Yes,’ he answered.

“For some time the doctor and I drove without saying a word; we were both of us deeply shocked. I was worried as well. Somehow or other I’d got to find the murderers and I foresaw that it would be no easy matter.

“‘Do you suppose it was gang robbery?’ said the doctor at last.

“He might have been reading my thoughts.

“‘I don’t think there’s a doubt of it,’ I answered. ‘They knew he’d gone into Kabulong to get the wages and lay in wait for him on the way back. Of course he should never have come alone through the jungle when everyone knew he had a packet of money with him.’

“‘He’d done it for years,’ said the doctor. ‘And he’s not the only one.’

“‘I know. The question is, how we’re going to get hold of the fellows that did it.’

“‘You don’t think the two coolies who say they found him could have had anything to do with it?’

“‘No. They wouldn’t have the nerve. I think a pair of Chinks might think out a trick like that, but I don’t believe Malays would. They’d be much too frightened. Of course we’ll keep an eye on them. We shall soon see if they seem to have any money to fling about.’

“‘It’s awful for Mrs Bronson,’ said the doctor. ‘It would have been bad enough at any time, but now she’s going to have a baby …’

“‘I didn’t know that,’ I said, interrupting him.

“‘No, for some reason she wanted to keep it dark. She was rather funny about it, I thought.’

“I recollected then that little passage between Mrs Bronson and the doctor’s wife. I understood why that good woman had been so anxious that Mrs Bronson should not overtire herself.

“‘It’s strange her having a baby after being married so many years.’

“‘It happens, you know. But it was a surprise to her. When first she came to see me and I told her what was the matter she fainted, and then she began to cry. I should have thought she’d be as pleased as Punch. She told me that Bronson didn’t like children and he’d be awfully bored at the idea, and she made me promise to say nothing about it till she had had a chance of breaking it to him gradually.’

“I reflected for a moment.

“‘He was the kind of breezy, hearty cove whom you’d expect to be as keen as mustard on having kids.’

“‘You never can tell. Some people are very selfish and just don’t want the bother.’

“‘Well, how did he take it when she did tell him? Wasn’t he rather bucked?’

“‘I don’t know that she ever told him. Though she couldn’t have waited much longer; unless I’m very much mistaken she ought to be confined in about five months.’

“‘Poor devil,’ I said. ‘You know, I’ve got a notion that he’d have been most awfully pleased to know.’

“We drove in silence for the rest of the way and at last came to the point at which the short cut to Kabulong branched off from the road. Here we stopped and in a minute or two my trap, in which were the police-sergeant and the two Malays, came up. We took the head-lamps to light us on our way. I left the doctor’s seis to look after the ponies and told him that when the policemen came they were to follow the path till they found us. The two coolies, carrying the lamps, walked ahead, and we followed them. It was a fairly broad track, wide enough for a small cart to pass, and before the road was built it had been the highway between Kabulong and Alor Lipis. It was firm to the foot and good walking. The surface here and there was sandy and in places you could see quite plainly the mark of a bicycle wheel. It was the track Bronson had left on his way to Kabulong.

“We walked twenty minutes, I should think, in single file, and on a sudden the coolies, with a cry, stopped sharply. The sight had come upon them so abruptly that notwithstanding they were expecting it they were startled. There, in the middle of the pathway lit dimly by the lamps the coolies carried, lay Bronson; he’d fallen over his bicycle and lay across it in an ungainly heap. I was too shocked to speak, and I think the doctor was, too. But in our silence the din of the jungle was deafening; those damned cicadas and the bull-frogs were making enough row to wake the dead. Even under ordinary circumstances the noise of the jungle at night is uncanny; because you feel that at that hour there should be utter silence it has an odd effect on you, that ceaseless and invisible uproar that beats upon your nerves. It surrounds you and hems you in. But just then, believe me, it was terrifying. That poor fellow lay dead and all round him the restless life of the jungle pursued its indifferent and ferocious course.

“He was lying face downwards. The sergeant and the coolies looked at me as though awaiting an order. I was a young fellow then and I’m afraid I felt a little frightened. Though I couldn’t see the face I had no doubt that it was Bronson, but I felt that I ought to turn the body over to make sure. I suppose we all have our little squeamishnesses; you know, I’ve always had a horrible distaste for touching dead bodies. I’ve had to do it fairly often now, but it still makes me feel slightly sick.

“‘It’s Bronson, all right,’ I said.

“The doctor-by George, it was lucky for me he was there-the doctor bent down and turned the head. The sergeant directed the lamp on the dead face.

“‘My God, half his head’s been shot away,’ I cried.

“‘Yes.’

“The doctor stood up straight and wiped his hands on the leaves of a tree that grew beside the path.

“‘Is he quite dead?’ I asked.

“‘Oh, yes. Death must have been instantaneous. Whoever shot him must have fired at pretty close range.’

“‘How long has he been dead, d’you think?’

“‘Oh, I don’t know, several hours.’ “‘He would have passed here about five o’clock, I suppose, if he was expecting to get to the club for a rubber at six.’

“‘There’s no sign of any struggle,’ said the doctor.

“‘No, there wouldn’t be. He was shot as he was riding along.’

“I looked at the body for a little while. I couldn’t help thinking how short a time ago it was since Bronson, noisy and loud-voiced, had been so full of hearty life.

“‘You haven’t forgotten that he had the coolies’ wages on him,’ said the doctor.

“‘No, we’d better search him.’

“‘Shall we turn him over?’

“‘Wait a minute. Let us just have a look at the ground first.’

“I took the lamp and as carefully as I could looked all about me. Just where he had fallen the sandy pathway was trodden and confused; there were our footprints and the footprints of the coolies who had found him. I walked two or three paces and then saw quite clearly the mark of his bicycle wheels; he had been riding straight and steadily. I followed it to the spot where he had fallen, to just before that, rather, and there saw very distinctly the prints on each side of the wheels of his heavy boots. He had evidently stopped there and put his feet to the ground, then he’d started off again, there was a great wobble of the wheel, and he’d crashed.

“‘Now let’s search him,’ I said.

“The doctor and the sergeant turned the body over and one of the coolies dragged the bicycle away. They laid Bronson on his back. I supposed he would have had the money partly in notes and partly in silver. The silver would have been in a bag attached to the bicycle and a glance told me that it was not there. The notes he would have put in a wallet. It would have been a good thick bundle. I felt him all over, but there was nothing; then I turned out the pockets, they were all empty except the right trouser pocket, in which there was a little small change.

“‘Didn’t he always wear a watch?’ asked the doctor.

“‘Yes, of course he did.’

“I remembered that he wore the chain through the buttonhole in the lapel of his coat and the watch and some seals and things in his handkerchief pocket. But watch and chain were gone.

“‘Well, there’s not much doubt now, is there?’ I said.

“It was clear that he had been attacked by gang robbers who knew he had money on him. After killing him they had stripped him of everything. I suddenly remembered the footprints that proved that for a moment he had stood still. I saw exactly how it had been done. One of them had stopped him on some pretext and then, just as he started off again, another, slipping out of the jungle behind him, had emptied the two barrels of a gun into his head.

“‘Well,’ I said to the doctor, ‘it’s up to me to catch them, and I’ll tell you what, it’ll be a real pleasure to me to see them hanged.’

“Of course there was an inquest. Mrs Bronson gave evidence, but she had nothing to say that we didn’t know already. Bronson had left the bungalow about eleven, he was to have tiffin at Kabulong and was to be back between five and six. He asked her not to wait for him, he said he would just put the money in the safe and come straight to the club. Cartwright confirmed this. He had lunched alone with Mrs Bronson and after a smoke had gone out with a gun to shoot pigeon. He had got in about five, a little before perhaps, had a bath and changed to play tennis. He was shooting not far from the place where Bronson was killed, but never heard a shot. That, of course, meant nothing; what with the cicadas and the frogs and the other sounds of the jungle, he would have had to be very near to hear anything; and besides, Cartwright was probably back in the bungalow before Bronson was killed. We traced Bronson’s movements. He had lunched at the club, he had got money at the bank just before it closed, had gone back to the club and had one more drink, and then started off on his bicycle. He had crossed the river by the ferry; the ferryman remembered distinctly seeing him, but was positive that no one else with a bicycle had crossed. That looked as though the murderers were not following, but lying in wait for him. He rode along the main road for a couple of miles and then took the path which was a short cut to his bungalow.

“It looked as though he had been killed by men who knew his habits, and suspicion, of course, fell immediately on the coolies of his estate. We examined them all-pretty carefully-but there was not a scrap of evidence to connect any of them with the crime. In fact, most of them were able satisfactorily to account for their actions and those who couldn’t seemed to me for one reason and another out of the running. There were a few bad characters among the Chinese at Alor Lipis and I had them looked up. But somehow I didn’t think it was the work of the Chinese; I had a feeling that Chinese would have used revolvers and not a shotgun. Anyhow, I could find out nothing there. So then we offered a reward of a thousand dollars to anyone who could put us in the way of discovering the murderers. I thought there were a good many people to whom it would appeal to do a public service and at the same time earn a tidy sum. But I knew that an informer would take no risks, he wouldn’t want to tell what he knew till he knew he could tell it safely, and I armed myself with patience. The reward had brightened the interest of my police and I knew they would use every means they had to bring the criminals to trial. In a case like this they could do more than I.

“But it was strange, nothing happened; the reward seemed to tempt no one. I cast my net a little wider. There were two or three kampongs along the road and I wondered if the murderers were there; I saw the headmen, but got no help from them. It was not that they would tell me nothing, I was sure they had nothing to tell. I talked to the bad hats, but there was absolutely nothing to connect them with the murder. There was not the shadow of a clue.

“‘Very well, my lads,’ I said to myself, as I drove back to Alor Lipis, ‘there’s no hurry; the rope won’t spoil by keeping.’

“The scoundrels had got away with a considerable sum, but money is no good unless you spend it. I felt I knew the native temperament enough to be sure that the possession of it was a constant temptation. The Malays are an extravagant race, and a race of gamblers, and the Chinese are gamblers, too; sooner or later someone would start flinging his money about, and then I should want to know where it came from. With a few well-directed questions I thought I could put the fear of God into the fellow and then, if I knew my business, it shouldn’t be hard to get a full confession.

“The only thing now was to sit down and wait till the hue and cry had died down and the murderers thought the affair was forgotten. The itch to spend those ill-gotten dollars would grow more and more intolerable till at last it could be resisted no longer. I would go about my business, but I meant never to relax my watch, and one day, sooner or later, my time must come.

“Cartwright took Mrs Bronson down to Singapore. The company Bronson had worked for asked him if he would care to take Bronson’s place, but he said, very naturally, that he didn’t like the idea of it; so they put another man in and told Cartwright that he could have the job that Bronson’s successor had vacated. It was the management of the estate that Cartwright lives on now. He moved in at once. Four months after this Olive was born at Singapore, and a few months later, when Bronson had been dead just over a year, Cartwright and Mrs Bronson were married. I was surprised; but on thinking it over I couldn’t help confessing that it was very natural. After the trouble Mrs Bronson had leant much on Cartwright and he had arranged everything for her; she must have been lonely, and rather lost, and I dare say she was grateful for his kindness, he did behave like a brick; and so far as he was concerned I imagined he was sorry for her, it was a dreadful position for a woman, she had nowhere to go, and all they’d gone through must have been a tie between them. There was every reason for them to marry and it was probably the best thing for them both.

“It looked as though Bronson’s murderers would never be caught, for that plan of mine didn’t work; there was no one in the district who spent more money than he could account for, and if anyone had that hoard buried away under his floor he was showing a self-control that was superhuman. A year had passed and to all intents and purposes the thing was forgotten. Could anyone be so prudent as after so long not to let a Little money dribble out? It was incredible. I began to think that Bronson had been killed by a couple of wandering Chinese who had got away, to Singapore perhaps, where there would be small chance of catching them. At last I gave it up. If you come to think of it, as a rule, it’s just those crimes, crimes of robbery, in which there is least chance of getting the culprit; for there’s nothing to attach suspicion to him, and if he’s caught it can only be by his own carelessness. It’s different with crimes of passion or vengeance, then you can find out who had a motive to put the victim out of the way.

“It’s no use grizzling over one’s failures, and bringing my common sense to bear I did my best to put the matter out of my mind. No one likes to be beaten, but beaten I was and I had to put as good a face on it as I could. And then a Chinaman was caught trying to pawn poor Bronson’s watch.

“I told you that Bronson’s watch and chain had been taken, and of course Mrs Bronson was able to give us a fairly accurate description of it. It was a half-hunter, by Benson, there was a gold chain, three or four seals, and a sovereign purse. The pawnbroker was a smart fellow and when the Chinaman brought the watch he recognized it at once. On some pretext he kept the man waiting and sent for a policeman. The man was arrested and immediately brought to me. I greeted him like a long-lost brother. I was never so pleased to see anyone in my life. I have no feeling about criminals, you know; I’m rather sorry for them, because they’re playing a game in which their opponents hold all the aces and kings; but when I catch one it gives me a little thrill of satisfaction, like bringing off a neat finesse at bridge. At last the mystery was going to be cleared up, for if the Chinaman hadn’t done the thing himself we were pretty sure through him to trace the murderers. I beamed on him.

“I asked him to account for his possession of the watch. He said he had bought it from a man he didn’t know. That was very thin. I explained the circumstances briefly and told him he would be charged with murder. I meant to frighten him and I did. He said then that he’d found the watch.

“‘Found it?’ I said. ‘Fancy that. Where?’

“His answer staggered me; he said he’d found it in the jungle. I laughed at him; I asked him if he thought watches were likely to be left lying about in the jungle; then he said he’d been coming along the pathway that led from Kabulong to Alor Lipis, and had gone into the jungle and caught sight of something gleaming and there was the watch. That was odd. Why should he have said he found the watch just there? It was either true or excessively astute. I asked him where the chain and the seals were, and he produced them immediately. I’d got him scared, and he was pale and shaking; he was a knock-kneed little fellow and I should have been a fool not to see that I hadn’t got hold of the murderer there. But his terror suggested that he knew something.

“I asked him when he’d found the watch.

“‘Yesterday,’ he said.

“I asked him what he was doing on the short-cut from Kabulong to Alor Lipis. He said he’d been working in Singapore and had gone to Kabulong because his father was ill, and that he himself had come to Alor Lipis to work. A friend of his father, a carpenter by trade, had given him a job. He gave me the name of the man with whom he had worked in Singapore and the name of the man who had engaged him at Alor Lipis. All he said seemed plausible and could so easily be verified that it was hardly likely to be false. Of course it occurred to me that if he had found the watch as he said, it must have been lying in the jungle for more than a year. It could hardly be in very good condition; I tried to open it, but couldn’t. The pawnbroker had come to the police-station and was waiting in the next room. Luckily he was also something of a watchmaker. I sent for him and asked him to look at the watch; when he opened it he gave a little whistle, the works were thick with rust.

“‘This watch no good,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Him never go now.’

“I asked him what had put it in such a state, and without a word from me he said that it had been long exposed to wet. For the moral effect I had the prisoner put in a cell and I sent for his employer. I sent a wire to Kabulong and another to Singapore. While I waited I did my best to put two and two together. I was inclined to believe the man’s story true; his fear might be ascribed to no more guilt than consisted in his having found something and tried to sell it. Even quite innocent persons are apt to be nervous when they’re in the hands of the police; I don’t know what there is about a policeman, people are never very much at their ease in his company. But if he really had found the watch where he said, someone had thrown it there. Now that was funny. Even if the murderers had thought the watch a dangerous thing to possess, one would have expected them to melt down the gold case; that would be a very simple thing for any native to do; and the chain was of so ordinary a pattern they could hardly have thought it possible to trace that. There were chains like it in every jeweller’s shop in the country. Of course there was the possibility that they had plunged into the jungle and having dropped the watch in their hurry had been afraid to go back and look for it. I didn’t think that very likely: the Malays are used to keeping things tucked away in their sarongs, and the Chinese have pockets in their coats. Besides, the moment they got into the jungle they knew there was no hurry; they probably waited and divided the swag then and there.

“In a few minutes the man I had sent for came to the police-station and confirmed what the prisoner had said, and in an hour I got an answer from Kabulong. The police had seen his father, who told them that the boy had gone to Alor Lipis to get a job with a carpenter. So far everything he had said seemed true. I had him brought in again, and told him I was going to take him to the place where he said he had found the watch and he must show me the exact spot. I handcuffed him to a policeman, though it was hardly necessary, for the poor devil was shaking with fright, and took a couple of men besides. We drove out to where the track joined the road and walked along it; within five yards of the place where Bronson was killed the Chinaman stopped.

“‘Here,’ he said.

“He pointed to the jungle and we followed him in. We went in about ten yards and he pointed to a chink between two large boulders and said that he found the watch there. It could only have been by the merest chance that he noticed it, and if he really had found it there it looked very much as though someone had put it there to hide it.”

Gaze stopped and gave me a reflective look.

“What would you have thought then?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I thought. I thought that if the watch was there the money might be there, too. It seemed worth while having a look. Of course, to look for something in the jungle makes looking for a needle in a bundle of hay a drawing-room pastime. I couldn’t help that. I released the Chinaman, I wanted all the help I could get, and set him to work. I set my three men to work, and I started in myself. We made a line-there were five of us-and we searched from the road; for fifty yards on each side of the place at which Bronson was murdered and for a hundred yards in we went over the ground foot by foot. We routed among dead leaves and peered in bushes, we looked under boulders and in the hollows of trees. I knew it was a foolish thing to do, for the chances against us were a thousand to one; my only hope was that anyone who had just committed a murder would be rattled and if he wanted to hide anything would hide it quickly; he would choose the first obvious hiding-place that offered itself. That is what he had done when he hid the watch. My only reason for looking in so circumscribed an area was that as the watch had been found so near the road, the person who wanted to get rid of the things must have wanted to get rid of them quickly.

“We worked on. I began to grow tired and cross. We were sweating like pigs. I had a maddening thirst and nothing in the world to drink. At last I came to the conclusion that we must give it up as a bad job, for that day at least, when suddenly the Chinaman-he must have had sharp eyes, that young man-uttered a guttural cry. He stooped down and from under the winding root of a tree drew out a messy, mouldering, stinking thing. It was a pocket-book that had been out in the rain for a year, that had been eaten by ants and beetles and God knows what, that was sodden and foul, but it was a pocket-book all right, Bronson’s, and inside were the shapeless, mushed-up, fetid remains of the Singapore notes he had got from the bank at Kabulong. There was still the silver and I was convinced that it was hidden somewhere about, but I wasn’t going to bother about that. I had found out something very important; whoever had murdered Bronson had made no money out of it.

“Do you remember my telling you that I’d noticed the print of Bronson’s feet on each side of the broad line of the pneumatic tyre, where he had stopped, and presumably spoken to someone? He was a heavy man and the prints were well marked. He hadn’t just put his feet on the soft sand and taken them off, but must have stopped at least for a minute or two. My explanation was that he had stopped to chat with a Malay or a Chinaman, but the more I thought of it the less I liked it. Why the devil should he? Bronson wanted to get home, and though a jovial chap, he certainly was not hail-fellow-well-met with the natives. His relations towards them were those of master and servants. Those footprints had always puzzled me. And now the truth flashed across me. Whoever had murdered Bronson hadn’t murdered him to rob and if he’d stopped to talk with someone it could only be with a friend. I knew at last who the murderer was.”

I have always thought the detective story a most diverting and ingenious variety of fiction, and have regretted that I never had the skill to write one, but I have read a good many, and I flatter myself it is rarely that I have not solved the mystery before it was disclosed to me; and now for some time I had foreseen what Gaze was going to say, but when at last he said it I confess that it gave me, notwithstanding, somewhat of a shock.

“The man he met was Cartwright. Cartwright was pigeon-shooting. He stopped and asked him what sport he had had, and as he rode on Cartwright raised his gun and discharged both barrels into his head. Cartwright took the money and the watch in order to make it look like the work of gang robbers and hurriedly hid them in the jungle, then made his way along the edge till he got to the road, went back to the bungalow, changed into his tennis things, and drove with Mrs Bronson to the club.

“I remembered how badly he’d played tennis, and how he’d collapsed when, in order to break the news more gently to Mrs Bronson, I said Bronson was wounded and not dead. If he was only wounded he might have been able to speak. By George, I bet that was a bad moment. The child was Cartwright’s. Look at Olive: why, you saw the likeness yourself. The doctor had said that Mrs Bronson was upset when he told her she was going to have a baby and made him promise not to tell Bronson. Why? Because Bronson knew that he couldn’t be the father of the child.”

“Do you think that Mrs Bronson knew what Cartwright had done?” I asked.

“I’m sure of it. When I look back on her behaviour that evening at the club I am convinced of it. She was upset, but not because Bronson was killed; she was upset because I said he was wounded; on my telling her that he was dead when they found him she burst out crying, but from relief I know that woman. Look at that square chin of hers and tell me that she hasn’t got the courage of the devil. She has a will of iron. She made Cartwright do it. She planned every detail and every move. He was completely under her influence; he is now.”

“But do you mean to tell me that neither you nor anyone else ever suspected that there was anything between them?”

“Never. Never.”

“If they were in love with one another and knew that she was going to have a baby, why didn’t they just bolt?”

“How could they? It was Bronson who had the money; she hadn’t a bean and neither had Cartwright. He was out of a job. Do you think he would have got another with that story round his neck? Bronson had taken him in when he was starving and he’d stolen his wife from him. They wouldn’t have had a dog’s chance. They couldn’t afford to let the truth come out, their only chance was to get Bronson out of the way, and they got him out of the way.”

“They might have thrown themselves on his mercy.”

“Yes, but I think they were ashamed. He’d been so good to them, he was such a decent chap, I don’t think they had the heart to tell him the truth. They preferred to kill him.”

There was a moment’s silence while I reflected over what Gaze said.

“Well, what did you do about it?” I asked.

“Nothing. What was there to do? What was the evidence? That the watch and notes had been found? They might easily have been hidden by someone who was afterwards afraid to come and get them. The murderer might have been quite content to get away with the silver. The footprints? Bronson might have stopped to light a cigarette or there might have been a tree-trunk across the path and he waited while the coolies he met there by chance moved it away. Who could prove that the child that a perfectly decent, respectable woman had had four months after her husband’s death was not his child? No jury would have convicted Cartwright. I held my tongue and the Bronson murder was forgotten.”

“I don’t suppose the Cartwrights have forgotten,” I suggested.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. Human memory is astonishingly short and if you want my professional opinion I don’t mind telling you that I don’t believe remorse for a crime ever sits very heavily on a man when he’s absolutely sure he’ll never be found out.”

I thought once more of the pair I had met that afternoon, the thin, elderly, bald man with gold-rimmed spectacles, and that white-haired untidy woman with her frank speech and kindly, caustic smile. It was almost impossible to imagine that in the distant past they had been swayed by so turbulent a passion, for that alone made their behaviour explicable, that it had brought them in the end to such a pass that they could see no other issue than a cruel and coldblooded murder.

“Doesn’t it make you feel a little uncomfortable to be with them?” I asked Gaze. “For, without wishing to be censorious, I’m bound to say that I don’t think they can be very nice people.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. They are very nice people; they’re about the pleasantest people here. Mrs Cartwright is a thoroughly good sort and a very amusing woman. It’s my business to prevent crime and to catch the culprit when crime is committed, but I’ve known far too many criminals to think that on the whole they’re worse than anybody else. A perfectly decent fellow may be driven by circumstances to commit a crime and if he’s found out he’s punished; but he may very well remain a perfectly decent fellow. Of course society punishes him if he breaks its laws, and it’s quite right, but it’s not always his actions that indicate the essential man. If you’d been a policeman as long as I have, you’d know it’s not what people do that really matters, it’s what they are. Luckily a policeman has nothing to do with their thoughts, only with their deeds; if he had, it would be a very different, a much more difficult matter.”

Gaze flicked the ash from his cheroot and gave me his wry, sardonic, but agreeable smile.

“I’ll tell you what, there’s one job I shouldn’t like,” he said.

“What is that?” I asked.

“God’s at the Judgement Day,” said Gaze. “No, sir.”