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# The Curse of the Burdens John Wyndham

# Chapter I · Shadow of the Curse

“Why talk about an allowance?” said James Burden coldly. “You know the state of affairs as well as I do. It is quite impossible for me to make you an allowance, Dick. I’m sorry, but we’re up against facts.”

His brother laughed. He was a good-looking young fellow of thirty, with a bronzed, clean-shaven face and merry gray eyes. But the wrinkles—the tiny wrinkles that only showed about the corners of his mouth when he laughed—spoke of something that had aged him beyond his years. That something had been the Great War, long past, but still written on the faces of thousands of young men. And behind the laughter in the eyes there was always a shadow—not of pain or grief, but of things remembered.

“The facts are these, old son,” Dick replied. “You never expected to come into this property until you were an old man. You might never have inherited it at all, for our good cousin Robert was looking round for a wife when he fell into the sea and was drowned. This property was of the nature of a windfall.”

“Yes, and rotten, like most windfalls,” James said sourly. “It takes me all my time to get anything out of it. Ten thousand acres and a mortgage that swallows up all the rents! And this house thrown in—a white elephant that has to be kept, and eats its head off!”

“I’d like to go into the figures.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t oblige you” said James stiffly, “and you wouldn’t understand them if I did. Father left us each two hundred and fifty a year. You can live on that and you can work.”

“I’ve been trying to get work, old son—for three years I’ve done all I can think of. But no one wants me. I shall get hold of a job later on, but just now—well, I thought you could spare me a trifle—say another two-fifty.”

James Burden, seated at a writing table in the library of Shotlander, smiled grimly. He was a dark-haired man of forty with a pale, handsome face. He was stouter than his younger brother, but there was no getting over the fact that they were both members of a very good-looking family. One could trace their resemblance to the portrait of their grandfather over the mantelpiece of the library. But whereas in Dick the face had been refined and hardened by a strenuous, active outdoor life, in the elder it had grown more soft and heavy and almost gross in its outlines.

“Two-fifty,” said Dick, “until I get a job.”

“Ridiculous! Why should you live in idleness on five hundred a year? Five pounds a week is quite enough for a young chap with no ties or responsibilities.”

“I’m taking all that on, old chap. I’m thinking of getting married.”

“Married? Oh, this is really too much of a good thing! I cannot afford to get married myself and you have the cheek to ask me to support your wife.”

Dick Burden laughed pleasantly and lit a cigarette. He had been standing by the fire but now he strolled to the big writing table and seated himself on the edge of it.

“We’re the last two,” he said, “and we ought both to marry. You don’t seem to like taking it on, but I’ve been thinking about it a good deal. We don’t want to let that old monk get the best of us.”

James Burden shrugged his shoulders. He did not say “What old monk?” or pretend that he did not know what his brother was talking about. Shotlander Priory had been given or sold to a certain Sir James Burden by Henry VIII at the dissolution of the monasteries. The old prior, crossing the worn threshold for the last time, had called down the curse of Heaven on those who were to take over the property of the church. “By fire and water,” he had said, “your line shall perish.” And they had seemed the foolish words of an old and dying man. For nearly four hundred years the descendants of Sir James Burden had held the property, though it had never passed from father to son.

“You see, old son,” Dick continued, “we’re the only two left now, and it looks as if our friend the prior had the best chance he’s ever had of knocking us out. Robert was drowned, and that’s getting rather near the point, isn’t it? We may be drowned or burnt to death, so far as I can see. It’d be a pity for there to be none of us left.”

“Do you think so?” said James dryly. “Well I’m not quite so sure about that. But look here, Dick, you can’t get over me with all this rot about the race dying out and that sort of thing. You’ve fallen in love with a girl as silly as yourself and you want me to keep the two of you. If you asked me for two hundred and fifty pence a year I wouldn’t give it to you. I’m sorry. If you want to get married soon you’d better find a girl with money or else rough it with the one you’ve got.”

The words were harsh, but they were spoken quite gently. Dick Burden was not in the least offended. He regarded his brother as a “dry old stick”—very practical and full of wisdom.

“Letty wouldn’t mind waiting,” he replied, “and she wouldn’t object to roughing it. But I’m not going to spoil her life for her.”

“Letty, eh?” queried James Burden. “So that’s her name.”

“Yes—Letty Kingsbury.”

James Burden’s eyes narrowed to two slits. He placed his hand to his forehead as though he were trying to remember something. His face was like a white mask.

“You’ve met her,” Dick went on, “at Easthill on Sea—at the boardinghouse; they call it a private hotel but I call it a boardinghouse. Don’t you remember? We went down there last year. Robert was staying there when—at the time of the accident. A slim, dark-haired girl—father a retired Indian judge—old chap with brown face and white moustache. Surely you remember her?”

“Yes—I remember her,” said James, speaking very slowly, and then, after a pause, “Has money I suppose?”

“None. Father’s got a pension—that’s all.”

“H’m, yes. Sir Julius Kingsbury—I remember him. Hardly the sort of man to approve of this marriage, eh?”

“Oh, your memory is improving,” laughed Dick.

“Yes. Sir Julius gave evidence at the inquest on poor Robert. Sir Julius, so far as is known, was the last person to see Robert alive.”

“That’s right.”

James Burden leaned his elbows on the table and pressed the tips of his fingers together. His eyes were fixed on the portrait of “Buck” Burden, who had sold nearly everything he could dispose of to pay his gambling debts.

“On the whole,” said James after a pause, “it’s just as well that you can’t afford to marry this girl.”

“What d’you mean by that, eh?”

“The evidence the baronet gave at the inquest was very unsatisfactory—in my opinion. In fact, I may say that I have grave suspicions that Sir Julius pushed Robert over the edge of the cliff.”

“Look here,” Dick said heatedly, “I won’t have you talking rot, Jim. You’re crazy—that’s what it is. Your health’s bad and your brain’s affected.”

“You evidently thought so if you expected me to allow you two hundred and fifty a year.” He paused and looked at his watch. “If you start for the station now you’ll just have time to do it quietly—without hurrying.”

“I’m not going to leave this house or this room until you explain your infamous suggestion.”

“I’m going to explain nothing, Dick. You’ve just said I’m crazy, and mad men say things they cannot possibly explain.”

“You’re not mad. For some reason or another you want to prevent this marriage.”

“Lack of money will do that,” James Burton said. “It will not be necessary for me to interfere. You’ll miss your train, Dick, if you don’t look sharp.”

“By Jove,” Dick muttered. “If your heart weren’t dicky, I’d knock the truth out of you.”

“There’s nothing to knock out,” James sneered. “But I’ll tell you this: I mean to get at the truth, and I’m going down to Easthill-on-Sea in a few days’ time. And I shall stay at the Warlock Hotel.”

“Oh, you’re a fool! I’ve no patience with you.”

“Perhaps not. And I doubt if you’ll have any patience with the police either.”

“You don’t mean to tell me that the police——”

“I don’t mean to tell you anything more. You can warn Sir Julius if you like. He won’t bring an action for libel against me; I can promise you that. I know nothing, but I intend to learn everything.”

“This is too funny,” Dick laughed. “Why you are the only person who has benefitted by Robert’s death.”

“Think that if you like. But if anything were to happen to me—and it might happen before a week is over—you would inherit a white elephant and the money that’s not enough to keep it in food.”

“Oh, I see. You think Sir Julius is going to commit murder wholesale in order to provide his daughter with an eligible husband? Upon my word, Jim, the theory of the curse is dreary common sense compared to this. I’m sorry for you, old chap. I hope you’ll be better in the morning. I can catch that train if I run all the way to the station. Good night.”

James Burden made no reply, but when he was alone—when the door had closed and he was alone with the portrait of the family spendthrift—the white mask seemed to fall away from his face, and his dull eyes glowed with fire.

His white, rather puffy hands moved toward each other on the table, and he clasped them together with such force that when he drew them apart again, the flesh of his fingers was red and indented.

He looked out of the window and saw his brother running down the drive. Then he thrust his hand into his pocket, and taking out a portrait of a very beautiful young woman, gazed at it with hungry eyes.

It was a photograph of Letty, the only child of Sir Julius Kingsbury.

# Chapter II · Love’s Enemies

In late spring, in the summer, in early autumn there was about as much privacy on the pier at Easthill-on-Sea as one would hope to find in Piccadilly Circus. The band played at the end of it, and there was a concert hall and sideshows and penny-in-the-slot machines of extraordinary variety and fascination.

In the winter, however, when the sea was gray, and either sullen or angry, and the sou’westerly gales blew, and the rain came down in torrents, the pier was deserted by all the residents except the untiring anglers, and it was a place where lovers might meet with as little fear of interruption as in a country lane. And there were innumerable shelters from the wind and rain—shelters of glass and wood, facing all ways, so that one could find protection from every wind that blew.

In one of these shelters Dick Burden stood with his back to the sea. In a corner of the seat that faced him sat Letty Kingsbury, her knees crossed and her gloved hands clasped round them. She was wearing a thick ulster of thick brown fleecy material and a neat little hat. She had the pale olive skin of girls who have lived the best part of their lives in India and the red healthy cheeks of a young woman who has recently spent two years by the sea and put in a good deal of her time out of doors. She was radiantly and splendidly beautiful.

And her dark beauty, almost of an Eastern type, was allied with the strength and vigor and vitality of the English “sporting girl.” It was said of her that her life in India had “done her no harm.” It might have been more truly said that it had given her something that a life spent entirely in England could never have given.

“It comes to this, Dick,” she was saying, “we’ve got to wait.”

“Yes, old girl—of course—of course. We couldn’t rub along on two hundred and fifty a year, could we?”

“Oh yes, we could! But you know it isn’t that. My father won’t hear of our marriage. He has even forbidden me to see you or write to you.”

“But you’ve disobeyed him, eh?”

“Yes—for this once.”

“Does that mean you’re going to give in to him?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you mean, Letty? You don’t know?”

“Oh, well,” she laughed, “Father has thrown himself on my mercy.”

“He put it like that, did he?”

“Yes—just like that. Dick, I’m very worried about my father. Up to a week ago he was just—well he was the ordinary prudent father who doesn’t want his daughter to make an imprudent marriage. And then—Dick, I suppose you won’t believe me when I tell you he really did implore me to have nothing more to do with you. He didn’t command or threaten me. He just—well, he seemed to break down altogether. And he is not that sort of man.”

“No, by Jove, he isn’t. And he gave you no reason—except that I’m very ineligible?”

“He gave no reason at all. He did not talk about money.”

“Just thinks I’m a rotter, eh?”

“Don’t be absurd, Dick. You know quite well that Father likes you.” Dick Burden asked no more questions. He fancied he knew what had happened. He had his brother to thank for this. James had by some means or other acquired a hold over Sir Julius Kingsbury. It was, of course, ridiculous to suppose that Sir Julius had murdered Robert Burden. But the baronet might have been the victim of very strong circumstantial evidence—known as yet only to one man, but quite sufficient to justify the police in making an arrest. A rather eminent retired judge like Sir Julius might shrink from anything of the nature of a public scandal. Innocent, and yet perhaps unable to prove his guiltlessness, he would be inclined to give way, not to actual blackmail but to strong persuasion.

It was a very awkward situation, for Dick could not take Letty into his confidence. It was quite impossible for him to tell her of his brother’s suspicions. Could any young man say to the woman he loved, “My dear old girl, I think I can explain this. My brother told me a fortnight ago that your father,” etc., etc.? It would have been not only ridiculous, but the end of everything between them. It would be suicide, and a most contemptible form of suicide. Jim would have to be fought with other weapons than freedom of speech.

Later on he might have to be kicked. But for the present he must be treated as the honest head of an old family, who wished to save his brother from an unfortunate marriage.

“You are very silent,” said Letty after a long pause. “Are you weighing your own merits and deciding whether I spoke the truth when I said that Father liked you?”

“No, old girl. I was only wondering what kind of bee he has got in his bonnet and how we can catch it. Put a little salt on its tail, I suppose.”

“Don’t talk rot, Dick. I’m pretty cheerful as a rule, but this beats me altogether. We’re up against something terribly serious, Dick. I am very worried about my father. He went up to London about a fortnight ago, and ever since then he seems to have changed—to have got so much older and more feeble. The other day he burst into tears, and about nothing at all, as far as I could see.”

“I expect he’s ill. Perhaps he went up to town to see a doctor. But look here, Letty, you’re not going to give way to him—about me I mean?”

“Yes, openly I am. You must not come to the hotel. I’ll meet you there as often as I can. He generally sleeps after lunch, as you know. And I—oh, well, Dick, I’m supposed to be playing golf.”

“I don’t like this hole-and-corner sort of business, Letty.”

“Nor do I, dear. But—well, it would be different if Father were quite himself. And—oh, it’s either this or nothing.”

The young man flung himself on the seat beside her and put his arm round her neck. Only the gray sea and the gray sky were looking when he drew her closer to him and kissed her passionately. Just these and the yellow, impassive back of a fisherman, clad in oilskins, who was standing twenty yards away from them. The stranger had been there all the time, forever flinging his weighted line far out into the water and never turning his head. He could not possibly have heard a word of their conversation above the noise of the wind and the rain, for he was on the far side of another shelter and was only to be seen through the glass of it.

“I don’t see who’s going to get the better of us,” whispered Dick, “it’s just a question of waiting. I’ll soon get a job, old girl, and then——” He kissed her again and again, and she suddenly cried out:

“Oh, Dick, that man is looking at us.”

He let go of her and laughed. The disciple of Izaak Walton was no longer gazing at them, but he was standing with his face toward them and was taking a flashing, wriggling fish off the hook.

“The first he’s caught,” said Letty. “How awkward he should have just landed it at that moment!”

“Dick Burden made no reply. He was fascinated by the extraordinary ugliness of the man’s face—by the size of it, the thickness of the lips, the thin straightness of the nose, by the small eyes set so far apart that they seemed to be on the very edges of the cheek-bones.

And, above all, Dick Burden’s attention was not only caught but held by the ridiculous idea that this hideous face was a caricature of his own—a gross and horrible caricature of the Burden type of face.

There were the full lips, and the thin nose, and the eyes set wide apart, but each feature was so exaggerated that it had become a monstrosity.

“A nice-looking chap, eh?” said Dick. “Enough to frighten all the fish out of the sea.”

The man turned and flung his re-baited hook into the water again. Far and straight the lead swung through the air for over a hundred feet.

“Some cast, that, eh?” laughed Dick. “I should say he’s a pretty hefty fellow. Does he remind you of anyone, Letty?”

“I’m glad to say he doesn’t. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more repulsive face. She rose to her feet and picked up a bag of golf clubs which stood in the corner. “I must be getting along, Dick.”

“I’ll walk back with you.”

“Oh no, you won’t! You’ll stay here and give me at least ten minutes’ start. I’m not taking any chances. Goodbye, you dear.”

“Tomorrow—here—the same time?”

“Yes, yes, Dick.”

She darted out of the shelter and vanished from his sight. He sat down and lit a cigarette. He had been happy enough so long as Letty was with him, but now, left alone with his thoughts, a hard look came into his eyes.

“What’s Jim driving at?” he kept saying to himself. Well, it would be best to ask his brother that question. Very likely he would deny that he had had an interview with Sir Julius Kingsbury and that he had interfered with their love affair. Well, then, he, Dick Burden, would have to see Sir Julius himself. He wanted to avoid that if possible. But somehow or other he would have to get at the truth.

He smoked his cigarette until the hot ash was close to his lips, flung the end out into the rain, and rose to his feet.

He was buttoning up the collar of his overcoat when he heard the sound of hurried footsteps on the planking of the pier, and his brother suddenly came in sight.

“Hallo!” said Dick. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to have a talk with you. I thought I should find you here. I’ve just seen Miss Kingsbury.”

“Indeed. And she told you I was here?”

“Oh no, she did not stop to speak to me. But she was just coming out through the turnstile—with her golf clubs, and I rather fancied I should discover you here. I’m sorry you have taken no notice of what I told you.”

“We may as well have it out,” Dick laughed unpleasantly. “I don’t care a hang for your opinions, but apparently Sir Julius does. I suppose I have to thank you for setting him against me.”

“Most certainly you have to thank me, Dick. I want to save you from this unfortunate entanglement, and I had to speak very plainly to Sir Julius.”

“So I imagined. This crazy idea about Robert, eh?”

“Sir Julius would hardly have listened to my suggestion,” James retorted, “if there had been no force in my arguments. There was no scene. The baronet is a very reasonable man.”

“Oh, is he? Well, I’m not, Jim. You’re a liar—no, worse than that—you’re a cunning rogue.”

“Steadily Dick, steadily. I can’t have you talking to me like that.”

“And I’ll tell you this,” Dick continued. “I only hope there is something in that moth-eaten curse. It’s about time the family came to an end if you’re the head of it.”

“I wouldn’t speak so loudly if I were you,” James Burden smiled. “There’s a man fishing on the other side of that shelter.”

And at that moment, as though the fellow heard the remark, he turned and gazed at them—only for a few seconds and then he faced the sea again.

“You might get to look like that,” said Dick, “if you live long enough. But I hope you won’t, Jim.”

“Waiting for dead men’s shoes, eh?”

The two men stared at each other. Dick’s face was as white as his brother’s. Then, with a fiery smolder of hate, the red light began to burn in their eyes.

# Chapter III · The Blow Falls

There was mutual venom in the brothers’ eyes, but whereas in Dick’s heart was the swift flame of anger and indignation, the hatred in that of the elder man was calm and steady and undying. They turned away from each other as though the tension were unbearable—as though they could only escape from a scene of physical violence by going their several ways.

Dick strode down the pier in the rain and James walked slowly in the opposite direction until he came to the rail by the landing-stage. Then he stood still, gripping the iron bar with both hands and staring out at the sea.

Two hours in the stuffy gloom of a cinema put Dick Burden in a better temper. When he left the place he had tea at a small café, and then he went for a long walk in the darkness. He wanted exercise, and he had no desire to return to his mean and lonely lodgings until the evening meal.

The rain had ceased, but the wind was still blowing half a gale as he climbed the long, sloping road that led out of the town to the summit of the cliffs. Walking to windward, Dick Burden got all the exercise he needed in an hour. When at last he paused from sheer exhaustion he seemed no longer to feel any bitterness against his brother.

It was possible, after all, that James had really been actuated by a desire to do the best he could for him. Dick remembered that he had first regarded the situation in this more kindly light when Letty had told him about her father. He had most certainly suspected his brother of nothing worse than meddling interference—of an honest wish to save the family from being drawn into an ugly scandal. It was not until he had found himself face-to-face with James, and sharp words had passed between them, that rage and hatred had got the better of Dick. And now they seemed to have vanished.

As he stood there in the windswept darkness, looking back at the lights of the town, he was just a little bit ashamed of himself. Jim had answered him softly until there was no longer any chance of turning away wrath. And then—well, it was not so much what his brother had said—though the remark about waiting for dead men’s shoes had been turned away, he would have struck his brother—had struck Jim—an invalid. It was not pleasant to think of that.

But now even the terrible glare of hatred had become something vague and uncertain.

The stars shining in a clear sky, the smell of the rain-soaked earth, the sense of great and lonely spaces, the wind—yes, above everything that clean, wonderful wind—seemed to set him apart from the ugly things of this world.

“Old Jim will soon drop all this nonsense,” Dick said to himself. And as he strode down the hill toward the town again he thought of Jim as something rather foolish that did not matter at all, and of Sir Julius Kingsbury as a crotchety old man whose brain was out of order. He saw himself as the kind of chap who could knock down all obstacles or climb over them. Never before in all his life had he felt so strong and capable and self-reliant. And Letty was just such another as himself. The two of them together would be quite invincible. He was sure of that.

Even the dismal sitting room of his lodgings had no power to depress his spirits, and the meal, ill-cooked, ill-served and half-cold, was eaten with contentment. When he had finished, Dick poked the fire into a blaze, lit his pipe, and took off his boots. The rain was coming down in torrents, and even the hideously furnished room seemed snug and warm.

Dick Burden stretched himself lazily in a dilapidated but comfortable armchair. He began to think of Letty Kingsbury, and in a quarter of an hour he was most unromantically asleep.

He awoke with a start as something touched his face—awoke and perceived what seemed like a gigantic hand close to his eyes. He sprang to his feet and saw that it was Letty who had touched him. They were alone in the room together. He glanced at the clock and noticed that it was half past ten. And then he laughed foolishly.

“Letty, is this a dream?” he said, and then, as he saw her eyes and the whiteness of her face, he felt as though someone had flung a bucket of cold water over him.

Something had happened—something terrible. Dick Burden felt certain. Letty stood there before him—unable for a moment to speak, trying no doubt to pick the words that would give utterance to that which was in her mind.

And he knew what it was that had happened. It was not that he had feared this tragedy, but simply that he knew—that the knowledge had come to him during those few seconds of silence.

His dream may have had something to do with it, for he had been dreaming of his brother.

“Jim?” prompted Dick at last.

“Yes, dear,” she answered, so faintly that he could scarcely hear the words.

“An accident, eh?”

“Yes—oh, Dick, he’s dead—he’s dead!”—and she covered her face with her hands.

“Here, you must sit down and rest,” he said, laying a hand on her shoulder. “They oughtn’t to have sent you to tell me. Someone else ought to have come. Sit down, Letty dear.”

“No, Dick, I—I’m alright. And they don’t know I’ve come.”

“They don’t know? What do you mean, Letty?”

“I mean they don’t know at the Warlock—perhaps they haven’t heard anything there yet. I was down by the harbor when—when they brought it ashore—a fishing boat; they picked it up as they were coming in. I was in the crowd—I saw the face—oh, Dick—Dick!” She began to sob.

Her lover put his arm around her shoulders.

“You poor little thing,” he said. “What a cruel shock for you. Perhaps Jim is not dead after all. They’ll try artificial respiration for a long time—oh yes, an hour or more. I’ll put on my boots and come round with you to the hotel. Look here, I insist on your sitting down just for a minute.”

He took her by the arms and placed her gently in the chair from which he had just risen. She offered no resistance. He kicked off his slippers and put on his boots. Then he slipped on his overcoat and said:

“I’m ready now, old girl. I say, it’s not likely to be as bad as you think.”

Letty stared at him. There were no traces of tears in her eyes or on her cheeks. James Burden had loved her and he had asked her to marry him. And Dick knew nothing of this—the one fact that made everything so much more horrible to her than he could ever imagine.

“Come, Letty,” said Dick, “we must get along at once. I dare say we’ll pick up a cab outside.”

He held out his hand to her, and she caught hold of it, and from the touch of those strong lean fingers she seemed to gather strength and courage. He pulled her to her feet and kissed her on the cheek.

“Poor old girl!” he said. “What rotten luck for you!”

“Don’t think of me!” she exclaimed. “How can you spare a thought for me—when your brother——”

“Oh, Jim’s alright,” he interrupted harshly. “It would take more than an old monk’s curse to hurt Jim.”

They went outside, where a taxicab was waiting. Letty herself had come in it. She had forgotten that.

# Chapter IV · Before the Coroner

The body of James Burden had been found by the fishermen in the sea about a mile west of the pierhead and a quarter of a mile from the shore. It had been seen to starboard by Henry Foskett and he had called out to his father, who was at the tiller. The Rosemary had been put about, and it had taken the two men nearly half an hour to get the lifeless being on deck.

They reached the harbor in ten minutes, and a doctor was sent for and was soon on the spot. After his examination of the body he said that James Burden had been dead for about three hours. There were no signs of violence; no signs of foul play. James Burden had met his end not by drowning, but by shock acting on a weak heart. His watch and cigarette case were in his pockets, and his watch had stopped at half past six. A letter and some cards in a notebook had established his identity, but had not given his Easthill address, and it was not until an hour later that the police discovered that he had been staying at the Warlock Private Hotel.

This was the sum total of the evidence given at the inquest by the doctor and the fishermen. The police gave some further details, the result of communications made to them by Richard Burden and Miss Cramer, the proprietress of the Warlock Hotel.

Dick was called forward, and he took the oath.

“You met your brother on the pier that afternoon?” queried the coroner.

“Yes.”

“By accident?”

“Perhaps not quite. I had been talking to Miss Kingsbury and my brother saw her leave the pier.”

“She informed him that you were on the pier?”

“No, but he came to that conclusion. He knew that I was engaged to be married to Miss Kingsbury. He told me himself that he guessed that I was on the pier.”

“He wanted to see you—about some matter of importance?”

“No. He just wished to see me. We had a chat together for a few minutes and then I left him.”

“Did he seem depressed?”

“Not in the least.”

“Had he any troubles that you are aware of?”

“Nothing that I know of. If you are suggesting that he committed suicide I think that is very unlikely. My brother was a man who was not easily upset or worried.”

“I suppose, Mr. Burden, that there were not many people on the pier at that time—in that weather?”

“I saw no one anywhere near us but a man fishing.”

“You did not see your brother again?”

“I never saw him again alive.”

“So far as we know at present,” said the coroner, “you were the last person to see him alive. It is possible that he did not leave the pier by the entrance.”

“That is so. He may have stood about until after dusk and have fallen into the sea. The tide was on the ebb and he would have been carried westward. There was no one about to save him or give the alarm. And my brother had a weak heart. He can swim, but the cold of the water would have killed him.”

“Has he been an invalid for many years?”

“Yes—ever since he had rheumatic fever at the age of twenty.”

“And his ill health did not prey on his mind?”

“Not at all.”

The coroner looked at his notes and frowned.

“I suppose,” he said after a pause, “that your brother was not superstitious? He did not believe in this so-called ‘curse’ connected with your house?”

“Not in the least. I did not mention it to the inspector. The papers got hold of it somehow and made a good deal of it. Of course, after my cousin’s death——”

“You needn’t talk about that,” the coroner interrupted harshly. “I conducted the inquiry. We are not concerned with that just now. Who first told you of your brother’s death?”

The abrupt question was flung at him almost as an accusation. Dick Burden would have liked to conceal the truth. The police had not made any inquiries on this point. The cab which had taken Letty Kingsbury and himself to the Warlock Hotel had been dismissed a few moments before the news came over the telephone. Ostensibly they had both learnt of James Burden’s death from Miss Cramer rushing out into the hall from her private room.

Dick Burden would have liked to say, “I first heard the news from Miss Cramer” but he knew he was standing on dangerous ground. His landlady might have told the police about Letty’s visits and—oh, well, it was safer to speak the truth.

“Miss Kingsbury,” he replied, and he was quite aware that his hesitation had produced an unfavorable impression on the coroner.

“At the hotel?”

“No—at my rooms. She came straight to me from the harbor—to save time.”

The coroner stroked his gray beard, and Dick Burden thought that he had never seen a man with a more unpleasant face. He remembered the inquest on his cousin and how this same coroner had badgered poor Jim about little details that had not seemed to matter.

It was as if the coroner could not get away from some pre-conceived idea of suicide or murder—though ninety-nine cases out of a hundred deaths were due to an accident or natural causes.

Well, perhaps it was the fellow’s duty to suspect everyone.

“Do you know anyone living at Cowhurst?” asked the coroner.

“I’ve never even heard of the place.”

“It is a small village some twelve miles north of here and about twenty miles southeast of Shotlander Priory.”

“I don’t remember the name. I may have passed through it, but I certainly do not know anyone who lives there.”

“You have never heard your brother speak of the place?”

“Never—so far as I can remember.”

“Thank you, Mr. Burden. There is nothing further that I wish to ask you at present.”

Miss Cramer was the next witness. She was a tall, big-boned woman of forty, with a large deeply lined face and bright red hair. She was fashionably dressed, and her furs must have cost a great deal of money. She took the oath in a harsh voice that was almost masculine in its pitch.

“How long have you known the deceased?” queried the coroner.

“Let me see,” she replied, “I think he came to stay with me three years ago.”

“Before Mr. Robert Burden ever stayed with you?”

“Yes—oh yes. Mr. Robert came on his cousin’s recommendation.”

“And you have never noticed anything odd about Mr. James Burden’s behavior?”

“I have always found him a nice, quiet gentleman.”

“He arrived at your hotel at three o’clock on the day of his death?”

“Yes.”

“And he did not seem upset about anything? He was quite normal, wasn’t he?”

“Quite himself.”

“A communication was waiting for him?”

“Yes—a letter from Cowhurst.”

“You noticed the postmark. Why?”

“Because I was born at Cowhurst, and know the village very well. I told the police that.”

“Yes, and you also told the police that Mr. Burden, on the morning of the day on which he was drowned, received a letter from Cowhurst.”

“Yes—that is right—I remember it quite well.”

“Why did you not come forward and give this information at the inquest on Mr. Robert Burden?”

“The question of the letters from Cowhurst did not seem to me to be of any importance,” said Miss Cramer.

“But now you think that it is of importance?” suggested the coroner.

“Yes, of course. I should be a fool if I couldn’t see that it was an extraordinary coincidence.”

“Have you any reason to think that it is anything more than a coincidence?”

“Only that such coincidences don’t happen as a rule.”

“You think that these letters were written by the same person?”

“I think it’s very likely.”

“You couldn’t swear that they were addressed in the same handwriting?”

“I took no notice of the handwriting. And, of course, I couldn’t have remembered the writing on Mr. Robert’s letter, even if I had examined it. But the postmark did attract my attention on both occasions.”

The coroner turned over some pages of manuscript—a copy of his notes at the inquest on Robert Burden. The crowded room seemed to quiver with expectancy. Up to the mention of this letter—of these two missives—no one had regarded the case as anything of more interest than an unfortunate accident which had befallen a visitor of some social position. But the coincidence of these communications was something to arrest the attention and hold it.

Here was a definite link between the two tragedies—the suggestion of a common cause. A couple of men, both owners of the same estate! The receipt of two letters, both posted in the same small village!

Even the most level-headed present could not help thinking of murder or of some horror that would drive a man to take his own life.

“Do you often go to Cowhurst?” queried the coroner, after a pause.

“I have not been there for ten years.”

“But you know people who live there?”

“Oh yes, several.”

“Relatives?”

“No. My father, who lived there, is dead.”

“But you have friends who write to you?”

“Yes—now and then.”

“And none of them has ever mentioned Mr. Robert Burden?”

“Never. Nor Mr. James either.”

“But after Mr. Robert Burden’s death, and after you saw the postmark on the letter Mr. Robert Burden received on the day of his demise, it would surely have been natural for you to have said something to your friends at Cowhurst?”

“I have told you that I attached no importance to the letter whatever. It was not until the second letter came that I——”

“Thank you, Miss Cramer,” the coroner interrupted. “We are very much obliged to you for your information.”

Letty had been summoned as a witness. She heard her name called out, rose to her feet, and took the oath. The coroner smiled at her as though to give her confidence. He asked her if she had known Robert Burden, and she said that she had only spoken to him twice. Did she know Mr. James Burden as well? Yes, quite well. She had lived in the hotel with her father for some time and had often met the deceased. He had struck her as a quiet, level-headed man—not in the least likely to commit suicide. No, she had not seen him at the pier entrance. If she had done so, she would have stopped to speak to him. He had not arrived at the hotel when she had left it. She had not seen him for a month. But she knew he was coming to stay at the Warlock. Her father had told her.

“You were down at the harbor when the body of the deceased was brought ashore?” the coroner inquired.

“Yes,” Letty answered. “I went for a walk after dinner. I often go down to the harbor. I like it better than the parade.”

“And when you saw the face of the deceased you went off at once to tell Mr. Richard Burden?”

“Yes—at once.”

“It did not occur to you to give the fishermen and the police any information—to tell them Mr. James Burden’s name and address?”

“No. I was quite certain that they would find all the information they required. A man generally carries visiting cards in his pocket.”

“But the address? Remember, Mr. James Burden had only just arrived at Easthill.”

“I’m afraid I did not stop to think of everything. It seemed to me that his brother ought to be informed at once, and I hurried off. I took a cab.”

For nearly half a minute there was silence, and Letty’s heart beat very quickly. Then she was told that nothing more was wanted of her. She felt as though she had escaped from some danger. “I am free,” she said to herself, and the look in her eyes showed her gratitude and relief—too plainly. She realized this as she saw the coroner gazing steadily at her.

“One moment, Miss Kingsbury,” he said. “Before you go, is there anything you would like to tell us—any information you would care to give? The duty of a witness in these sad affairs is not only to answer questions truthfully, but to inform the court of anything which may help the jury come to a proper verdict.”

The color flamed up in the girl’s white face—and then died away again. This was a direct challenge—an insult. No other witness had been asked this question. It was almost as though the coroner had said, “You’re keeping something back. Come, out with it.”

Letty Kingsbury recovered her self-control.

“I have nothing further to add,” she replied coldly. “If I had known of anything that would be of assistance I would have told the police.”

“Thank you, Miss Kingsbury. I hope you are not offended. The question was a mere formality. We are much obliged to you for your evidence.”

She went back to her seat with those sentences ringing in her ears. It seemed to her that there was a covert sneer in them.

What had she told them already? What had she told this man? More perhaps then she had put into words.

# Chapter V · Blackmailer or Madman?

The jury returned an open verdict at the inquest, but Dick Burden knew that their decision was by no means the end of the matter. He was, in fact, certain that already he was vaguely and indefinitely suspected of murder, although it would have been ridiculous to arrest him. There was no evidence against him, but also there was no doubt that he was the one person in the world who would benefit from his brother’s death. He was now the owner of the Shotlander estates, and in a position to marry the woman he loved.

There was no getting away from that fact. His entire outlook on life had changed. A rather hopeless love affair had given place to a possibility of marriage in the near future.

Of course that in itself would have been nothing. Every heir to an estate benefits by the death of his predecessor. But there were other facts that might make it very awkward for him.

He was the last known person to see his brother alive. And there had been a violent—and indecent—quarrel near the end of the pier. If anyone—that ugly fisherman, for instance—had come forward and told the coroner about the altercation, there might even have been a “case” against him.

His brother had been a real obstacle in his path, not merely because his brother was the owner of the Shotlander estates, but because his brother had definitely forbidden his marriage, and had used his influence with Sir Julius Kingsbury to prevent it. And now—well, the obstacle had been removed.

Dick Burden saw all this very clearly as he sat in the library at Shotlander Priory one evening a fortnight after James Burden had been laid in the family vault. For two weeks he had had but little time to think of anything but business. During that period he had discovered that the estates yielded a clear seven thousand a year, and that Jim could very well have spared that annual allowance of two hundred and fifty pounds. It is not pleasant to discover ugly truths about the dead.

Jim had been mean. There was no doubt about that. Well, he had always been an invalid and peculiar.

“Poor old Jim,” thought Dick. “Precious little he got out of life!”

He filled his pipe and lit the tobacco, and stretched out his legs to the warmth of the blazing fire. It was nine o’clock, and he could not possibly go to bed for another hour and a half. He did not care to be alone with his thoughts. He yawned, rose from his chair, and made his way to the billiard room, where he practiced difficult shots at the top of the table.

Half an hour later the old butler, who had known three masters in as many years, entered the room and said:

“A gentleman has called to see you, sir. A Mr. Robertson, sir; he said he had no card with him.”

“I don’t know him,” Dick replied. “Well, you may as well show him in here, Atkins.”

The butler retired, and a minute later he ushered a man into the billiard room. Dick Burden recognized the ugly face at once.

It was that of the man who had been fishing on the pier! Not at all a person that Dick Burden desired to see again, though he had been interested in the fellow’s ugliness—in the face that was a curious exaggeration of all the Burden features.

“I must apologize for this intrusion,” said Robertson, when the butler had left the billiard room. “It is an impertinence for a stranger to call upon you at this hour.”

“Not at all,” Dick answered cheerily. “Sit down, won’t you?”

Robertson took off his overcoat. It was creased and dirty, and suggested poverty. His hat was a greasy old black felt.

“I am glad to rest,” he said, flinging himself on one of the long leather-covered seats that were set against the wall of the room. “I have had a very long walk—nearly seven miles, to tell you the truth.”

“Great Scott! Seven miles! You must have a drink!”

“No, thank you. I am a teetotaler. But I will smoke a cigar—one of my own, if you don’t mind. I stick to a particular brand.”

He took a cheroot from a shabby leather case and bit off the end. Dick Burden did not like the look of him at all. Why had the fellow traveled such a distance? And why had he walked? He had certainly come on an errand of importance. Blackmail? Possibly, but a blackmailer of intelligence would have shown his hand before the inquest. After it his evidence would be of little value.

The police would only say to him, “That’s all very well, but why didn’t you come forward at the inquest?” and there would be no answer to that.

A teetotaler and a smoker of very mild cigars! And the most horrible face in the world! Dick Burden did not like the combination.

There was something inhuman about it—well, perhaps not exactly inhuman, but unnatural.

Dick Burden rested his cue against the paneled wall and put on his old shooting jacket. And then, as he began to refill his pipe, Robertson said:

“Do you mind sitting down here, Mr. Burden? There are occasions on which one does not want to shout. By the by, if you don’t mind, I’d feel safer if the door were locked.”

Dick Burden smiled, walked to the door, and locked it.

“Now then, Mr. Robertson,” he said sternly, “let us get to business. I’m not very fond of mysteries.”

“Of course not,” replied the visitor, “but you’re in the thick of them. You’ll excuse my saying that, won’t you? You recognize me, of course?”

“Well, I did fancy I’d seen your face before.”

“Mine are features a man does not easily forget,” Robertson laughed.

“Yes, yes—we have seen each other before—on the pier at Easthill. Are you fond of fishing?”

“Not in the sea, Mr. Robertson.”

“Ah, that’s a pity—h’m, yes, a great pity; teaches a man to be patient. You’ll have to be very patient if you’re going to hold on to this delightful old place of yours.”

“What do you mean?” queried Dick sharply.

“The curse of the old monk, about which I hear. It’s working very well. You’re the only one left now.”

“The police will deal with that,” the young man laughed derisively.

“The police won’t save you.”

Dick Burden smiled, leaned forward, and knocked out the ashes from his pipe on the floor. His mind was moving quickly, but he wanted time to think. He had a shrewd idea that the danger was very close to him—no further away in fact than this newcomer. Possibly the man was mad, but it was more likely that he wished to get on friendly terms with his victim—that he wished to pose as a comrade in the hour of danger.

“We are both in the same boat,” said Robertson after a pause.

“You too, eh?”

“Yes, but not for the same reason. They want to get rid of me because I know too much.”

“What do you know?”

“I know who killed your brother.”

This astounding statement jerked Dick Burden to his feet. He walked round to the open fireplace, where there was a heavy poker of burnished steel.

“I’m not mad,” said Robertson. “I was on the pier when your brother was pushed into the water by Sir Julius Kingsbury.”

“Sir Julius Kingsbury!”

“Yes, I saw it all quite plainly, and Sir Julius suspects that I witnessed the deed. Sooner or later he’s likely to get me, and that is why I’ve come round here tonight. It’s hard luck on you, but it is better for you to know now than later on—after you’re married.”

“This is a rotten lie, and you—you’re a scoundrel, whoever you are.”

“You think it is impossible, eh?”

Dick Burden began to refill his pipe. It would be absurd for him to say even to himself that it was impossible for Sir Julius Kingsbury to have committed this crime after all that his brother had told him. According to Jim, the baronet had murdered Robert Burden, and there was very good evidence that Sir Julius had been afraid of Jim. It was quite possible that Sir Julius, half mad with terror, had got rid of the man he feared.

But then one had to assume that the baronet had murdered Robert Burden, and he, Dick, had never been willing to admit the possibility of such a tragedy. He had regarded Jim as a liar. And now—well, Jim’s death might be the actual proof of Jim’s honesty.

It was all very horrible—and most horrible of all was the fact that Robertson, like some hideous devil, had made a statement that, whether true or false, would work like poison in a man’s brain.

“Nothing is impossible,” said Dick when he was puffing at his tobacco, “but one has to consider probabilities. Why did you make no attempt to save my brother?”

“What could I do? I am a poor swimmer, and in my heavy clothes and oilskins I should have gone to the bottom like a stone.”

“You could have given the alarm—have run for help.”

“It would have been impossible to save your brother. I saw it all quite clearly, Mr. Burden. There is no boat at the end of the pier. By the time I had got to the parade and we had launched a boat it would have been too late.”

“Oh, you can’t expect me to believe all this nonsense. At any rate, you could have told the police—as quickly as possible.”

Robertson rose from the seat and walked slowly toward Dick Burden. He did not speak until they were within a yard of each other. Then he said:

“You are taking it pretty calmly.”

“Yes—one doesn’t get excited over fairy tales. What is your game, Mr. Robertson?”

“Self-preservation, first of all. Then a desire to save you. Listen to me,” he said. “You think I’m a liar. You don’t credit my story. Well, do you fancy the police or the coroner would have believed it—my word against the word of Sir Julius Kingsbury? I have no evidence but that of my own eyes. And you’d scarcely have thanked me for bringing this horrible charge against the father of the girl you want to marry. If only in self-defense we’ve got to be friends.”

“I think you’re mad.”

“We’re up against a big thing,” Robertson continued. “Kingsbury has marked both of us down, and he is not alone. Even if I could have persuaded the police to lock up Sir Julius—even if he were in a condemned cell, that wouldn’t save us. The matter is not nearly so simple as that. It’s something I don’t understand as yet. But I’m going to fathom it—if I live long enough. The police can’t help us. Kingsbury doesn’t know for certain that I saw him push your brother into the sea. He suspects it; but I’m trying to make him think that I saw nothing. That’s one reason why I’ve held my tongue.”

Dick Burden smiled incredulously. Without doubt the man was insane.

“I wish you would explain,” he said. “It’s all like a nightmare. Why have you walked here?”

“If a man has to keep off the roads he must walk,” replied Robertson. “I’m known to be lazy and fond of my car. I’ve no doubt all the roads are watched. I came seven miles across country.”

“Where do you live?”

“In London,” Robertson replied. “Yes, I think I can say I live in London. But I move around a lot in my car—I have taken a room for the night in the Chequers Inn, at Stilehurst. My motor broke down—conveniently. I’m supposed to be in bed and asleep—not to be called until ten o’clock in the morning.”

“And you’re going back there, eh?”

“I hope to get back,” Robertson answered grimly; “but I’m being watched.”

The visitor put on his overcoat and hat, slipped his right hand into his pocket, and took out a heavy automatic.

“I’d keep one of these by you,” he said. “It’s the sort of thing that might come in useful. I wonder if you’d mind my slipping away by the window?”

Dick Burden was weary of the fellow—of this absurd romancer who, either from vanity or mania, had made himself out to be a person whose life was in danger.

“You can depart by the chimney if you like,” he answered coldly.

“Would you object if I turned out the lights? A man makes a fair mark against the window of an illuminated room.”

Dick Burden hesitated. He did not quite fancy being alone in the dark with Robertson. But in the end he nodded assent.

“Perhaps it would be better if you left me in here,” the visitor added. “I don’t want you to run any risks. I can see what you think of me, Mr. Burden. You can trust me here. I shall not steal anything.”

He switched off the lights. Dick closed the door behind him, turned the key in the lock, and stood outside in the hall.

—

Five minutes later Dick Burden entered the billiard room and flooded the apartment with light.

He glanced at the bellying curtains, walked up to them, and then paused. Was there any truth in Robertson’s ridiculous story? The visitor had rather insisted on switching off the lights, as though there was someone waiting without, in the hope of getting a good mark for a rifle or pistol.

Of course, that was all rubbish! Dick Burden pushed back the curtains and stood looking out into the darkness. Beneath the window there was a wide flower bed and beyond that a gravel path, and further on a stretch of lawn. His shadow, long and gigantic, reached past the grass.

He thought of the trenches in Flanders and smiled. Out there it had been considered bad form to risk one’s life for no reason whatever—except to show that one was not afraid.

“I’d better smooth over the idiot’s footprints,” he said to himself, “or there’ll be talk of burglars.”

He closed the casement, turned out the lights, locked up the billiard room, and made his way round to the garden, with an electric torch in one hand and a heavy walking stick in the other.

The stick was a poor substitute for a rake, but one could hardly risk being seen with a gardening implement at that time of night. That would have been too absurd.

When he came to the window—the center of the three—he directed the ray from the torch onto the wide flower bed. At this time of the year there were no plants in it, and the surface was smooth and brown.

There was not a single footprint on the earth. Dick Burden calculated the distance from the ledge of the small casement to the gravel path.

“Fifteen feet if it’s an inch,” he said to himself. No man on earth could have jumped that space to the path. It would have been impossible to stand upright on the sill. “The fellow has smoothed over the marks.”

But there was no sign of the mold having been disturbed. And Robertson would have been in the dark and quite incapable of doing anything of the sort.

Dick Burden returned to the house, and for the first time that evening he was really afraid—not of an unknown enemy, but of this extraordinary Mr. Robertson. It seemed to him that he was standing very near to the borderline of the supernatural.

The hideous face—that gross caricature of the Burden features! Had he been talking with some monstrous creation of the curse—something that had lived on century after century, to achieve the downfall of the race?

The idea was fantastic and absurd! But the fear of something strange and inhuman was real enough. That lasted until Dick Burden was in bed and asleep.

# Chapter VI · Sir Julius Utters a Warning

“Dick thinks we might be married in about three months from now,” said Letty Kingsbury, without turning her head to look at her father. She was standing by the fire in their private sitting room at the Warlock Hotel.

Sir Julius, seated at a small table, paused for a moment, pen in hand, glanced at Letty, and then went on with the writing of a letter.

He was a short, thickset man of fifty-five, with a brown, rugged, weather-beaten face. His hair was white and plentiful, and his iron-gray mustache was clipped very close. There was something grim and austere about him—something often found in men who have held posts of high authority in India. He was not liked in the hotel, where he had lived for two years. But for the charm of his daughter, he would have been barely tolerated, except by Miss Cramer, who could not do enough for him.

It was known—even in England—that he had had the reputation of being a hard and unmerciful judge.

That such a man should have broken down—should have pleaded with his daughter and have even burst into tears—seemed almost incredible.

Certainly, in any difference of opinion, it would be Letty, and not her father, who would plead, and plead in vain.

“You see, Dad,” Letty continued, after nearly a minute’s silence, “it was only a question of money, wasn’t it?”

“Not altogether,” Sir Julius replied, without taking his pen from the paper.

“But you always said you liked Dick. And it was only a question of money until that morning—a few days before poor Jim died—and then—well, you would not give your reason; but I knew you were thinking of the money all the time.”

Sir Julius rested his elbows on the table and pressed the tips of his fingers together.

“You are of age,” he said slowly, “and you can be joined in matrimony to whom you please. But if you marry Dick Burden you will be unhappy all your life.”

“Oh, Father, how can you say such a shameful thing?” said Letty indignantly.

“You will be unhappy all your life,” Sir Julius continued, “not because Dick Burden is the sort of man to make a woman unhappy—nor yet because you will have to face poverty.”

“Why then?”

“Because you will be marrying into an accursed family. It is doomed to extinction.”

“Oh, Father, you don’t really believe all that nonsense, do you?”

“Facts speak for themselves. First Robert and then James Burden! It will be Dick’s turn next, and after Dick—perhaps—your child.”

“Do you honestly think, Father, that the curse of the monk—do you imagine God would allow——”

“I know what has happened already,” Sir Julius interrupted harshly. “It is not for me to say what God will or will not permit. This family is doomed, and if you marry into it you will suffer horribly. Fear, and the loss of those you love! That will be your life, Letty, and I want to save you from it.”

“My life is my own, Father,” the girl replied, “and if there is any risk of—of unhappiness I am prepared to take it. The curse is all nonsense; but”—she paused for a few moments—“if there is anything else you know of you ought to tell me.”

Sir Julius shrugged his shoulders, picked up his pen, and dipped it into the ink again. Then he continued his writing.

“Is there anything else?” Letty insisted.

Sir Julius made no reply. He finished his letter, blotted it, and placed it in an envelope.

“You know my views on the matter,” he said as he sealed the envelope. “I shall do all I can to stop this marriage. I am not going to discuss the matter any further with you.”

“Then there is something else—some reason why——”

“I have given you my reasons.”

“Father, you can’t expect me to believe that you’re afraid of this so-called curse. What is the real reason? I must know the truth. I—we can’t go on like this, avoiding the truth.”

Sir Julius rose from his chair, walked to the window, and stared out of it at the sea. And Letty, watching his face and wondering whether she dare ask him any more questions, suddenly saw it change—saw the stern obstinacy of it vanish; noticed the lower lip droop and a look of terror come into the hard, gray eyes.

“Father dear!” she exclaimed, “what is the matter? Are you ill?”

He stepped back from the window, and the girl perceived that the skin of his face had changed from brown to an ugly, whitish yellow. He caught at the back of a chair with one hand. Letty came to his side.

“You are ill, Father,” said she in a gentle voice.

“Yes—yes,” he answered hoarsely, “I—I am ill. No, I am alright. Some brandy, Letty. I felt faint—no, stay here, Letty. I will go into my bedroom and lie down. There’s brandy in the cupboard. Don’t make a fuss—that’s a good girl. I’ll be myself again in a minute or two.”

He walked steadily toward a door that led into his bedroom. On the threshold he said:

“Stay here—don’t worry. I am better—already.”

He closed the portal in her face and locked it. Letty, utterly bewildered, went to the window. The sitting apartment was on the third floor and overlooked the parade and the sea. This was not the most fashionable end of Easthill, but it was near the harbor and the older part of the town. There were very few people to be seen. There had been no mistaking that sudden start—that quick look of horror on Sir Julius’s features. It was fear, and not illness, that had drained his face of blood and caused that drooping of the lower jaw.

And the fear, like a disease, had been infectious. She, too, was trembling and afraid as she stared out of the window. Yet she could see nothing that might not have been witnessed on any day of the week—at almost any hour during the winter at Easthill.

A few people hurrying by in heavy overcoats. Two sailors striding past toward the harbor. A sailor standing by himself with his back against a lamppost, a pipe in his mouth, and his hands thrust in his pockets. A pair of young lovers in a shelter, sitting very close to each other. An old man trying to sell bootlaces and matches to a fat, elderly woman in cheap furs.

And on the gray, cold sea, a single fishing smack putting out from the harbor with a patch of white foam at her bows.

There were other people in the picture, but these individuals seemed to stand out and fix themselves as definite objects that could be retained by the memory.

“Someone who is not there now,” said Letty to herself. “Something that has now disappeared.”

She was frightened, for it seemed to her that, although the baronet was not ill, his brain might be giving way. She could not forget that once before he had changed into another man, that he had burst into tears and broken down completely. And she remembered that on that occasion, as on this, he had been gazing out of the window—just before he had turned and implored her not to marry Dick Burden.

That had not seemed to her to be of any importance at the time. But now it did! Then, again, his belief in this absurd curse! A man’s brain is not necessarily unbalanced because he is superstitious. But her father was not superstitious.

He was a materialist, and believed in nothing he could not see with his own eyes.

It seemed to her that now he was in the habit of seeing things—things that were not there—horrible things indeed if they made a coward of a brave man.

The girl strode across the room to the table. The letter her father had just written was still lying on the pad of pink blotting paper, and she saw that the letter was addressed to Sir Julius’s bank in London.

There was a knock on the door, and the Swiss waiter entered.

“Mistaire Burden have called to see you, mees,” he said.

Letty hesitated before she replied. She did not wish Dick to meet her father while the latter was in his present strange state of mind.

There might even be an unpleasant scene between the two men. But in any case she did not wish Dick to see her father so ill and peculiar in his behavior.

“I will come downstairs,” she said, “in one moment.”

The menial left the room, and Letty went to the door of her father’s chamber and knocked on it. There was no reply, and she tried the handle. To her surprise the door opened. There was no one to be seen.

# Chapter VII · Called to Shotlander

“Yes, your father went out just now,” said Dick Burden. “I saw him, but he didn’t notice me. He seemed to be in a great hurry. I say, can’t we go upstairs?”

“No, Dick,” replied Letty, “I’d rather you didn’t. Father is not very well, and I expect he’ll be back in a minute. We can talk here alright, can’t we?”

Dick Burden looked round the lounge and shrugged his shoulders. Two old women were sitting by the fire in a couple of large armchairs. A young fellow was reading a newspaper by one of the windows. A coarse-featured man of middle age was lolling on the sofa, his eyes half closed and a cigar between his lips. It was not a suitable place for an interview between two lovers.

“What train did you come down by?”

“Oh, I motored here.” Dick answered. “I’ve just bought a car. I thought perhaps you’d like to come out for a run this afternoon.”

“I should love to. Are you staying here?”

“I’m putting up a the ‘Majestic,’ but only for tonight. Shall I call round at half past two?”

“No; look here, Dick, if you’ll wait a minute I’ll slip on my things and walk with you to your hotel.”

“Right you are,” he replied. “But be as quick as you can.”

Letty disappeared through some curtains that hung between the lounge and the hall, and Dick Burden sat down and lit a cigarette. His face was very grave, and there were dark rings round his eyes. He had not been sleeping very well during the past week. His interview with the strange and fantastic Robertson had affected him more than he cared to acknowledge. Of course the man was mad, but the conduct of even a lunatic requires some explanation. And there was nothing wild or ridiculous about the horrible charge Robertson had brought against Sir Julius Kingsbury. Richard Burden believed that his brother had had some kind of hold over the baronet, and that Sir Julius had a strong motive for getting rid of him.

And he, Richard Burden, was in love with the daughter of Sir Julius Kingsbury, and there was nothing but this to prevent their marriage—nothing but this, an incredible and yet possible obstacle.

He might marry the daughter of a murderer, but not the daughter of a man who had slain poor old Jim. That would have been a monstrous, an impossible crime against nature.

And then there was Robert Burden. Poor old Jim had believed Sir Julius Kingsbury to be guilty of the murder of Robert Burden.

One murder breeds another. Robertson believed that he went in fear of his own life. Robertson had warned him, Dick Burden—had even suggested that he should carry a loaded pistol about with him.

Well, he had taken Robertson’s advice to that extent. But he feared Robertson more than he feared Sir Julius Kingsbury. Were they both mad? Was he living in a world of madmen?

Dick Burden smiled at his own thoughts. He smiled at the absurdity of the whole idea—at the way in which he had allowed himself to believe in murder as a commonplace event.

No one had been murdered, and no one would be murdered unless Robertson were a homicidal maniac. He felt just a little bit ashamed of himself.

Men did not go about killing each other in this melodramatic fashion. No doubt the war had taught him to think cheaply of human life. But he ought to have realized that he had made a fool of himself.

He looked round the room, and the drab reality of life came home to him. This ugly furniture—those dull, uninteresting people—this dreary boardinghouse that called itself a private hotel!

This was the real world after all. And he wondered what the old ladies who were sitting by the fire would say if he suddenly cried out:

“You had better be careful. A murderer is living in this place with you.”

He could imagine one of them replying:

“Dear me—how dreadful—fancy that! I always told you, Amelia”—yes, the other one would probably be Amelia—“that the society in these places is dreadfully mixed.”

He laughed out loud at this imaginary conversation, and everyone turned and looked at him in shocked amazement.

He was in deep mourning, and no one so attired should have laughed like that. More than ever he realized that he was in a world where it is a ten-million-to-one chance against any man being a murderer.

Suddenly the heavy plushette hangings parted, and Dick saw Miss Cramer, tall and beautifully dressed, and with her hair like flame. She came up to him and said in her masculine voice:

“You are wanted on the telephone, Mr. Burden.”

He followed her across the hall into her private room, which was near the entrance to the hotel. To his surprise, instead of retiring and saying “I’m sure you don’t want me here, Mr. Burden,” she went to her rolltop bureau and, picking up a letter, handed it to him.

“No one has telephoned,” she said. “The postman brought this a minute or two ago and I did not put it in the rack. I hope you think I did right.”

Dick Burden glanced at the letter and saw that it had been posted in Cowhurst.

“Thank you, Miss Cramer,” he remarked quietly. “I’m glad you didn’t place it in the rack. One doesn’t want a lot of foolish talk here.”

He thrust the communication in his pocket, and Miss Cramer said:

“I don’t want to meddle with your affairs, Mr. Burden, but I trust you will go straight to the police with that letter. Recent happenings have done my house no good. Perhaps you will be murdered now. I ought never to have given the letter to you.”

Dick Burden shook his head.

“I am afraid it wouldn’t do to tamper with the post,” he said, “even with the kindest of motives. But it was good of you not to leave the letter in the rack. I shall possibly tell the police of my receiving it or send a copy of it to my lawyers. And I should be glad if you’d say nothing about it to Sir Julius or his daughter.”

“Not unless anything happens to you, Mr. Burden.”

Dick left the room and found Letty waiting for him in the lounge. She walked back to his hotel with him, and she noticed that, in spite of his efforts to be cheerful, he seemed to have something weighing on his mind. They said very little to each other during that quarter of an hour. She had much to tell him—much to discuss; but they would be able to talk over their future plans after lunch, and decide if they would be married without her father’s consent.

It was a quarter to one when they parted outside the Majestic Hotel. Just a shake of the hand, and a lifting of the hat, and “Goodbye, dear,” and “I’ll be round at half past two sharp, and we’ll have a jolly little run, even if it snows.”

The words were prophetic, for at two o’clock it did begin to snow. Sir Julius had telephoned that he was lunching at the club, and Letty was glad, for it was quite possible that he would have forbidden her to go out with Dick Burden. And she would have disobeyed, and that would have meant an unpleasant scene.

At 2:25 Letty was in the lounge. She was wearing a fur coat. The room was full of people, but she stood by the window and looked out at the falling snow. Already it lay an inch deep on the road and parade, and the sea, by contrast, seemed black as ink. It was not the sort of afternoon for a motor-drive. All around her people were talking about the vileness of the weather. A young man chaffed her and suggested a long walk and a picnic.

A 2:40 Miss Cramer entered the lounge and told Letty that a message had just come through for her from the “Majestic.” Dick Burden had been suddenly called back to Shotlander on urgent business. He had not even had time to speak himself on the telephone. The manager had acted in his stead.

“Mr. Burden hopes to be down again tomorrow,” said Miss Cramer. “He will send you a telegram.”

Letty did not show her disappointment. She laughed and replied:

“Well, it’s not much of an afternoon for a motor-ride, is it?”

“No dear, and I think you’re best out of it. It’d be sure to mean a bad cold, if nothing worse.”

Letty walked slowly up the stairs, and when at last she reached the sitting room she sank into a chair by the fire. Ten minutes elapsed before she rose to her feet and took off her fur coat. The snow was falling so thickly that she could not even get a glimpse of the sea.

# Chapter VIII · An Unfortunate Adventure

Detective-inspector Linkinghorne turned over a page of a long typewritten statement and said:

“You put things remarkably clearly, Mr. Ivory, and, if I may say so, you have quite a literary style. I believe you could make money by writing for the magazines.”

Superintendent Ivory smiled and began to fill his pipe. He was a big man, still on the right side of fifty, and would easily have passed for a butcher or a publican.

“My daughter puts things into shape for me,” answered he. “I give her the facts and she makes them read well. She has had a good education.”

“So has my son,” the detective remarked, turning over another page, “but his taste is for mathematics. He was talking about this case to me last night and trying to get me to believe that two and two don’t necessarily make four, and then——” He paused and added abruptly: “This Cowhurst business is probably all a blind.”

“Eh, what’s that—come, come, Mr. Linkinghorne—two letters.”

“Yes, the first may have had something to do with the death of Robert Burden. Now, let us suppose I had wished to get rid of James Burden and that I had nothing whatever to do with the demise of his cousin. Wouldn’t I just jump at the Cowhurst idea and post a letter from the village—as I passed through it in a car at night? That would lead everyone to think that the two Burdens had both been killed by the same murderer. And that would confuse the inquiry from the start.”

“Oh, I don’t think like that, Mr. Linkinghorne. It would be against all experience.”

“And then,” continued the detective, “look at the curse of Shotlander. What a godsend to any criminal. Your daughter had a very pretty little passage about that.”

“You mustn’t throw my daughter in my face,” said Ivory sharply. “I am responsible for all the facts in that statement. My girl——”

“Yes, yes, I know,” put in the detective soothingly, “but was it your idea that the working out of the curse might be due to natural laws? Did you tell her to write something to this effect——”

Linkinghorne turned back a few pages and read: “ ‘That which the ignorant ascribe to miraculous agencies may be only due to the hidden forces of nature. It is conceivable that the Burden family may be doomed to perish by their own weakness or some criminal instinct in their own beings.’ Was that your idea?”

“No, I’ll confess it was not. It was my daughter who suggested that the motive for the crime was the possession of the estate—that James Burden slew his cousin and was in turn killed by his brother. I tell you this between ourselves, Mr. Linkinghorne. I did not dare put it down on paper.”

The sleuth leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. The two men were sitting on either side of the fire in the dining room of the Linkinghornes’ flat. It was a cozy, well-furnished apartment within a quarter of a mile of Scotland Yard.

Superintendent Ivory, of Easthill, was his guest for the night. It was thought desirable that they should first meet in London for an informal talk.

So here they were, smoking on either side of the cheerful fire, and paying no attention to the clock which had just struck two in the morning.

In another eight hours Ivory would be on his way to Easthill, and Linkinghorne would certainly not be in London. But they were men who had often been obliged to take a very short rest between two long spells of toil.

“H’mm, yes,” resumed the detective after a silence that had lasted for two minutes. And then he opened his eyes and said: “By Jove! That’s a smart little daughter of yours—working the curse into a practical theory. Well, if there’s anything in the idea Richard Burden is safe enough, for he’s the last of his line.”

“Rose—that’s my little girl—thought Richard Burden would probably commit suicide, and there’d be an end of the lot,” said Ivory.

“Rose Ivory,” Linkinghorne laughed. “What a pretty name, and what ugly ideas she has in her head!”

“One must have ugly ideas about ugly things,” the superintendent retorted hotly, “even if one is a young girl.”

“Ah, the pity of it,” sighed the detective—“the pity of it. Well, Mr. Ivory, we’ve got to find that fisherman.”

“We’ve tried hard.”

“Have you advertised?”

“No. It was thought best not to do so. We don’t want to draw attention to the fact that he’s wanted.”

The detective nodded his head in agreement.

“Quite right—for a time. You’ll have to advertise though. You have a description of him?”

“Yes, both from Richard Burden and Miss Kingsbury.”

“Well, get busy, and then, if he doesn’t turn up, we shall know that he has reasons for wanting to keep clear of us. He seems to be a remarkably ugly fellow, and someone ought to answer your inquiries. A man like that would be noticeable anywhere.”

“We inquired at every boardinghouse, hotel, and lodging house in Easthill but could not hear of him.”

“And at Cowhurst, eh?”

“Yes, of course. My own opinion is that we must concentrate on Cowhurst. But now that you are taking over the case——”

He paused as the telephone bell cut into his conversation. Linkinghorne seated himself at a table near the window and picked up the receiver.

“Yes, Linkinghorne speaking,” he said. “Oh, that’s you, is it, Jones?…You don’t say so! Well, upon my word! I’ll motor down at once…No, I’ll take my own little car. Mr. Ivory is here and I dare say he’ll come with me. I won’t lose time in talk. Good night.”

He hung up the receiver, and Ivory said:

“Where are you going to take me?”

“Shotlander Priory, or what’s left of it. The place has been burning for two hours, and it’s doubtful if a single room of it will be saved.”

The superintendent began to ask questions, but the detective cut him short:

“Put your coat on and come along to the garage. I’ve no chauffeur. It’ll be a cold drive in the snow.”

Three minutes later the two men set off. The sturdy little car took them across Surrey and over the Sussex border before it climbed halfway up a long, steep hill and came to rest in an impenetrable drift.

Linkinghorne was annoyed. It was impossible to get through. He pulled out a map and studied it carefully. But, as a matter of fact, he did not quite know his position. In the daytime there would have been familiar landmarks, and it would have been easy to read the signposts. The speedometer told him that they were not very far from the Chequers Inn at Stilehurst, where he would have turned to the right on the road that would have taken him to Shotlander Priory. But he was not aware just how far he was from the hostelry, and in the dark one has to be very accurate in taking one’s bearings.

He folded up the map, backed the car out of the obstruction, and tried to turn her. He was an experienced driver, but the snow got the better of him. It had filled a wide and deep ditch, and made it level with the turf by the side of the road. The rear wheels of the little vehicle sank suddenly and the two men found themselves lying at a very comfortable angle of forty-five degrees. The bonnet pointed to distant stars in the clear sky. Linkinghorne switched off, and the plucky little engine was silent.

“That’s done it,” said the sleuth. “We’ll have to walk the rest of the way.”

“Walk? You’re mad!”

“We shall only get wet, and there’ll be a nice fire to dry ourselves.”

“Can’t we find a horse to pull us out?”

Linkinghorne looked at his watch, holding it close to a small electric lamp on the dashboard.

“It is half past four,” he said. “You can stay here if you like. Perhaps you had better do so. I’m going to walk.”

“The car might get stolen, mightn’t it?”

“Yes,” laughed Linkinghorne. “Anyone with a horse to pull it out of this ditch might steal it.”

“If another car came along—a big car?”

“Yes, yes, if they had a stout tow-rope; but there are not many cars driving about on a night like this.”

“True,” said Ivory savagely. “Well, do you mind if I do stay here?”

“Not in the least.”

“After all, I don’t know why we ever started. What use is there in watching a bonfire?”

“We won’t discuss that now, Mr. Ivory. I will leave you the flask and the biscuits. You’ll be snug enough in here. You’ll probably fall asleep with the car tilted back. Like lying on a bed, isn’t it? Got plenty of tobacco?”

“Oh, heaps, thank you, Mr. Linkinghorne; but look here, if you get lost in the snow you’ll want that flask.”

The detective laughed as he climbed out of the car. A hill, not so very far away, stood out black against a red glow in the sky—a glow like the swift coming of dawn in some tropical country.

“Look at that,” he said. “Now won’t you change your mind and come along with me?”

Ivory shook his head. He was tired and sleepy. Who could tell how far away that hill might really be. And who could say for certain that that glow in the sky was the reflection of the burning house?

“I’ll stay here,” he yawned.

Linkinghorne did not press the matter. On the whole he was rather glad to be rid of the lethargic Ivory. And, after all, it was an advantage to leave someone in charge of the car.

# Chapter IX · A Tragic Discovery

Linkinghorne reached Shotlander Priory without adventure and with no greater hardships than a very stiff walk of seven miles and a wetting up to the knees. The fire, as a fine spectacle, was over. The roof had fallen in two hours before his arrival, and it was that which had sent the glow of light into the sky. From the crest of a hill the detective himself had looked down on the last great tragedy of an ancient house. Beyond a wood of tall trees he had seen the black shell of the building spouting flames from every window. As he had hurried toward it the light had diminished in intensity, and by the time he stood on the lawn, strewn with pictures and furniture, there was nothing more picturesque than great volumes of black smoke and white steam as the fire engines poured their jets of water on the debris.

“You should have been here an hour ago,” said a policeman. “She did burn just beautiful, that she did.”

Linkinghorne sought out those who could tell him the facts. Representing himself as a reporter on a great London paper, he found many willing to recount all they knew. One by one he discarded them until he came across the butler.

Old Atkins was sitting on one of the plate chests with a pistol in his right hand to protect the valuables. His face was cut and blackened with smoke.

A curious, moth-eaten fur cap covered his head. His thick overcoat was torn and charred.

Linkinghorne was irresistibly reminded of a pirate guarding a hoard of treasure, and thought that the pistol ought to be taken away from that shaking hand.

There was a strange wild look in the old man’s eyes, and, of course, no one was likely to carry off chests that might easily weigh two hundredweight apiece.

“A bad job, this,” said Linkinghorne, who had been told that this queer figure was Burden’s butler. “A cruel job. Do you know how the fire started?”

The old man made no reply, but his fingers seemed to tighten on the butt of the firearm.

“Silver, I suppose, in those chests,” the sleuth continued in his gentle voice. “If you could give me any particulars about the fire I’d be grateful to you.”

“I answer no questions until I know who’s asking them, and I don’t reply to them then unless I think I’m helping the law.”

“H’m!” said the detective, wondering whether it would not be better to take Atkins into his confidence. Here was an old servant—the local policeman had told this to Linkinghorne—who had known the last four owners of Shotlander Priory. And the old fellow had spoken of helping the law.

“Idle questions I will not answer,” Atkins continued, “nor will I talk with fools. Who are you, sir?”

Linkinghorne said that he was a police officer in plain clothes, and added that he did not wish anyone else to know it, and that he had not even disclosed his identity to the local police.

“You are from London?” queried the butler, “or would it be from Easthill?”

“From London, and I want to hear all about this fire. When did it start?”

“Before midnight, sir; but they’ll have told you that.”

“Where is Mr. Richard Burden?”

“At Easthill, sir, I believe. He left for that place yesterday morning.”

“Of course an attempt has been made to communicate with him?”

“Yes, sir. But the wires are down between Redfield—that’s our nearest town—and Easthill. A car was sent off, but it has not returned.”

“Only the servants in the house, eh?”

“Only the servants, sir.”

Further inquiries elicited the following particulars. The fire had started in the library. Smoke and flames had been seen emerging therefrom by a gamekeeper at midnight. The conflagration had spread rapidly. The more valuable contents of the rooms had been saved, but everything in the library had been destroyed. The local fire brigade and the Redfield outfit had been on the spot in twenty-five minutes.

“But,” said Atkins in conclusion, “all the engines in London would not have saved the Priory, for it was doomed to perish.”

“You believe in the curse, eh?”

“Do I not believe in God, sir?”

“Working through the hands of men, eh?”

“It might be so, sir.”

“You spoke of helping the law, Mr. Atkins. That, I take it, would mean you think someone set the house on fire.”

“I do think that, sir. The library was locked up, the master being away—no fire in it, nor anyone smoking there.”

“Were any of the windows open?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. When Mountain—that’s the gamekeeper, sir—first saw the place burning he was a mile away. By the time he reached the house no one could have told whether there was a window open or not. There was none left. But I don’t see how the fire could have started if no one did it on purpose.”

Linkinghorne asked if the door of the library had been found locked.

“Yes, sir—a heavy oak door it was—studded with nails, and the fire hadn’t burnt through it. It was locked, for we inserted the key, and I burnt my fingers as I turned it.”

“You opened the door, eh?”

“No, sir. We couldn’t open the door. There’s a bolt on the inside, and that was fastened—and that, sir, is the queer part of the business.”

“Everyone knows it, of course?”

“No, sir. I kept that to myself. The others thought the heat had jammed the ironwork. I decided to say nothing until I saw Mr. Richard or some responsible person like yourself.”

Linkinghorne commended this discretion, and asked the old butler to point out the windows of the library.

“Those three on the extreme left,” Atkins replied, “but you couldn’t go near them now, sir.”

That was obvious. So tremendous had been the heat from the burning house that even where they were sitting, a hundred yards away from the nearest point of it, the snow had melted into slush. Linkinghorne put more questions—he asked for information about James Burden his cousin Robert, and even Robert’s father; chatted pleasantly about the family, seeking in his gentle, disarming fashion for something that would fit in with the strange theory of that child Rose Ivory.

It was a long time since he had paid so much attention to a fantastic idea. But this appealed to him—the possibility that the curse might work through natural laws to its appointed end.

And then, quite casually, as though it were of no importance, old Atkins mentioned the visit of Robertson, and in an instant the detective had thrust aside all strange theories and had grasped the essential clue—so tremendous in its possibilities that it almost took his breath away. But he did not betray his interest in Robertson. And when Atkins had given a description of the man, Linkinghorne asked no more questions. He would wait until he saw Dick Burden.

There were many interrogations to be asked, but Dick Burden was the person to answer them.

“That pistol!” he said, changing the subject with a laugh. “You don’t think anyone is likely to run away with the plate chests?”

“Who knows what will happen, sir, in these days, when all connected with this house go in fear of their lives?” replied the old man.

“Oh, well, it is not you, but your master who will have to be careful,” said Linkinghorne. “If I were you I should get the police to look after the silver and then go to bed. It’s not a night for an old man to be sitting about.”

Atkins refused to let anyone else guard the chests, and the sleuth, whose mind was now entirely occupied with the tracing of Robertson, decided not to pursue the matter.

He realized that it would serve no purpose for him to remain longer at Shotlander, and he asked the old fellow where he could obtain a decent bed and breakfast; for by now it was getting rather late, and he was anxious to turn in after his arduous night’s experiences on the snow-clad country roads.

“There’s the Chequers Inn at Stilehurst,” replied the butler. “It’s a matter of seven miles from here.”

“At Stilehurst? That’ll suit me very well. I’ve heard of the hostelry—quite a well-known place, full of old oak and all that sort of thing. Good night. I’ll come over tomorrow, Mr. Atkins, and thank you very much for your information. And look here—don’t you tell anyone about that bolted door until you see me again.”

After some trouble, Linkinghorne found a vehicle that would take him to Stilehurst. And so it was that the sleuth had another stroke of good luck. It seemed as though Fate were destined to help him in his search for Robertson.

Linkinghorne allowed himself precisely two hours in bed, and after a hearty breakfast he made cautious inquiries about the man he was so anxious to be acquainted with. Of course, the detective did not know that Robertson was supposed to have stayed the night at the “Chequers,” but Linkinghorne was aware that Robertson had arrived at the Priory on foot, and it was just possible that he had walked from Stilehurst.

“Oh yes, sir,” said the landlord, “I remember the gentleman well—a very ugly person he was, sir, meaning no offense if he’s a friend of yours. His car broke down here, and I’ve every reason to recollect that, because the gentleman went to bed early and we never saw him again.”

“Never saw him again? What do you mean? Did he go off without paying his bill?”

“Oh no, sir. The chauffeur paid that—even for the breakfast that the gentleman did not eat.”

“Look here,” said Linkinghorne sharply. “This sounds like nonsense. You’d better tell the truth. The police are looking for this Mr. Robertson.”

“I’m telling you the truth, sir,” the landlord replied sharply. “This Mr. Robertson went to bed very early and gave orders that he was not to be disturbed until nine o’clock in the morning. The maid found the room empty and a note pinned to the pillow. It just said that he couldn’t sleep and that he was going to walk on to Easthill. He wrote that the chauffeur was to settle the bill and pick him up on the road as soon as the car was repaired.”

“Didn’t you think that very odd?”

“Yes, sir, but people who can’t sleep at night are odd. They do want to get out in the air and walk.”

“And you never told the police?”

“No, sir. Why should I have done that? My bill was paid, and the chauffeur said that his master was a ‘queer fellow.’ Yes, those are the words he used—a queer fellow.”

“Did the chauffeur give you any address?”

“No, sir, and I didn’t ask for it. It was nothing to do with me.”

“Nothing. Still, perhaps—out of curiosity——”

“Oh no sir. I’m not that sort. My bill was paid.”

Linkinghorne laughed.

“The ideal host,” he said. “Well, this chauffeur? I’d like a description of him.”

“A small, dark, clean-shaven fellow, sir, with a scar on his forehead and well-spoken—not a common chap by any means.”

“A sort of a gentleman, eh? What time did he leave?”

“About eleven o’clock, sir.”

“Not much wrong with the car then?”

“I suppose not, sir. I don’t know what was wrong with the car, but the chauffeur put it right himself.”

“Have you got that note?”

“Yes, sir, I have.”

“Why did you keep it? Looks as if you thought something was wrong,” Linkinghorne suggested.

“Not wrong, sir, but queer, if you take my meaning. As a matter of fact, I thought Mr. Robertson might be wanted by the keepers of a lunatic asylum.”

“Very likely you’re right,” the detective laughed. “Well, I’d like to see that note.”

“You can have it, sir, and keep it. I’ll get it for you now.”

“Thanks, and I want a car to take me over to Shotlander.”

“Very good, sir.”

Elkinson, the landlord, left the private room in which this interview had taken place.

Linkinghorne filled his pipe and lit the tobacco. It seemed to him that he was having the most extraordinary luck.

Within twenty-four hours he had not only obtained an important clue that might enable him to track down this Robertson, but he was going to see a specimen of Robertson’s handwriting.

Instinct had led him to Shotlander, but sheer luck had brought him to the Chequers Inn.

But Linkinghorne was a man who was suspicious of good fortune—an ungrateful sort of fellow who was apt to look gift horses long and steadily in the mouth.

“Robertson may never have written this note at all,” he said to himself; “the chauffeur may have done so, or even our friend the landlord. And Atkins may have sent me here on purpose.”

None of these things was probable, but they were all possible. And Linkinghorne had to consider possibilities. He was still considering them when the landlord, a short fat man with a red face, returned with the letter.

Linkinghorne read it through, and said that he was very greatly obliged to the boniface. The latter also produced a signature-book, in which the late guest had inscribed his name and address—“Mr. Robertson—London.”

“Vague, that,” commented the detective. “Thank you ever so much. What a lovely morning! Good to see the sun, eh? Snow melting already. I may stay another night here, if I can find my luggage—a long night’s rest. I want that.”

A few minutes later he departed in the hired car and told the driver to go along the road to London. He thought that he ought to find out what had happened to Ivory before he went to the Priory.

He was in no particular hurry to get to the latter. He wanted to meet Dick Burden there, and it was not likely that Dick would arrive before noon.

The snow was melting, but the roads were very heavy, and there would be drifts. And no doubt the wires were still useless. But in any case, Ivory must be found, and the little car dragged out of the ditch.

Linkinghorne was very fond of his vehicle. He had studied the map, and he knew now, in the broad daylight, exactly where it had come to rest.

He smiled as he thought of Ivory. A good, earnest, painstaking fellow without doubt, but not fond of getting his feet wet.

Well, no doubt Ivory had chosen the easiest way of getting a night’s rest. The car, high-backed and tilted at that angle, would have made a very comfortable bed. And there were biscuits, and whisky in the flask. And no more snow had fallen.

He would not find Ivory buried in the snow. And perhaps he would not find Ivory at all. The lazy fellow might have ventured forth in the sunlight in search of a good breakfast. There would be a farmhouse or cottage somewhere near at hand.

On the top of a hill he caught sight of his car. It was still in the ditch. A little further on, the big drift barred the way. On the other side of it Linkinghorne could see the wheelmarks of his vehicle.

“Sorry, sir,” said the driver, “but we can’t get through this. I reckon that bus ran into it last night and backed out of it again. Hallo, there! Anyone on board?”

No one answered, and Linkinghorne shouted: “Hallo! Hallo! Hallo!” Then he explained that it was his own car and that he had left a friend in it.

“I’d like to get her out of that ditch,” he said. “My friend has evidently abandoned her.”

“And no blame to him either, sir.”

“Well, I’ll go and have a look. Can’t you get round by some by-road?”

“Oh yes, sir, but it will take twenty minutes or half an hour.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Linkinghorne, and, alighting from the hired conveyance, he walked back along the road and stopped by a gate that opened into a field sloping upward from the highway.

And from this new position he saw something lying in the field—something that had been hidden from him before by the hedge. It was the body, not of Ivory, but of a stranger, a very small man indeed.

“You’d better turn the car,” instructed Linkinghorne, “but draw up by the gate here.”

Then he climbed over into the field and made his way toward that dark and ominous blot on the whiteness of the snow.

There were no drifts on this steep bank. In places it had been swept almost bare, and one could see the green of the grass.

The wind of the previous night had taken the snow from it and lifted it into the hollow of the roadway.

Only near the hedge did the snow lie deep, mounting to the top if it and pouring like a cataract over the low barrier of thorn.

The man was lying face downward, arms flung out in front of him and legs slightly drawn up. He was slight of build. A thick-belted black overcoat of some fine smooth cloth, boots and leggings, a peaked cap lying a few inches away from his head—all these proclaimed a kind of livery. When Mr. Linkinghorne turned the body over he was not surprised to see brass buttons on the coat. But he was astonished when he found himself looking into the white face of a dark, clean-shaven man with a long scar across his forehead.

Linkinghorne was angry with Fate for having robbed this man of life. A brief examination was enough to satisfy him that the chauffeur had been dead for some hours. So far as the detective could judge at present, there was no sign of any violence—no wound of any sort. But most certainly the man was dead, and the one person who could have given valuable evidence about Robertson and could have explained precisely what happened on the night the latter failed to return to the “Chequers” would now be silent forever.

But perhaps there was something to be learnt, even from the dead. Linkinghorne searched the man’s pockets and transferred various articles to his own. Then he discovered a silver watch and chain, a silver cigarette case, a driver’s license, bearing the name of Albert Honeyman and an address in London.

The sleuth went back to the gate and called out to the driver of the hired car. It was no difficult task for the two men to carry that slight burden and place it on the back seat.

“Yes, Honeyman—that’s his name,” said the driver. “Stayed at Mr. Elkinson’s place for one evening. Better drive straight to the nearest doctor, sir, I suppose?”

“That’s it, but I’m afraid a doctor will be of no use. It would only be a matter of form. I think I’ll go and have a look at my car. I can keep to the high ground of the field and get round the drift. Cover that poor chap up with the rug.”

Linkinghorne hurried back along the slope of the field, broke his way through the hedge, and reached his vehicle without difficulty. There was no one in it, but he found a message scribbled on the inside of an old envelope:

I’ve had a very good night, thank you, and am off to find some breakfast. I hope to get someone to haul the car out of the ditch, but write this in case you should turn up before I come back—

WILFRED IVORY.

Linkinghorne closed the door of the car again, and his keen eyes noted certain matters of interest. On the road there were tracks of a very much larger vehicle than his own—of a car that had stopped close to the edge of the drift, reversed, and then gone down the hill again. And there were footprints—the marks of narrow-pointed boots that had not belonged either to himself or Ivory. So far as he could judge from a cursory inspection, they were the footprints of two men. They could be traced up to his own car and back again, and then to a place in the hedge a little above the spot where he had come through from the field in to the road. Someone had penetrated the bushes themselves, for several twigs were broken, but there were no footprints on the far side of it. This did not puzzle Linkinghorne because long after the snow ceased to fall, the wind must have shifted it. Indeed, there was a bare patch of green on the slope above.

It was only natural to suppose that some of the footmarks had been made by the unfortunate chauffeur. The sleuth took some thin white paper from his pocket and cut out four patterns with a small pair of scissors. Then he went back and fitted a couple of them to the boot soles of the dead man. The other two were much too large.

“The feet of Robertson,” he said to himself.

Then he sighed. He would have dearly loved to make further investigations and await Ivory’s return. But he owed some duty to the dead, and, in any case, he had to get into touch with London, by telephone or telegram, as soon as possible.

# Chapter X · Dick Vanishes

Sir Julius Kingsbury brought the news of the fire to his daughter—about 12:30 on the morning of Letty’s interview with Dick Burden.

“Most of the furniture and pictures have been saved,” the baronet said, speaking very slowly and with a hard, unsympathetic note in his voice. “But the place is completely gutted—only the shell of it left. No lives have been lost, so far as is known.”

“Oh, how terrible! Dick was so fond of the place. Who told you?”

“I went round to the ‘Majestic’ to see Dick. He was not there——”

“Oh, I knew that. He returned to Shotlander yesterday afternoon.”

“Why didn’t you tell me so—yesterday?”

“I don’t know. It did not matter. He was coming back here today. I suppose he wired to the manager of the hotel?!”

“No. The wires broke down last night in the storm. The message came by car. Dick did not visit Shotlander after all. He told the people at the hotel he was going home for the evening. But he did not carry out his intention. At any rate, he failed to arrive.”

This information neither puzzled nor alarmed Letty. She was only thankful that Dick had changed his mind. He might so easily have been injured in the fire—might even have lost his life.

Certainly it was a stroke of luck that he had not carried on his original intention of spending the night at the priory.

“Then the folk there don’t know where he is?” the girl queried.

“They did not know when the car left Shotlander at four o’clock this morning.” Sir Julius paused and stroked his mustache. “I’ve no doubt,” he continued, “that Dick went up to London. Very likely he’s at Shotlander by now. Letty, you don’t seem to realize what has happened.”

“I realize that Dick has lost his home and that he’ll never rebuild it.”

“Don’t you understand that the curse is still nearer fulfillment? It was said that by fire and water the line should perish.”

“The house was not alive,” Letty retorted. “What is the Priory after all?”

“It is one with those who live in it, Letty. An old place like that is almost flesh and blood. And it has perished. And now—only Dick is left alive. The enemies of Shotlander are relentless. Spiritual or material, they are very near to victory. Letty, my dear child—surely now you will understand——”

“I am not afraid,” the girl interrupted. “If there are enemies, I’ll help Dick to fight them—even if they are devils. I have that much of you in me, Father.”

Sir Julius shrugged his shoulders, walked to the window, looked out of it for a few moments, and then seated himself at his writing-table. There was a knock on the door, and Miss Cramer entered the room.

“I’ve just heard about the fire,” she said breathlessly. “Where is Mr. Richard Burden? Do you know, Sir Julius?”

“I do not,” he answered coldly.

“Was he at Shotlander Priory?”

“He was not.”

“But he intended to go there,” said Letty. “He sent a message to me over the ‘phone to say that he was going to motor to the priory, and so he could not take me out for a drive in the afternoon. What is the matter, Miss Cramer? Do you know anything about Mr. Burden?”

“Yes—he had a letter yesterday from Cowhurst; I gave it to him myself. He told me that he would send a copy of it to his lawyers, and he begged me not to speak about it to you and frighten you. But now that no one knows where Mr. Burden is I feel that it is my duty to inform the police.”

“You think something has happened to Mr. Burden?” queried Sir Julius.

“Of course I do,” said Miss Cramer. “Who wouldn’t?”

“I, for one,” Sir Julius replied. “A lot of nonsense has been talked about these letters. Still, the police must know. You had better telephone to them at once.”

“You should have told us this before,” said Letty.

“Oh no. Miss Kingsbury—I promised I would say nothing until it was necessary—until something happened to Mr. Burden.”

“Nothing has happened to Mr. Burden,” said Sir Julius firmly. “I’ve no doubt he is now at Shotlander.”

“Please telephone at once to the police,” exclaimed Letty. “There’s no time to be wasted in talking.”

Miss Cramer left the room, and Sir Julius dipped his pen in the ink and began to write a letter. For a few moments Letty did not speak, and then she said: “I am going to Shotlander, and I think you had better come with me.”

“Certainly not, Letty. And don’t forget that if anything has happened to Dick, it has occurred here, in Easthill.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it was in Easthill that Robert and James Burden died, and it was at Easthill that they received the letters from Cowhurst.”

“I am going to Shotlander,” reiterated Letty. “I shall be back tonight.”

“If you mean to carry out your proposal,” said Sir Julius, “you had better not return. I am not going to plead with you. But we can’t live together—after this—with any respect for each other. You know I am accustomed to be obeyed.”

“Yes, Father dear, but——”

“Oh, this is just an incident,” he broke in. “But it means you intend to marry Dick Burden, that my wishes do not count, and that for the rest of my life we are going to be nothing to each other. Well, it is your choice, not mine, Letty.”

She looked at him for a few moments without speaking. And she was sorry for him—more sorry than she had ever been for anyone in all her life.

Her pride and stubbornness gave way to pity. For she remembered her father, not as she saw him then, but as she had seen him on the previous morning, haggard and piteous and broken.

And it seemed to her that he might be like that, when she had left him. She pictured him like that—alone.

He almost seemed to her like a child. And yet—he was a man who could not possibly be humored like a child.

“If I did visit Shotlander,” the girl said, “I don’t suppose I could do any good. Father, you used to like Dick.”

“I still like him, but I care most for your happiness. I do not want you to marry into a doomed family, to lose husband and perhaps child—to live a life of constant fear and misery.”

The words were spoken in a deliberate manner.

Letty sighed. They were going over all the old ground again. She decided it would be better to give way. After all, she could do no good by going to Shotlander. Dick was not there.

The door opened and Miss Cramer entered the room this time without knocking.

“The car has been found,” she exclaimed in her deep, masculine voice. “Oh, Miss Kingsbury, I startled you. There’s been no accident. The vehicle never left Easthill. It broke down by a garage in the North part of the town. Mr. Burden left it there to be put right, and said he would call for it in the morning. The proprietor of the garage telephoned to the ‘Majestic,’ and the manager got in touch with the police. They had just heard when I rang them up.”

“There is no news of poor Mr. Burden.”

“Don’t talk of him like that,” Letty exclaimed angrily—“as if he were dead! Of course he went by train! He changed his mind, and was close to the station and perhaps he had only just time to catch the express, so he couldn’t take the car back to the hotel.”

“Oh, I wish I had your way of looking at things, Miss Kingsbury. Well, I mustn’t stop—or you won’t any of you get any lunch.”

She bounced out of the room, and slammed the door behind her. Sir Julius went up to his daughter and took her face between his hands and kissed it.

“My dear child,” he said—“my poor little daughter.”

Letty broke down—burst into tears and clung to her father as if she would never let him go.

# Chapter XI · Arrival of the Quarry

There was no mystery whatever about the cause of Albert Honeyman’s death. The post-mortem showed that the man was suffering from a severe form of heart disease, and that it had proved fatal under the strain of some sudden exertion. The starting of a car would have been quite sufficient to kill him, and it was odd that an individual in such a condition should have been a chauffeur.

The mystery lay rather in the circumstances attending the poor fellow’s death. Why had he been found in that field? Where was the car? Who was the other man? Apart from the evidence of the footprints, there must have been another person or more, or the vehicle could not have been driven away. It was conceivable that the latter might have gone for help, but why had no more been heard of him, and why had he not put Honeyman in the car and driven to the nearest village?

All these were questions that were still unanswered three days after the fire at Shotlander Priory. Nothing was known about the mysterious car except that it had arrived on the scene, after four o’clock in the morning, at which time Linkinghorne had set out on his walk to Shotlander, and had left before 8:30, at which hour Ivory had crawled out of the little coupe, had seen the marks of the footprints and wheels, and, being hungry, had postponed further investigation until he had found some breakfast. This meal he had been able to obtain at a farmhouse a mile from the snowdrift and a little off the main road. He had made inquiries about the big car, thinking it “caddish” for the owner to have left him in the ditch, but no one had been able to give him any information. On his return he had found a message from Linkinghorne, and later on in the day a mechanic had arrived with a lorry, had pulled the coupe out of the ditch, and towed it along some byroads into Redfield.

The only evidence, therefore, that Ivory could offer was that of time, but there was something suspicious in the fact that he had not been disturbed from his slumbers. This suggested that the man or men in the car were either in a great hurry or did not wish to meet anyone who could identify them afterward.

But the greatest mystery of all was the identity of Albert Honeyman himself. His antecedents had got to be traced. The address found in his pocket proved to be only that of a small tobacconist who received the letters of other people and charged a small fee for this courtesy. The name of Albert Honeyman had been on his books for three weeks, and during that time Honeyman had only called twice for his letters.

“Albert Honeyman himself does not matter,” said Linkinghorne to Ivory after the inquest. “That unfortunate fellow is only a clue to this Robertson. I must leave others to find out as much as possible about Albert Honeyman. You and your assistants will have your work cut out in tracing Richard Burden. I shall have to devote my time entirely to Robertson. And then there’s Cowhurst and the burning of Shotlander Priory. Upon my word, Ivory, they’re going to keep us busy.”

Ivory nodded. The two men were in a private sitting room at the Chequers Inn. Linkinghorne was going to stay the night, but Ivory intended to catch an evening train to Easthill.

“One man couldn’t keep us as busy as all this,” the detective continued after a pause. “We don’t know what the game is yet, but there’s more than one in it——”

“And perhaps more than one game,” Ivory interrupted.

“Yes—possibly. This disappearance of Mr. Richard Burden is most unfortunate, because it is only he who can tell us why Mr. Robertson called to see him.”

“My theory,” said Ivory, “is that Robertson saw Richard Burden push his big brother off the pier and that Robertson is out for blackmail. And I shouldn’t wonder if Richard Burden has committed suicide.”

“Ah, you make events fit in with your original theory. That is a common mistake,” replied the sleuth.

“And a common cause of success, Mr. Linkinghorne. But theories don’t matter just now. We’re going to find out what has happened to Burden and Robertson, and who wrote the letters from Cowhurst, and who set fire to the Priory. As you say, we are going to be busy.”

“But not too busy to keep our eyes on the trail, Ivory. I shouldn’t wonder if they are drawing red herrings across our path. That’s an old trick, but it cuts both ways, for if one can find the man with the red herring, it’s as good as finding the criminal.”

A few minutes later Ivory left to catch his train, and Linkinghorne lay back in his armchair and closed his eyes. For a quarter of an hour he did not move. Then there was a knock on the door and the landlord entered the room.

“A young man to see you, sir,” said Elkinson; “name of Jones.”

“Jones, eh?” laughed Linkinghorne. “A good name. Show him up.”

The landlord retired, and a minute later ushered a tall, dark-haired young fellow into the room. He bore the trademark of police officer and had a rather fleshy red face.

“Well, Jones?” queried Linkinghorne when the door was closed.

“We’ve found the car, sir.”

“Mr. Robertson’s car, eh? Well, that’s not bad work, seeing that you didn’t know the number of it.”

“It’s outside, sir, and a very nice car it is, too. We found it on Wimbledon Common this afternoon—just standing there—no one in it—engine cold. It was reported to us a derelict that might turn out to be what we were looking for. Anyhow, it’s a landaulet.”

“Dark blue?”

“No, gray.”

“The landlord here distinctly said it was a dark blue car, and we’ve other evidence to that effect.”

“Yes, sir, but it has been repainted.”

“Impossible—in the time.”

“Oh, it’s been very roughly done, sir, and the blue paint is underneath.”

“Oh, well, then it is the car. Any information about it?”

“None at present, sir. It was found on a part of the common where hardly anyone would go at this time of year—at the bottom of a steep road that runs down to Queen’s Mere.”

“Very strange.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are they dragging the mere?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so.”

“Well, they’d better. They may find Robertson’s body. He must have come pretty well to the end of his tether if he’s had to abandon the car. Any number-plates on her?”

“None, sir, and——”

The door opened without ceremony, and the landlord burst into the room.

“Mr. Robertson, sir,” he cried—“Mr. Robertson! He’s here, and asking to see you.”

Jones looked astonished. Linkinghorne smiled, and nodded, as though he had been expecting a visit from Robertson.

“I will see him in a minute or two,” he replied. “Just close the door, Mr. Elkinson—no, stay this side of it.”

The landlord did as he was bidden.

“Have you seen the car?” questioned the sleuth.

“Yes, sir,” replied the boniface.

“Can you identify her?”

“Yes, sir. A bit of her leather upholstery was torn at the back of the driver’s seat, and I remember asking the chauffeur if he’d like one of my maids to stitch it up. It still wants mending.”

“Thank you. Well, send up Mr. Robertson when I ring the bell. That’ll be in about a minute or two.”

The landlord left the room, and Linkinghorne began to fill his pipe.

“You can wait in the next apartment, Jones,” he said. “It is my bedroom. You will take a full report of the interview in shorthand. Close the door; then put your ear to the keyhole and write as best you can. No doubt Robertson knows you are here, so you’d better leave this room after he is shown into it. Ring the bell, will you?”

Jones obeyed. Twenty seconds later the door opened and the landlord stood aside to let Robertson enter. Linkinghorne, who had never seen the newcomer before, was astounded at the ugliness of the man’s face.

“Well, so long, Jones,” said the detective. “I’ll see you later on. Good evening, Mr. Robertson. Please take a seat.”

“The typical murderer,” said the detective to himself; and then allowed: “I’ve been waiting to see you for some little time, Mr. Robertson.”

“Yes, I must apologize for giving you so much trouble. I only landed this afternoon at Ramsgate, and I should have gone away again if I had not come across one of your advertisements in the newspaper. It was most fortunate for both of us.”

Yes, indeed,” said Linkinghorne grimly. “Please sit down and I’ll order drinks.”

“Thank you. I don’t drink.”

“How did you know I was here?” queried Linkinghorne abruptly.

“I did not know. I only suspected. Where the carcass is, you remember, there will the eagles be gathered together.”

“You are referring to——”

“The fire at Shotlander. I also read about that in the newspaper.”

“And the death of Honeyman?”

“Yes, and a good many other things I knew nothing about—so I came straight here.”

“Expecting to find me at this inn?”

“Why, certainly. What spot could be more convenient for you? Besides, Mr. Linkinghorne—I got your name from the paper—I stayed at this hotel and it would naturally interest you. I came here on the chance of discovering you, and I have found you. Now, what is it you want?”

Robertson now accepted the sleuth’s invitation to be seated. He lit a cigar, and Linkinghorne proceeded to put his questions.

“On the afternoon of January the 17th,” said he, “you were fishing on the pier at Easthill?”

“Was I? Let me see. The 17th, you say? Yes—that’s right.”

“Why didn’t you come forward at the inquest?”

“What inquest?”

“On James Burden.”

“I had no evidence to give.”

“You were fishing on the Easthill pier. Both James and his brother were there at that time.”

“I do not know Mr. James Burden by sight.”

“You know none of the Burden family?” queried Linkinghorne after a pause. This was a trap, but Robertson did not fall into it.

“Yes, I know Mr. Richard Burden,” was the quiet reply. “I called to see him on—let me see—it would be on February the 9th or the 10th.”

Linkinghorne was not astonished at this candor. The man would realize that the butler had already given this information.

“Why did you call at Shotlander Priory?”

Robertson shrugged his shoulders.

“It was not an ordinary visit,” Linkinghorne continued. “You must have walked all the way from this inn and back again. There was something wrong with your car.”

“Am I on my trial?” queried Robertson.

“No, but you’d better answer my questions.”

“Have you a warrant for my arrest?”

“Not yet,” Linkinghorne laughed. “If I’d been going to arrest you I should have warned you that anything you might say would be used in evidence against you.”

“That’s only a formality.”

“I want to make things easier for you. You need not answer any more of my questions.”

Robertson leaned forward, resting his arms on the table.

“Have a good look at my face,” he said, “and tell me if it reminds you of anyone.”

Linkinghorne stared hard at the hideous features, and then he smiled. He could not fail to notice that which Richard Burden had seen at a glance. He took three photographs from his pocket—the portraits of Robert and James and Richard Burden—laid them in a row, and studied Robertson’s face again.

“You are some relation of the Burdens,” he said. “You are—you’ll pardon my saying so—a caricature of the Burden family.”

“Yes, I am Richard Burden’s cousin—the son of his aunt. That fact has been kept a secret for a very long time, and I only tell you now because I want you to understand that, so far from being concerned in the deaths of the Burdens, I am one of the family and myself in danger. I called to see Richard Burden that night to talk over the best method of dealing with this unknown enemy. I know no more than you do about the murders.”

“Where did you go that night—after you left Shotlander Priory?”

“I told Honeyman that he could pick me up on the road between Stilehurst and Easthill. I suppose you have my note.”

“Yes—here in my pocket.”

“Well, then, I did exactly what I said I was going to do. I struck the road to Easthill and walked and walked—resting a bit every now and then.”

“And Honeyman picked you up?”

“No. I gave him until noon, and then I took a train to Easthill.”

“And what happened to your chauffeur?”

“I don’t know. I never saw him again.”

“Oh come, come, Mr. Robertson—you never saw your car and chauffeur again?”

“It was not my car,” Robertson remarked very slowly, “and Honeyman was not my chauffeur. I know nothing about him. I may tell you that I have no residence in England. I live in a little village called Sarre, near Boulogne. I am well known there. I have a small yacht, and am very fond of fishing. I often cross to the English coast. All this you can prove for yourself, and you can also satisfy yourself that I was back in Sarre on February 12th, and that I have been there ever since—until this morning. In fact, when I crossed to Ramsgate. There is no mystery about me whatever, Mr. Linkinghorne.”

“Oh yes, there is,” said the detective to himself; but aloud he said: “We seem to have made a mistake, Mr. Robertson.”

“Not at all. You naturally wanted my evidence about James Burden, and—and this fellow Honeyman. I’m afraid I cannot help you. I picked Honeyman up in London that night—or rather, in the afternoon. He stopped close to me in Knightsbridge, and asked me if I wanted to be driven anywhere——”

“But the car was not licensed for hire.”

“I know that. I took him to be some gentleman’s chauffeur who wanted to make a bit. I asked him if he’d drive me to Easthill, and he said he would, and that he’d do it cheaply, as he had to be in Easthill on the following day. He told me his master lived there. Of course, I pretended, when we broke down by the inn, that he was my servant and that it was my car. I know nothing whatever about him.”

The interview was over. This story would have to be examined and tested. The main assertions were capable of proof, if they were true. But there was little to be gained by further questions. The man’s face was a mask, and no one could read his thoughts.

Linkinghorne went to the fire, lit his pipe with a spill, and then, glancing at a picture which hung over the mantelpiece, saw something dimly reflected in the glass—something that made him turn abruptly on his heel.

Robertson’s great arms lay on the table, and his head was bowed between them. His massive shoulders rose and fell as though he was shaken by deep sobs. No sound came from his throat or lips.

“Are you ill, Mr. Robertson?” queried Linkinghorne.

The man raised his head and, leaning back, gripped the edge of the table with his hands. His face was distorted with agony.

“Yes,” he muttered hoarsely, “I—I am ill. My nerves have gone to pieces. I cannot sleep, my health is breaking down. I cannot go without rest night after night. I’ll stay here at the ‘Chequers’ for a day or two until you’re satisfied with my bona-fides.”

—

It was only an attack of influenza after all, but it laid Robertson by the heels for a while as surely as though a prison door had closed on him.

# Chapter XII · What Was It He Saw?

To the pedestrian or the cyclist or the motorist, Cowhurst is chiefly remarkable for its very beautiful old church, of which the Saxon tower is the principal feature, and the number of its inns in proportion to its population.

As a lover of Sussex aptly puts it in a little poem:

In little Cowhurst  
 You can drink till you burst

In its one street—a delightful thoroughfare that climbs the hill—there are no fewer than five public houses, and each of them is of a respectable antiquity. But the oldest and noblest is the “Silver Buckle.”

This ancient cognizance of the Pelhams is painted on the signboard, carved on the stone, and cut on the paneling over the big fireplace in the hall.

The inn, which still retains its old fretted barge boards and its curiously carved corner posts, is well known to antiquarians, but not much frequented by tourists, except for lunch, for though the food is good, the beds are uncomfortable and it is rather behindhand in the matter of bathrooms and sanitation. To this hostelry, on a cold winter evening, two days after Robertson’s arrival at the “Chequers” at Stilehurst, came a young and remarkably pretty girl. She arrived in an ancient cab from a station five miles distant, and she had no more luggage than an old and shabby little suitcase. Mrs. Woodgate, the landlady, a fat and heavy-featured old woman, regarded her with disapproval.

“A bed for the night?” she echoed sharply. “Yes, I daresay we can oblige you.”

“For several nights perhaps,” said the girl sweetly. “I just love this place. I’d like to live here all the rest of my life.”

The landlady sniffed contemptuously and rang a bell. An untidy servant appeared and took the girls suitcase.

“Number six,” said the landlady, and then to the guest: “You’ll be having dinner, I suppose?”

“Oh, anything will do for me—anything.”

“None of your boiled eggs, miss. We don’t serve that kind of meal here. It’s the full dinner for seven and sixpence or none at all.”

“Oh, everything you’ve got,” laughed the girl. “I’m very hungry.”

She followed the servant up the broad oak staircase, and was shown into a large, low-ceilinged room with a small bed in it.

“This is your best room?” she queried.

“No, miss. Our best apartments are already taken by Sir Julius Kingsbury and his daughter.”

“Miss Kingsbury? Is that the Miss Kingsbury who——”

“I think so, miss,” the servant interposed. “They come from Easthill—and I read in the Sunday paper that——”

“Yes, yes. That’ll do. Oh, I never thought that I’d have such a thrilling holiday!”

The servant lit two candles and retired. Presently she returned and said:

“The missus told me to ask what name?”

“Name? Oh, Miss Black—Miss Rose Black.”

“Miss Rose Black. That do sound funny, miss.”

The servant vanished, giggling. Rose Ivory—for she it was—stood before a large cracked mirror and regarded herself as though she were an object of interest. She had every reason to be satisfied with the picture. Soft brown hair, gray eyes set rather far apart, a mouth with a most delightful smile, a small tip-tilted nose—a thin lithe figure! All this would have pleased a man, but it did not please Rose Ivory, who all her life had longed to be tall and dark and stately. She did not wish to look like a butterfly, for she was a very serious young person indeed.

“But perhaps on this occasion,” she said to herself, “it will be useful.”

She had been sent to Cowhurst on a mission, and she already saw herself as someone of importance. She had had an interview with the great Linkinghorne, and as a result she had been dispatched to the “Silver Buckle” and had been given money to spend.

She had purchased a new evening frock for the occasion, and—well, as she saw herself in the mirror, she could not resist the temptation of putting on her finery.

This made her late for dinner, and when she entered the oak-paneled dining room Sir Julius Kingsbury and his daughter had just seated themselves at a table in the corner. Sir Julius was facing the entrance and she knew him quite well by sight. Miss Kingsbury had her back to the room. Of course it was Miss Kingsbury, but Rose Ivory could not see her face.

The girl seated herself at a table as far away from the Kingsburys as possible, but in a position from which she could watch them.

The dinner was only “full” in the sense that it was long. For the most part it consisted of scraps left over from lunch.

The “Silver Buckle” was famous for its lunches, but few people ever dined there.

To Rose Ivory, however, unused to luxury, it was a very good meal indeed. But she would have enjoyed it better if she had not known that it would be her duty, as soon as possible, to thrust her acquaintance on the Kingsburys. She was well aware of the difference in their social position, and she did not look forward to being snubbed.

“Find out why Sir Julius Kingsbury has gone to Cowhurst,” Linkinghorne had said to her, “and make friends with him. Keep an eye on him. You’re a pretty girl, and I dare say he’ll take a fancy to you.”

At the end of the third course Miss Ivory became aware of the fact that she was attracting attention. The baronet’s daughter turned in her seat and looked at her. Sir Julius smiled. Oh, yes, they were certainly talking of her and wondering what she was doing by herself at the “Silver Buckle.” For several minutes Rose kept her eyes fixed on her empty plate.

“Miss Rose Black,” she said to herself—“a young artist suffering from a nervous breakdown.” All that sounded very simple. She was an amateur painter, and she had brought her brushes and her sketch-blocks with her. As for the nervous breakdown, that was to excite sympathy and friendliness. She did not like her job at all. The grim reality was that stern-eyed elderly man. She was afraid of him. She could well believe, as she had heard at Easthill, that he had shown no mercy to criminals.

And now—well, if he were not a criminal himself, he had at any rate been placed under observation by the police.

A plate containing two oranges and twelve Brazils was placed before her. She cracked a nut, and a little cloud of dust flew out of it. And then, looking up from her plate, she saw Miss Kingsbury walking toward her. Sir Julius was still in his seat. He had lit a cigar, and was leaning back in his chair.

Letty Kingsbury came straight up to Rose and said:

“Surely I have met you somewhere. Don’t you live at Easthill?”

“Oh no,” laughed Rose. “I live in London, and I’ve come down here for a rest and to do a bit of painting.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Letty. “I was certain I’d seen you at Easthill,” and she turned to go from the room.

“Oh, please don’t apologize,” faltered Miss Ivory. “It’s so lonely here, and I’d like to be able to speak to someone. My name is Rose Black.”

“And mine is Letty Kingsbury. I’m here with my father—for a day or two. He has been ill and it’s quite quiet here, isn’t it?”

“Kingsbury?” queried Rose. “Sir Julius Kingsbury?” and then suddenly sprang to her feet. “Your father!” she cried. “What is the matter?”

Letty turned. The baronet was leaning forward and sitting quite motionless, his eyes were open, his face contorted with fear or pain. The cigar had dropped from his mouth onto the table and lay there smoldering. He was staring at the open door.

Sir Julius Kingsbury sat motionless, staring at the doorway as though Death was standing there and he was afraid to die. But there was no one in the doorway.

Letty hastened to her father, but Rose Ivory, who was certain that Sir Julius was looking at someone, walked straight to the door.

There was not even anyone in the paneled hall. After the serving of the dessert the waiter—an ostler between mealtimes—had vanished.

The door of the landlady’s private room was open, and Rose Ivory poked her head round the corner and saw that the room was empty.

Down a passage came the sound of laughter—probably from the kitchen.

Rose Ivory, suddenly aware that she might be on the threshold of a great discovery, cared nothing for appearances. She went out of the hall door and looked up and down a deserted street. And then she ran up the broad staircase.

There was no one on the landing. The inn seemed to be quite empty and silent save for the sounds from the servants’ quarters.

No doubt the staff, including the landlady, were at supper.

To Rose Ivory there was something curious and even sinister about the emptiness of the “Silver Buckle.”

To her vivid imagination is was as though something very horrible had appeared and that everyone had fled from the sight of it.

Even the laughter did not reassure her.

Women, and men too for that matter, so often laugh at their own fears—inanely, hysterically.

She stood on the landing for a few moments, and then realized that she had been acting in such a way as to attract the greatest possible amount of attention.

She went quickly to her bedroom, took a bottle of smelling salts from her bag, and ran downstairs to the dining room.

She found Sir James Kingsbury sipping some brown-colored liquid from a wineglass. His face was flushed.

“I’ve brought my smelling salts,” said Rose. “I had to turn out my suitcase to find them.”

“It was very kind of you,” Letty replied stiffly, but Sir Julius held out his hand, took the green glass bottle, and put it to his nose.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed with a laugh. “Better than all the brandy in the world. You are a kind and sensible young lady.”

He set down the bottle close to his plate and drained the contents of the wineglass at a single gulp.

“Rotten stuff,” he said, “except when one is ill. I have these attacks—at times. They pass very quickly. Let us forget all about it. Do you know this place well, Miss—Miss——”

“Black,” said Rose promptly. “No, I’ve never been here before.”

“Then you can’t tell us what to do in the evenings, eh?”

Rose laughed. She had imagined that Sir Julius might steal out by himself after dinner, and that she would follow him—“track him down,” as she had phrased it to herself.

“Oh, I expect we sit here,” she replied, “until we go to bed.”

“Rest,” said Sir Julius. “I suppose you’ve come to Cowhurst for peace. Nerves? No, you don’t look like a neurotic person. What are you really here for?”

Rose explained that she was an artist. The conversation turned to matters of art, and it was not long before Miss Ivory got out of her depth. But she only floundered for a moment, and then Sir Julius, with a kindly smile, began to talk of Cowhurst, leading up to the subject quite naturally, by discussing the possibilities of the place as a hunting ground for artists.

“At present,” he said, “it seems to be quite neglected.”

Later on he remarked that he was tired, and asked Letty to go and see the landlady about filling a hot-water bottle.

“The beds in these inns are often damp,” he said to Rose when his daughter had left the dining room; and then, after a slight pause: “Well, did you find the ghost?”

“I—I’m afraid I don’t understand you, Sir Julius,” said Rose, who understood him only too well.

“The ghost I saw in the doorway. You went to work very quickly, and I fancy you’re a sharp young lady.”

“Oh, please explain, Sir Julius.”

“You saw me staring,” the baronet continued, “as though I were gazing at someone in a doorway. And then I was ill. My daughter, knowing the cause of my complaint, hurried at once to my side. But you peered into the hall. There was no one there, of course?”

“No one,” said Rose, “but I went to get my smelling salts, Sir Julius.”

“You didn’t think there was anyone there in the doorway?”

“Well, yes, I did. I couldn’t help thinking that, could I? You were looking at the door—just as if someone had suddenly appeared.”

“There was someone there,” said Sir Julius in a low voice. “But it was not a creature of flesh and blood.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it was a man who is dead, my dear child. Of course, you don’t believe in ghosts?”

“I don’t think I do, Sir Julius.”

“Oh well, if you’d been sitting by my side tonight you’d have seen one—or possibly you would not have done so. I have alluded to this matter because I do not wish you to tell my daughter that you thought someone was standing there and that you saw no one. It would frighten her. She is anxious about my health, and I don’t want her to imagine that I’m subject to delusions.”

“As if I should be likely to say anything to Miss Kingsbury!” Rose exclaimed.

“Well, that’s a bargain,” the baronet said gently. “I like your honest, pretty face, and I don’t think you are really a little busybody that meddles with other people’s business. We are going to hire a car tomorrow and go for a drive. I hope you’ll come with us.”

“I’d like to,” said Rose—“most awfully.”

# Chapter XIII · Linkinghorne Is Puzzled

To the police and also to the public the disappearance of Richard Burden was the one thing that mattered. It was conceivable that both Robert and James Burden had met with accidents. Two juries had given separate verdicts to that effect, and but for the curious coincidence of that letter from Cowhurst there might have been no further inquiries. But the total disappearance of a strong, sane young man was a matter that called for a quick and thorough investigation. All the police of England—all the police of the United Kingdom were on the lookout for Richard Burden.

A description of him had gone over telephone and cable to the Continent, and even the American and Canadian liners were watched and searched.

Now, the disappearance of a young man is not in itself a sensation of the first magnitude.

Scarcely a week goes by without some young man or woman vanishing, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the missing person turns up again, for it is easy enough to disappear and hide oneself for a considerable period.

But the disappearance of Richard Burden, following on the deaths of his brother and his cousin, and coinciding with the destruction of Shotlander Priory, seemed to form so exact a fulfillment of the curse upon the family that a blaze of romantic glamour poured upon it.

So far as the public was concerned, the material aspect of the case was almost lost in the psychical and even religious questions involved.

Serious papers dealt very solemnly with the questions. There was a boom in spiritualism. Mediums and fortune-tellers and crystal-gazers had the time of their lives.

The police, however, were not concerned with the fulfillment of curses.

Linkinghorne, in the selection of Rose Ivory as an agent, had not for one moment chosen her because he believed in her ingenious theory that the curse of the monk had been fulfilled by some inherent taint in the family itself. But had realized that any young girl who had been capable of inventing such a theory was a person of more than ordinary ability.

A letter from Rose lay now before the detective on the table of his private sitting room at the Chequers Inn. Five days had elapsed since Robertson’s arrival and he was still confined to his bed. All that individual’s previous statements had been confirmed.

He was an honored resident in the village of Sarre. Many had testified to his worth and kindliness.

His boat had been in Easthill harbor at the times of the deaths of James and Robert Burden, but it was equally certain that Robertson had been at Sarre and that his boat had been in Boulogne harbor at the time of Richard Burden’s disappearance. The trip to London, which had occurred between these incidents, had been satisfactorily explained, and the incidents of the return journey in Honeyman’s car had been verified.

Save for the rather eccentric behavior of Robertson on the night of his stay at the Chequers Inn, there had been nothing out of the ordinary in his conduct.

He had gone to London to see his mother, who was living with an old servant in a flat in South Kensington.

Linkinghorne had personally interviewed both these old women, and he had been quite satisfied with their replies.

And now there was this disturbing letter from that very original young lady, the superintendent’s daughter.

The communication from Miss Ivory had arrived by an afternoon post, and Linkinghorne’s tea was set out before him.

“Dear Mr. Linkinghorne,” the girl had written, “there was an adventure on the first night,” and she described the illness of Sir Julius Kingsbury and the supposed cause of it. And then she went on to say that she had gone to bed at ten o’clock and had left the Kingsburys still sitting in the dining room.

“I was just a little bit excited,” the letter continued, “and I could not sleep. I had a magazine with me, and I had been trying to read it, but I found myself unable to fix my attention on a short story. It neither interested me nor did it lull me to rest. A clock on the landing had just struck one when I heard a door open sharply further down the passage. There were loud steps along the corridor. They turned out afterward to be those of Sir Julius Kingsbury. My door was locked, and when he had passed it I heard a crash and the sound of a struggle.

“I suppose under ordinary circumstances, I should have kept on the safe side of the door, but I could not forget that you sent me here to take note of anything out of the common, and this was certainly something that does not usually happen in a quiet country inn. I opened my door very quietly, peeped out, and saw Sir Julius kneeling on the floor. His face was toward me, and though his head was bent I recognized him plainly enough in the light of a small oil lamp that was burning in the passage. He was still in the same clothes he had worn at dinner.

“His shoulders were hunched together, his arms stretched out straight down toward the floor, and his fingers curved as though they were gripping something. His two hands were a little distance apart, and the circle made by the curved fingers would just have gone round a man’s throat. And they were a few inches off the floor. It was a horrible sight, Mr. Linkinghorne, but the most uncanny part of it was that Sir Julius was still fighting as though he had pinned his man down, but had not yet strangled him. The hands rose as though they had been jerked upwards, and then went down again. The grip of the fingers tightened. Then they moved sideways. He raised his head once, but he did not appear to see me.

“This has taken a long time to write, but the scene did not, I suppose, last for more than half a minute. Then Sir Julius gave a loud cry and suddenly collapsed, rolling over onto his side. And at that moment another door opened and Miss Kingsbury came running down the passage with a lighted candle in her hand. And then two other people appeared—the fat landlady, looking most grotesque in a flannel dressing gown, and a maidservant. Sir Julius came to his senses, and told them that a man had entered his bedroom and, finding that the occupant was still up and dressed, had bolted. He, Sir Julius, had followed him, caught him, and thrown him down on the floor of the corridor. But, after a tremendous struggle, the intruder had got away, and he, the baronet, had collapsed.

“That was Sir Julius’s story, and I said nothing. I did not tell them I had witnessed this struggle with an imaginary burglar. I pretended that I had only come out of my room when the man had escaped. I thought you’d wish me to do this.

“Of course, poor old Sir Julius is quite mad. That he saw a ghost and had a supposed burglar on the same day is abundant and sure proof of that.”

The description of the imaginary man, as given by the baronet, did interest Linkinghorne very much. It was a fairly accurate likeness of Robertson. This fact was known to Miss Ivory.

“You will understand,” she wrote, “that Sir Julius detailed particulars of the burglar before he became normal. This morning he had a talk with me, and he seemed anxious to find out what he had said. He did not ask me in so many words, but he fished very carefully for information. And then he remarked that a blow on the head must have made him foolish, and he gave me an entirely different description of the burglar, making out the latter to be, in fact, as unlike Robertson as possible. I gather from this——”

The detective, reading the letter again for the third time, folded it up and placed it in his pocket. And he registered a mental vow that if he employed Rose Ivory again he would give her a few instructions.

“Keep to the facts,” he would tell her, “and only supply the facts. A letter should be very concise and to the point.”

Linkinghorne drank two cups of strong tea and ate two cold muffins and several slices of cake. Then he lit his pipe and stretched out his legs to the warm glow of the fire.

He was puzzled and disturbed by the letter, but, above all, he was vastly interested. Robertson had brought forward almost absolute proof that he was an innocent man, and it was very interesting to learn that he had been in the mind of the crazy Sir Julius when he had run out of the bedroom and grappled with an imaginary enemy on the floor of the passage. And this became of more importance when the baronet afterward gave an entirely different description of the burglar. It was quite evident that Sir Julius, for some reason or other, hated Robertson and desired to take his life, and equally evident that the baronet wished to keep his enmity a secret.

Sir Julius was the father of Letty, who was in love with Richard Burden. And the baronet was already a marked man. It was now known to the police that Sir Julius had been seen on the Easthill cliffs near the place where Robert Burden was supposed to have fallen into the sea, in the same day and about the same hour when the tragedy had occurred. The baronet had not yet been questioned on this matter, as the police were waiting to get further evidence. But Sir Julius was being watched.

“It’s one of the two,” said Linkinghorne to himself, “and perhaps both of them are in it. Sir Julius Kingsbury and Robertson! Well, a queer pair, anyway.”

# Chapter XIV · Atkins Shows Loyalty

Letty Kingsbury firmly believed that her father had seen someone standing at the door of the dining room of the inn and that he had had a fight with the same man in the corridor outside his bedroom. Most certainly the fellow was not a burglar, but it did not occur to her to question his existence. Her father had insisted on paying a visit to this inn at Cowhurst, ostensibly for a change of air, but really, she had no doubt, to find out something about this man—perhaps to meet him. His courage had failed him in the dining room, but later on he had met this mysterious someone face-to-face. And there had been a struggle. That her father had altered his description of his opponent on the following morning did not change her opinion. When he had come to his senses he had drawn an imaginary portrait. He had something to conceal, and he had concealed it to the best of his ability.

Rose maintained a discreet silence. She allowed everyone to form theories.

To Linkinghorne she wrote a good deal, and posted her letter in another village. We know what was in Miss Ivory’s communication to the detective; but she said nothing to Letty Kingsbury.

And Letty Kingsbury, indeed, had little time to think of anything her father might say or do. Her mind groped in a great darkness for some ray of light that would show her the face of her lover. She did not believe that he was dead. There were even times when she wished that he might be dead.

That which might be the truth was gradually being forced in upon her reason. Richard Burden was the last man who had seen his brother alive.

James Burden had been in love with her, had done all in his power to prevent their marriage.

There had been a quarrel on the pier—blows—an accident—it would be no more than an accident.

That was how she was being forced to see what had happened. And she fancied that her father knew the truth, and that perhaps Robertson also knew.

Robertson and her father! Well, perhaps it was Robertson after all, who had visited the inn. But that did not matter—at present.

She wanted news of Richard Burden, and she had accompanied her father in the faint hope that she might come across someone at Cowhurst who would give her information that perhaps he would not give to the police.

Sir Julius looked very ill on the day following his adventure, but he would not hear of the drive being postponed.

“It will do me good,” he said to Letty when they were discussing the matter in his bedroom before lunch, “and, besides, I hope to combine business with pleasure. I think we will visit Shotlander.”

“Shotlander?” the girl queried. Then, suddenly: “Father, you know something about what has happened to Dick! Oh, for pity’s sake tell me!”

“You will not see him again,” said Sir Julius after a pause. “So far as you are concerned, Letty, he is dead. You can never marry him.”

“Is he in England?”

“I don’t know where he is, Letty.”

“Does Mr. Robertson know?”

“Mr. Robertson? Have you taken leave of your senses? Mr. Robertson?”

The girl looked straight into the baronet’s eyes. He was haggard and gray, and of late had been aging visibly. “Mr. Robertson,” she said, “was on the pier that afternoon. He saw Dick and me. He may have seen Jim Burden. Mr. Robertson is aware of something and he has told you what he knows. Father, do you understand that my heart is breaking—not because I think Dick is dead—but because—I’m afraid of something that would be worse than his death.”

“I know nothing,” Sir Julius muttered. “I am seeking enlightenment.”

“You think Dick killed his brother?”

“That is very likely.”

“They fought—and there was an accident?”

“Yes, yes, of course—an accident. The police do not know that Jim wanted to marry you Letty, that he did all he could to prevent you from marrying Dick. Letty, my dear child, I—I am fighting for your happiness. I cannot say anything more now than that until—until tomorrow. We are caught in a terribly strong net, the two of us. We may not be able to break out of it——”

“I can’t understand all this kind of talk,” Letty interrupted harshly. “But if we’re both enmeshed in the same net we’ll have a better chance of getting out of it if I know something about the nature of the entanglement.”

“You shall know,” Sir Julius answered wearily, “ere very long—oh yes, perhaps before this time tomorrow.”

“And you are going to take this Miss Black with us to Shotlander?” Letty queried after a pause. “Miss Black—a stranger?”

“Oh, she’s not a stranger, Letty,” he laughed. “I know all about that young lady.”

“You’ve met her before, Father?”

“I’ve seen her often in Easthill. Her name isn’t Black. It’s Ivory. She’s the daughter of Superintendent Ivory at Easthill. Bless her little heart, I know all about her.”

“The daughter of Mr. Ivory?” Letty echoed.

“Yes, yes. Linkinghorne has sent her here, I expect—to spy out the land. You didn’t believe that story about the smelling salts, did you?”

“Yes, I did,” replied Letty.

Sir Julius shrugged his shoulders.

“You must let me deal with these people, Letty. I’m a match for them. Linkinghorne and a silly child are not likely to worry me. We are all in the hands of God, and it’s not death that men fear so much as dishonor. Please leave me, Letty. I wish to be alone—for a few minutes.”

Letty made her way down the stairs to the dining room, and there she found Rose Ivory. The two girls smiled at each other.

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Shotlander Priory looked grim and terrible in the pale winter sunlight. Most of the outer shell remained, but all the inner walls, built of timber and plaster, had perished.

To Letty the ruins were the very emblems of death. They stood for the fulfillment of the curse, for the end of an old and honored family.

Sir Julius Kingsbury, however, had not come to Shotlander to gaze on desolation and to moralize. He and the two girls walked round the blackened shell, and only paused by the windows of the library.

“It was in this room,” said the baronet, “that the fire started. I think I shall climb in through the window and have a good look round.”

“Oh, it is dreadful to leave the place like this,” exclaimed Rose. “Why don’t they come and clear away the rubbish and——”

“My dear young lady,” Sir Julius interrupted, “at present there is no one to give orders, for it is not known whether Richard Burden is alive or dead. And as for clearing away the debris, no one would trouble to do that unless they were starting to rebuild the house. Everything of value was saved, except the contents of this one room, which were burnt to ashes.”

He crossed the broad flower bed, and scrambled through the gaping hole where there had once been a window—the way by which Robertson had taken his departure on the night of his visit to Richard Burden.

“I shall go for a walk,” said Letty decisively. “I want to get out of sight of this place. Will you accompany me, Miss Black.”

“Oh, I think I’ll stay here,” Rose replied. “I have never seen anything like this before. I’ll remain with Sir Julius.”

“Right you are. I’ll be back in half an hour, Father. What time do we leave?”

The baronet was indefinite in his reply. He might be busy for a while. But most certainly he would not be ready to go in half an hour.

Letty walked across the broad stretch of lawn and made her way past the stables to the kitchen garden—three acres of ground enclosed by a high mellow brick wall. Not a soul to be seen!

After a time she wandered into a private road which ran under the overhanging boughs of trees—the road, so she supposed, to one of the lodges. When she had walked a quarter of a mile she encountered a path that branched off to the left. She followed this for a little way, and came suddenly upon a very old man sitting upon the trunk of a fallen elm. He was looking at something that lay on the open palm of his hand. He did not raise his head at her approach, but his fingers closed on what he held. She recognized him from a portrait that had appeared in one of the illustrated daily papers. It was Atkins, the old butler—the faithful servant who had lived under the rule of four successive owners of Shotlander Priory.

“I am Letty Kingsbury,” she said gently. “I was engaged to be married to Mr. Dick Burden. May I sit down here for a little while and talk to you?”

The old man took off his hat and rose to his feet, standing bareheaded. Tears came into his eyes.

“I am not too old to stand, miss,” he said in a quavering voice. “I would not dream of taking the liberty——”

“Nonsense,” replied Letty sharply. “I want to talk to you—I want you to tell me everything.”

The old man unclosed the fingers of his left hand and Letty saw a worn and dented cigarette case.

“His cigarette case!” she cried. “Where did you get it? He had it with him the last time I ever saw him.”

“Is that true, miss? Are you sure that you’ve not made a mistake?”

“I am quite certain. I saw him that morning—the day he disappeared. Where did you find it?”

“In this wood, and not more than half an hour ago, miss. I kicked aside some leaves while I was walking, and there it lay. I knew it at once.”

She took the cigarette case from his hand and stared at its blackened surface.

“The fire!” she cried. “No, of course it was not the fire. How silly I am! But Mr. Dick must have been here—no, how foolish I am!—it may have been stolen from him.” She caught the old man by his arm.

“Where did you find it?” she exclaimed. “Please show me the exact spot.”

The old butler walked along through the trees for a hundred yards, and then came to a wide clearing in the wood. Here there was a pool about a quarter of an acre in extent, and on the far side was a small Grecian temple. It was partly in ruins, and almost hidden with enormous masses of ivy. And beyond this shrine there was only a narrow belt of trees between the building and the road.

As they walked round the edge of the pool, Letty Kingsbury shuddered at the dark stillness of its waters.

“It was just here that I found the cigarette case, miss,” said the old butler, pointing with his stick at the decaying leaves.

“We must tell the police at once!” Letty exclaimed. “It will acquaint them with the fact that Mr. Dick has been here since I last saw him at Easthill.”

“Aye, and that his house was burnt to the ground that night and that he took no notice.”

For a few moments they looked at each other in silence, and then the old man shook his head.

“And if he is dead,” he continued, “we cannot bring him to life again. But if he is alive there are reasons why he would not wish us to tell the police.”

“You think—you dare to think that——”

“I think no ill of Mr. Dick,” the old man interrupted harshly. “But if he has reasons for keeping silence it is not for those who love him to interfere. If he can get the better of his enemies by pretending to be dead, is it for us to inform the police that perhaps he is alive? Mr. Dick, he plays his own game.”

His right hand swung out and the cigarette case fell into the center of the pool.

“That will not prevent me from telling Mr. Linkinghorne,” said the girl coldly.

“Nor me from saying that you were dreaming, miss. But if you love Mr. Dick you’ll hold your tongue—for a little while.”

He walked away along the path until he was lost to sight. Letty Kingsbury stood motionless for a little while. And then she was suddenly seized with a desire for action. She went on her knees and began to search among the dead leaves. But she found nothing.

# Chapter XV · Rose on the Trail

On the following day Sir Julius Kingsbury suggested that he and his daughter should leave Cowhurst and stay for a day or two at “Chequers” at Stilehurst. Letty offered no opposition to this change in her father’s plans. Indeed, it fitted in with her own wishes. After the old butler’s discovery of Dick Burden’s cigarette case in the woods at Shotlander, the possibilities of Cowhurst seemed of little importance.

On their return from the Priory, and through part of the night, Letty lay awake for several hours, and even in her dreams the girl was conscious of some force that drew her back to the gaunt ruins of Dick’s house, and the woods that lay round it, and the dark, silent pool, and the Grecian temple that was almost hidden with the growth of ivy. It was not that she expected to find anything there that would throw light on the mystery of her lover’s disappearance. There was only a vague longing to be near Shotlander.

And there were other reasons why she was glad her father had decided to go to the “Chequers.”

Both Linkinghorne, the great detective, and Robertson, the man for whom the police had advertised, were staying at the inn. She was curious to see Linkinghorne, but she particularly wanted to see Robertson.

They reached the Stilehurst hotel at seven o’clock in the evening, not so very long after the detective had perused the letter from Rose Ivory. Linkinghorne was informed of their arrival by the landlord.

“I thought you ought to know, sir,” said Elkinson. “They never wrote about rooms, or I’d have told you.”

“Thank you,” said Linkinghorne with a smile. “You are quite right to report their arrival but it is of no importance whatsoever. If Sir Julius should ask to see me, will you please tell him that I am ill and cannot possibly meet him until tomorrow. I will have my dinner up here. Has Mr. Jones come in yet?”

“Yes, sir. He’s in the billiard room.”

“Would you ask him to come up here?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Oh, and by the by, Mr. Elkinson, I am so unwell that I am not to be disturbed tomorrow morning until noon. I shall put a notice on my bedroom door to that effect. You will call me yourself, and if you get no answer you will understand that I am not in my room. I may have to leave here suddenly, but I do not wish anyone to know that I have gone. Don’t forget to send Jones.”

—

Rose Ivory said goodbye to the Kingsburys, and went upstairs to her bedroom. She had been told that they were going to the Chequers Inn, but she had no intention of following them. Linkinghorne was there on the spot, and he could deal quite effectively with the situation. She had other matters to attend to, and she was going to do her work well and thoroughly.

She dined by herself in the old paneled room, and was served with a remarkably good dinner. She ate with her hat on and her coat flung over a chair by the side of her. She had paid her bill and was going to leave the inn at nine o’clock. Long before the departure of the Kingsburys she had made her plans, and had dispatched a telegram to a garage at Easthill, asking the proprietor to send a car for her—to take her home. She intended to find Richard Burden—alive and in hiding. Rose Ivory had always believed that Dick had killed his brother and that he had vanished in such a way as to lead the police to think he had been murdered. Her theory—and she had put it into so many words—was that the Burden family was rotten to the core, and that thus it had been doomed to perish. James had murdered Robert for the sake of the inheritance, and the latter had been killed by Richard. No doubt in time Dick would turn up with a wonderful story of captivity and an attempt on his life.

So far—up to the previous day—this had been only a theory. But now there were facts to support it. She had only remained a few minutes with Sir Julius Kingsbury in the ruins of the Priory. Then, making some excuse, she had wandered off to investigate. She had taken the same road as Letty, but instead of turning down the path into the wood, she had kept straight on, had seen the Grecian temple through the trees, and had actually been inside it when Letty and the old butler had appeared on the further side of the pool. She had concealed herself in the great masses of ivy and had overheard the conversation between Letty and Atkins and she had seen the butler fling the cigarette case into the pool. She had managed to slip away unobserved and rejoin Sir Julius several minutes before Letty’s return.

And now she was quite certain that Richard Burden was in hiding, and that Atkins knew where he was. She intended to watch the old butler, who would of course have to keep his master supplied with food and water. That Atkins had shown the cigarette case to Letty Kingsbury did not trouble her at all. Atkins had doubtless reasons of his own for suggesting to Letty Kingsbury that Richard Burden might not be dead.

At nine o’clock the car arrived, and Rose was pleased to see that Prince, the proprietor, was driving it.

“I am not going straight home,” she explained when she had seated herself beside him and the vehicle was running through the village.

“Do you know the road to Shotlander Priory?”

“Yes, Miss Ivory, but you’re not going there at this time of night, are you?”

“I am, Mr. Prince.”

“But your father will be expecting you home tonight, Miss Ivory, won’t he?”

“No. Look here, Mr. Prince, I’m engaged on very important and secret business for the police. I may have to keep you out all night. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, Miss Ivory—so long as I am paid for it.”

“Well, I may keep you waiting for me at Shotlander. On the other hand, I may find someone there who will drive me over to Stilehurst to see Mr. Linkinghorne.”

Mile after mile they drove on through the darkness. When at last they reached one of the lodges in the park there was a yellow glow of light in a window, and the gates were closed. They skirted the park wall until they came to another lodge. This was in darkness, and there were no gates at all. Rose had already ascertained that this cottage was uninhabited, and that the entrance was no more than a quarter of a mile from the kitchen garden. The road, in fact, was the continuation of the road that ran past the Grecian temple.

Rose Ivory asked Prince to back his car onto the grass, put out the lights, and leave it there under the shadow of some tall ilex trees.

“You must stay here,” she whispered, “and look after the car.”

He protested and vowed he would accompany her.

They were still arguing in low tones when they heard the hum of a motor in the distance, and they shrank close to the wall. The high-pitched note came closer and closer, and then it dropped several tones with the falling speed of the engine. Fierce lights blazed between the gateless pillars and a big car swung round the corner into the park and quickened its pace again. The lights dimmed to a mere yellow glow, and in a few seconds they vanished altogether among the trees.

“They have come for Richard Burden,” said Rose to herself. “He is going to escape tonight.”

“Now, what might they be doing here?” queried Prince. “No one living in the park but the servants and gamekeepers and so on.”

“Why, these are my friends,” Rose said—“the people I’m expecting to meet here.”

“You’re sure of that, eh?”

“Quite certain. I recognize the car. I told them I’d meet them further on by the house. I must go at once. I shall be alright. I have a little pistol in the pocket of my coat. You must stop here.”

“For how long, Miss Ivory?”

“For an hour—no, perhaps for two. If I’m not back then you can come and look for me.”

Rose Ivory walked away across the road, a very faint white streak in the darkness. Her hands were thrust into the pockets of her thick warm coat, and her fingers closed on the butt of an automatic. The weapon gave her no confidence, for she knew that she could not fire at Dick Burden if he tried to escape, or at old Atkins, or the driver of the strange car if they interfered with her. She could threaten them, but she could not take a man’s life.

She realized now that she had acted like a little fool. She ought to have gone to Linkinghorne, and he would have done the job properly. But she had desired the sole honor and glory of this capture. For years she had dreamed of an occasion like this—an occasion in which she would do something really striking and remarkable. Somehow or other the reality was not as picturesque as the dream. There was not even a glimmer of romance in the darkness and the sighing of the wind among the leafless trees.

# Chapter XVI · Gripping Moments

Sir Julius Kingsbury extinguished the lights of the big car, stopped the engine fifty yards further on, and stepped down from the driver’s seat. He knew well enough that he had gone on his final journey, and that never again would he see the light of day. Robertson had made that quite plain to him when they had that last terrible interview at the Chequers Inn—when the baronet had caught Robertson stealing out of the house and had followed him and made him return.

Robertson had accounted for Linkinghorne and Jones. He had drugged the whiskies and sodas, and had left the two detectives in a deep sleep. He had locked the door on them and had smiled at the notice Linkinghorne himself had written: “Please do not call me until noon.” Oh yes, Robertson had dealt very effectively with Linkinghorne and Jones. But Robertson had not taken him, Sir Julius Kingsbury, the wretched slave of Robertson, into account. Robertson had forgotten the old proverb that even a worm will turn, and he certainly had not imagined that a man would take his own life to see justice done in the world.

“I must go tonight,” Robertson had said. “Every day since my return I have waited for an opportunity. I cannot wait any longer. If I do, Richard Burden will be dead.”

Then he, Sir Julius, had asked questions, and Robertson had said:

“You understand what it means if I answer these interrogations or if you stop me from going?” And the baronet had replied: “Yes, Robertson, I know. But there is a way out for me. I can kill you and take my own life—here and now. I ought to have done that long ago.”

“Here and now?” Robertson had laughed. “Oh yes, of course! But then poor Dick Burden will die. And you don’t want that, do you—for your daughter’s sake? And I certainly don’t. For here I am, ready to sacrifice myself in an attempt to save the life of one man and the soul of another. Let us first see if we can find Dick Burden, and then discuss what we shall do with our miserable lives.”

And they had left it at that, saying little, for they knew each other’s secrets, and they were not to be spoken of, nor was there any need to utter them—unless, perhaps, at the very last, when they were so near to eternal silence that they would grasp eagerly at the few minutes of speech left to them.

The door of the closed car opened and Robertson stepped out upon the grass by the side of the road. A shaft of light flashed on Kingsbury’s face, and again there was darkness. It was significant that the two men had not been seated side by side, that Robertson had been in the closed part of the car, where he could not talk to Kingsbury. It was as though they most certainly had nothing further to say to each other.

Kingsbury followed Robertson along the road in silence, not seeing him in the intense darkness under the trees, but only hearing the sound of his footsteps. The light flashed out again, and Robertson’s hand closed over it. The crimson glow of the flesh of the latter’s hand showed like a smear of blood. Kingsbury followed the gleam as they left the road and turned aside through the trees. Robertson stopped, and the light flashed out again on a wet, tangled mass of ivy, falling like a great green cascade from the roof of the building to the ground.

“It is here,” said Robertson, speaking in a low voice, “that I must ask you for any weapon that you have brought.”

“I have none,” Kingsbury replied.

“You will allow me to search you while you hold your hands above your head?”

“Most certainly.”

Robertson sought and found nothing, for the very good reason that Kingsbury had quietly dropped his pistol on the ground two yards from where he was standing and had swept a few dead leaves over it. He had not pitted his wits against the cunning of the East for twenty years without learning a few tricks of that sort.

“Thank you,” said Robertson, and then he gripped Kingsbury by the arm, so hard, as a matter of fact, that Kingsbury gave a sharp moan of pain.

“You know my strength,” said Robertson. “I could kill you with these two bare hands of mine as easily as you could destroy a rabbit.”

The light flashed on the ivy again, and Kingsbury, stepping softly back a couple of paces, picked up the pistol and placed it in his pocket. He did not intend to murder Robertson. He only intended to see that Robertson went through with this job.

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Rose Ivory, creeping softly through the trees, saw a light gleaming from the inside of the Grecian temple. It vanished, and she stood still, scarcely daring to breathe. It seemed to her that someone had heard her approach and that she would have to be very careful. For five minutes she did not move. There was not a sound but the sighing of the wind in the trees. She still hesitated, and then she did as brave a thing as any man or woman could do. She walked boldly forward and switched on her own electric torch. It showed her the great mass of ivy, and—as she went further on the pillars of the temple and the inside of it—the stone walls and seats and more tangled growth.

The place was empty, but there was a door at the back of it, half hidden by the ivy. The woodwork had once been painted white, but now was stained green and brown with age.

She stared at it for a few seconds. She was disappointed, for she remembered that she had seen the other side of this door, from the back of the temple. She could not forget the curious pattern of it. No doubt it had been placed there by the architect to suggest an entrance to further apartments, but it obviously only opened to the wood behind.

Great trails of greenery hung down over the door. Rose Ivory brushed them aside and caught hold of a brass handle, dark and slimy. And then she saw the marks of violence on the door—a battered lock and dented jamb.

“But leading out into the wood again?” she asked herself. And then she pulled at the handle and the door opened a few inches, and beyond it, in the light of her electric torch, she saw, not the carpet of dead leaves and the black trunks of trees, but a similar door—a door of precisely the same pattern, closed and barely eighteen inches away from its fellow.

Moving aside the ivy and opening the door still further, she noticed a narrow passage, running to the right. The thickness of the wall was a mere sham. There were two thin walls and two doors. It was a very ingenious device.

“A hiding-place,” she said to herself, “and only known, perhaps, to members of the family.”

She handled the ivy very carefully and squeezed herself through the narrow opening. Then she closed the door and walked along the passage, only to find herself facing a blank wall of painted deal paneling. The ingenuity of the builder was not yet exhausted. The girl sought for some exit, and several minutes elapsed before she found it—not in the paneling, but in the boarded floor. Two boards lifted up and disclosed a flight of stone steps. She descended twelve of them and found herself in another passage. She switched off the light and groped her way in the darkness, treading very carefully, and making sure of her foothold.

The passage was broad, and she could only just touch the walls by stretching out both her arms. The atmosphere was stifling at first, but grew more pleasant as she proceeded on her way. Being a very careful young woman, she counted her steps, so that she could measure distances. When she had traveled about three hundred yards, according to her own reckoning, she heard the sound of voices, and saw a gleam of light. After that she moved more slowly and carefully, and gripped her pistol in her right hand.

# Chapter XVII · Life and Death

“You, Mr. Robertson?” said Dick Burden, as the bolt shot back and the heavy door opened. “Well, you’ve just come in time. I finished the last of the food this morning, and though there’s plenty of water left it’s getting a bit stale. And there’s only another quart of oil for the lamp. Somehow I always thought you were in this.”

Robertson looked round the cellar.

“A sofa,” he said, “a chair and a table, food and drink, and an oil lamp. Not so bad. A good many men have less. We’ve come to set you free.”

“Well, that’s jolly nice of you,” laughed Dick Burden. “I thought you’d come to murder me. But you are alone and you say ‘we.’ Oh, perhaps you were once an editor.”

Robertson shrugged his shoulders. He was scrutinizing the face of the young man. Dick Burden, haggard, dirty, and unshaven, was not a very pleasant picture.

“We’ll talk things over,” he said after a pause. “Have a cigar?” and he held out his open case.

“Yes, a cigar would be just like heaven to me,” replied Dick. “Not drugged, eh?”

“Oh no—quite alright.”

Dick Burden lit up, and for a few moments he did not speak for sheer rapture at the taste of tobacco. Robertson kept his eyes fixed on the half-open door. I’d just like to know how you left my library that night,” said Dick after a pause. “This way, I suppose.”

“Yes—there was a sliding panel in the library. Of course, when the house was burnt down and the roof fell in, all traces of the secret entrance to this cellar were buried in the debris.”

“I see—yes, I suspected that from the methods of the chap you paid to kill me. He must have gone through here to the library and set fire to the place, and then returned this way. So the house is burnt down, eh? I did not know that. I could not open the other door. Well, what’s it all about, Mr. Robertson?”

The half-open door swung back, and Sir Julius Kingsbury entered the cellar.

“You, Sir Julius?” queried Dick Burden. “Oh, of course, this is just a nightmare. Where do you come in?”

The baronet made no reply. His face was ghastly in the light of the small oil lamp that burned steadily on the table.

“He forced his society on me,” Robertson answered after a pause. “Of course, I need not have come here, but that would have been very bad for you, Mr. Burden. I did not know for certain that you were here. I had not even heard of your disappearance and the fire at Shotlander until I landed in England a few days ago. Then I went to the police, and I was taken ill—and I had no chance until tonight. You see, the police cannot be told the truth, and I had to come here without their knowledge. It has been difficult, but, thank Heaven, I am in time.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” said Dick Burden, but I’m jolly glad to see you. And I swear I won’t get you into trouble if you’ll let me out of this. That’ll be alright, won’t it, Sir Julius?”

“No. All the guilty shall suffer—all the murderers! Not one of them shall escape the wrath of God.”

“Honeyman has escaped,” said Robertson quietly. “Honeyman is dead.”

“The little dark fellow with a scar on his forehead?”

“Yes,” Sir Julius replied. “I suppose he trapped you, Burden.”

“He did. I got a letter from Cowhurst asking me to be near this imitation Greek temple at five o’clock that evening. Now, I knew what a letter from Cowhurst meant, and I should have gone to the police with it. But I thought I was man enough to see the job through by myself. I dare say you know the contents of the letter, Mr. Robertson?”

“I do not.”

“Well, it spoke of a treasure in gold and jewels—a treasure hidden away in some part of the house and grounds. This belonged to the Burden family, and the writer promised to show me where it was if I would give him half of it.”

“Ah, greed!” exclaimed Robertson. “That has always been the real curse of the family! Greed and the love of gambling to satisfy greed! Thus Buck Burden ruined himself. Yes, that was the bait to catch any Burden.”

“I was armed,” Dick Burden continued, “and I thought I’d get the better of anyone who wanted to do me in. I set out in my car, but it broke down and I had to leave it in a garage. I was just going to take a train when a big Daimler came up and the driver—our friend Honeyman—called out to me and he asked me if he could take me anywhere. It was snowing at the time, as you remember——”

“I don’t remember,” Robertson interrupted, “for I was not in England.”

“Well, Sir Julius will remember. I said to the man, ‘What’ll you charge to drive me to Shotlander Priory, near Stilehurst?’ and the man replied, ‘Seven pounds on a night like this, guv’nor.’ I jumped into the vehicle. I thought the fellow might come in useful if there was a row.” He paused and laughed, looking into their two grim faces.

“Honeyman was too smart for me,” he went on. “It was not until he entered the park that he told me he had written me the letter. We’d had a breakdown on the way, I did not arrive until nearly eleven and by that time I’d rather got to like the chap. And when he showed me the entrance to this little trap I thought that he knew a thing or two, and perhaps there was a hidden treasure after all, and that the fact of the letter having been posted in Cowhurst was only a coincidence. Well, we reached this place, and, catching me off my guard, he hit me over the head. When I came to my senses I felt myself imprisoned but I haven’t the faintest idea what good he got out of it.”

“He was a maniac,” said Sir Julius harshly—“a religious maniac. He fancied he had a mission to perform before he died, which was to be the instrument of the vengeance of God. The curse of the monk was unfulfilled, and he swore to fulfill it. He murdered your cousin and your brother; he flung one over the cliff and the other off the pier into the sea. For you he reserved the death by fire instead of water.”

“You know this?”

“Yes, Mr. Robertson told me.”

Robertson’s hideous face wrinkled in a grin.

“Tell him all the truth, Sir Julius,” he snarled—“that you saw the murder of Robert Burden.”

Dick looked inquiringly at Sir Julius. And the old man bowed his head.

“Yes,” he answered after a pause, “I saw that. So did Mr. Robertson. And—and—Dick, I would not let my daughter marry you.”

“Tell him all the truth,” reiterated Robertson—“everything.”

“Mr. Robertson put pressure on me,” said Sir Julius in a choking voice. “You see, Dick, this Honeyman was Robertson’s son, and Robertson fought for him—used a very ugly weapon.”

“Tell him all the truth!” shrieked Robertson. “Yes, Honeyman was my son, and he is dead; and there’s nothing to fight for now. But say what weapon I used, Sir Julius. Come, this is the day when everything must be known.”

Sir Julius Kingsbury was silent.

“Must I tell him?” queried Robertson. “I kept silence because Honeyman was my son. But why did you say nothing, Sir Julius Kingsbury?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dick interposed. “I don’t want to hear anything about it.”

“But you should hear!” cried Robertson. “This is the day of judgment, and the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed. I was in India with Sir Julius, and——” He paused as he saw that Dick Burden was pressing his fingers to his ears. And then, looking round, he caught sight of Sir Julius pointing a pistol at his head.

“Not another murder, Sir Julius,” he said with a laugh. “It is enough for a man to have one on his soul.”

Dick Burden sprang to his feet.

“I’m going to get out of this,” he exclaimed.

“No,” Robertson replied. “You shall not leave here until you’ve heard what I’ve got to say.”

“Oh, there are two of us against you, and one is armed.”

Robertson picked up the table, swung it round, and hit Burden with such a terrific force that the young man was flung against the wall ten feet away from where he stood, and dropped in a crumpled heap on the floor. Sir Julius fired, but his hand was unsteady, and the bullet glanced off the leg of the uplifted table. And then the mass of wood came flying at him as he pulled the trigger again, and he sank down under the weight of it as it caught his shoulder and flung him round like a top. The next moment Robertson’s gigantic hands were at his throat, crushing the life out of him.

And Sir Julius Kingsbury saw things in a red mist—the face of a dead man in India, and then the features of Robertson, as he had witnessed them from the window at Easthill, bringing fear and terror into his life, and again as he had viewed them in the dream at the Cowhurst inn.

And then there was the face of Honeyman—seen first on the cliffs and then, later on, from the window at Easthill on the day Dick Burden had vanished, and, for the last time—the face of a dead man that mocked him.

“Let go of him or I’ll kill you,” shrieked a ridiculously small voice. Robertson did not seem to hear it. He did not even look up from the blackened face of his enemy or perceive the pretty white face of Rose Ivory.

She fired, intending to wound him. But her hand was trembling, and she was not even a tolerable shot with the weapon. The pistol threw high. A small purple stain suddenly appeared on Robertson’s temple. That was all, but Robertson lurched sideways and fell on his back. The grip of his terrible hands seemed to tighten in the brief agony of death.

# Chapter XVIII · Golden Daydreams

Dick Burden and his wife sat on the grass under the trees on the far side of the great lawn at Shotlander. The house had been fully insured, and already the builders were at work on a new residence—a less palatial home, but one that was going to do credit to the foremost architect of the day.

It was late autumn, and they had just returned from their honeymoon in Norway. They were staying at the “Chequers” at Stilehurst, and every day they drove over to Shotlander. The woods were gorgeous with gold and crimson and brown, and the leaves had commenced to fall. The autumn sunlight was warm, and not a breath of air stirred the trees.

“Today is Father’s birthday,” said Letty after a long silence. “If he had been alive he would have been sixty today.”

“He died fighting,” said Dick gently. He saved my life.”

This was a lie, but Dick Burden never tired of repeating it. He had lain for a month between life and death, and he had not been able to give any evidence until six weeks after the tragedy. Then he had made a simple but entirely false statement to the effect that Robertson had tried to kill him, and that Sir Julius had saved his life—first Sir Julius, by “drawing the enemy’s fire,” as Dick had put it, and then Miss Rose Ivory, who had finished the job.

That was true enough—that he owed his life to those two. His lie had been merely a suppression of the truth—a silence in regard to material facts. Locked in his own heart was the secret which had given Robertson power to demand the silence of Sir Julius. Indeed, he knew nothing of this secret, save that Sir Julius had killed someone in India, and that Robertson had proof of the judge’s guilt.

No shadow of this unknown crime rested on Letty. Dick Burden was not one who believed in the sins of the fathers being visited on the children. For himself he would not have cared if all the world had known of Sir Julius Kingsbury’s crime. But he thanked God that Letty, his dear wife, had been spared all knowledge of her father’s guilt. She was not even aware of Robertson’s vague accusation—vague, but real enough, or Sir Julius would not have been made an accessory after the fact to the murder of Robert Burden.

Nor did the police know. It was possible that Rose Ivory was cognizant—that she had been outside the door for some little time before she entered the cellar. But, if so, the girl had decided to hold her tongue. In her evidence at the inquest she had distinctly stated that she had heard the first crash of the battle before she reached the end of the passage, and that she knew nothing of what had happened except that which she had seen with her own eyes. He, Dick Burden, had been the sole witness up to this point.

And Linkinghorne and the police had been far too busy over other matters to devote any time to a side issue. They had traced all Honeyman’s movements and proved that he was really Robertson’s son. They had discovered that he must have used the passage and the cellar as a hiding place during his “religious” war against the Burden family. They had found out that he had run away from home at the age of sixteen, that he had fought in the French Army in the war, that he had been wounded, and that his injuries had probably been the cause of his insanity.

Piece by piece, the history of his life had evolved itself, and even the mystery of his death had come to light. He had been alone in the car, flying down from the scene of his crime. Then for some reason or other he had turned back, and found the way blocked by the snowdrift. He had obviously left the car in order to find out the extent of the drift, and had died of heart failure.

The empty car had been found by a certain Edward Finlay, a professional thief. Finlay had seen a chance of stealing the vehicle, and had driven it back to London. Then, realizing that all the police of England were looking for this car, Finlay had abandoned it.

Subsequently Finlay had been sentenced for a series of car thefts, and had confessed to this one, after his footprints had been compared with the pattern of those left in the snow. But long before Finlay’s arrest the police had ascertained that the vehicle had never belonged to Albert Honeyman at all, and that he himself had stolen it.

Oh yes, the police had been very busy and Linkinghorne had not worried himself about Sir Julius Kingsbury. The baronet was dead, and it was not the custom of the sleuth to waste his time on those who had shifted off this mortal coil. And besides, it was clear that Sir Julius was not quite in his right mind a few days before his end. Sir Julius had seen ghosts at the “Silver Buckle” in Cowhurst.

Nor had Dick Burden himself any time to waste on the deceased baronet. The horror of the past lay behind him, and he could only think of the future and the present. The blackened ruins of Shotlander Priory has been cleared away, and a new house was rising on the old site. His hand sought Letty’s and found it, and his fingers gripped it hard.

“Your father was afraid of the curse,” he said. “That was why he did not wish you to marry me. Well, then, if there ever was any evil in the race I think it must all have been concentrated in Robertson. Do you know, Letty, that when I first saw that fellow I fancied that he was some monstrous creation of the curse—something that had lived on century after century, to achieve the downfall of the race.”

“But he only came to warn you.”

“No, Letty, he came to accuse your father of having murdered poor old Jim.”

“Oh, how horrible!” cried Letty. “My father, the most upright judge who ever lived—a man of honor—a really good man.”

“Well, my idea was alright,” Dick continued after a pause. “Robertson’s son—with Burden blood in him—very nearly did make an end of the family.”

“Yet even in Robertson there was good,” said Letty. “He could have left you to die, and he risked the discovery of everything by setting out that night to save you. Oh, dear Dick, need we talk of such terrible things?”

He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

“I’d go through it all again, sweetheart,” he whispered. “With you as the prize.”

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THE END.