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# THE MURDERS NEAR MAPLETON

**WHEN SIR EDWARD VERNON AT A Christmas party proposed a toast of "empty chairs," his guests little thought that within a few hours their host, proposer of the toast, would occasion another empty chair. . . .**

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**ANTHONY BATHURST, whose solutions of the now famous CASE OF THE BLACK TWENTY-TWO and THE BILLIARD ROOM MYSTERY, adds another laurel to his crown in this latest BRIAN FLYNN success.**

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# THE MURDERS NEAR MAPLETON

## BY BRIAN FLYNN

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# BRIAN FLYNN MYSTERIES

## THE CASE OF THE BLACK TWENTY-TWO
## THE BILLIARD ROOM MYSTERY
## THE MURDERS NEAR MAPLETON

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# THE MURDERS NEAR MAPLETON

## CHAPTER I

### THE BEGINNING OF THE TERROR

SIR EUSTACE VERNON straightened his shoulders and raised his glass. "Another toast, ladies and gentlemen, before the ladies leave us! A toast, I think, that we should always drink at Christmas-time! One that should never be forgotten." He spoke very gravely and one by one the company of his guests ceased their gay and irresponsible chattering and looked towards him, with expectant eyes, down the long and brilliantly lighted table. For he was a man of much distinction. "I will ask you all," he announced very quietly, "to charge your glasses and drink to the 'empty chairs.' To those dear ones who once were with us but who have now 'passed on,' as we shall 'pass on' when our time comes." The medley of suddenly grave voices floated towards him—echoing the words of his toast. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen." Sir Eustace sat down. But his handsome face showed signs of perturbation. The merry chatter of the company re-commenced, although the thoughts of more than one had changed and travelled far.

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"What's come to your uncle, these days?" asked a debonair young man of his charming neighbor at the table.

The girl addressed darted a quick glance at her companion with her pretty eyes a-flutter. "What do you mean, Terry—tell me—have you ——?"

"Noticed anything?" he broke in again, before she could complete the sentence. "Yes—I have noticed something. Most decidedly! And what's more, Helen—I don't think I should be very far wrong if I said that you had noticed something yourself."

Helen Ashley looked carefully round her more approximate neighbors before she answered. Lowering her voice she caught Terence Desmond's arm lightly, and admitted the truth of his words. "You're quite right, Terry, I have! It's been coming on him, too, for some time—if you mean the same thing that I mean. But tell me—what is it you've noticed? Tell me exactly."

Desmond was about to reply when a voice sounded at his elbow. "Yes, please, Purvis. Fill up again—please."

The butler filled his champagne glass with becoming dignity.

"No more for me, Purvis," refused Helen Ashley. "What were you going to say, Terence? Please forgive me if I seem unnaturally insistent—but the truth is I'm dreadfully worried about Uncle Eustace."

"Let me think. How long have I been here, Helen?"

"Not quite a week," she answered. "But long enough ——"

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"To notice a good many things and to get into his bad books very thoroughly—eh?" he replied—the laughter showing in his blue eyes. Helen looked serious. Desmond went on. "I think he's *frightened*, Helen. That's the impression he's given me all the time I've been here. To use an ordinary expression, 'that he had something on his mind' would be beside the point—inadequate. It's much more than that and it's different from that. I've seen 'fear' before—many times—and in many guises—and far too many times not to recognize it when I do see it. Your uncle's afraid of something," he concluded—"I haven't any doubt about it, and very badly scared, too."

"I think you're right," agreed Helen Ashley, quietly—"you've summed up the position just as I've seen it. It's getting on my own nerves, too—that's the worst of it." She looked towards the head of the table where the man of the discussion was engaged in an animated conversation with his left-hand neighbor.

"I am just old enough, Mrs. Trentham," he was saying, "to enjoy my Christmas very thoroughly. It is only the young who are bored by Christmas. Doubtless you are bored yourself."

"I certainly haven't been bored at Vernon House," replied the lady—"you are far too charming a host ever to allow anything like that to happen. I think it's a great pity that Vernon House hasn't a hostess." Her accompanying smile was demurely provocative as it rippled across her face. Sir Eustace twirled his grey moustache and smiled in return.

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"That could be remedied, Ruby. It's not too late to ——"

A tray dropped from the hands of one of the maids and clattered heavily to the floor. He broke off his sentence—his lips working convulsively and his face ashen grey. "God!" he exclaimed, "what was that?" Then he recovered himself to find Mrs. Trentham's eyes regarding him curiously. "My nerves are all to pieces since I had that attack of influenza," he explained lamely. "The result is that any sudden noise like that plays the very dickens with me and knocks me right over. I'm afraid it sounds silly ——" He stopped to watch the effect of his explanation upon his companion. Ruby Trentham's eyes fluttered just the suggestion of an understanding.

"Not at all," she remarked. "I think most of you financiers are like that—Morris is almost as bad—and he hasn't even the excuse of a previous illness to fall back upon—whenever he's pulling a big deal through on 'Change,' as he calls it, or engaged on any big business proposition—he's as twittery as a canary—aren't you, Morris?" She turned her beautiful face towards her fat and prosperous-looking husband.

"If you say so, my dear—I suppose I must agree. You've taught me to do that." He shrugged his shoulders. His answer held a touch of sourness.

Although he belonged to the type of man who ardently desires his wife to excite other men's admiration—he liked that admiration, when excited, to confine itself within certain limits. In this connection Contemporary Rumor had it that he viewed Sir

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Eustace Vernon's interest in his wife with an appreciable disfavor, that tended to grow rather than to decrease.

"I couldn't help hearing what you said, Sir Eustace," interjected a tall clean-shaven man—the vis-à-vis of Mrs. Trentham—"particularly as it happened to fit into my personal province—but you're quite right. 'Flu' plays the very deuce with people—it's apt to leave so many evils behind—and the victim's nervous system is one of its happiest hunting-grounds. It plays Old Harry when it gets in there." The speaker was Doctor Lionel Carrington—Sir Eustace Vernon's medical adviser—and a man to whom the latter had undoubtedly taken a strong liking.

"There you are, Trentham," exclaimed Sir Eustace—"Carrington to the rescue! He knows me. He understands me."

The doctor smiled an affirmative, just as another speaker took up the thread.

"You are far too modest, Sir Eustace—you underrate yourself and the strains you have imposed upon yourself—the cause of your indisposition is not far to seek. Why talk of 'influenza'—have you forgotten the night of January the eleventh last? Surely not! What you did that night will live forever in the hearts of the people of Mapleton."

The voice of the man that spoke rang with emotion, and almost held the fervor of fanaticism. Doctor Carrington turned and looked at him. Father Jewell sprang to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried with dramatic

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intensity—his voice vibrant with feeling—"and yet another toast before we finish this Christmas dinner. Let us drink a health to the children—the men and women of to-morrow—whose lives Sir Eustace Vernon saved."

His cultured and incisive voice cut like an icy knife down the length of the table. The company took up the toast with infectious enthusiasm. Major Prendergast waved his glass by its stem.

"Hear, hear"—his heavy voice boomed approval—"Sir Eustace Vernon! Sir Eustace Vernon! One of the bravest deeds I ever saw."

Diana Prendergast—a cameo of loveliness—turned—her eyes radiant with star-sheen, and laid her hand on her husband's arm. "Be quiet," she said—"Sir Eustace is going to speak. Be quiet! Listen!"

To the others there came the same realization. They were silent again and unanimously sank back into their seats—subsiding gently. Sir Eustace rose. As he stood there at the head of the table, Terry Desmond suddenly became more conscious than ever before in his life that their host was rapidly aging. His baldness was thrown up into startling prominence by the relentless light of the room, and his shoulders drooped perceptibly. But his eyes shone through the glass of his pince-nez as fearlessly as ever; and it was herein that the discerning observer could catch sight of the indomitable courage that had sent their owner to climb the front of a rapidly burning building time after time to save the lives of a dozen children hopelessly entrapped therein. With the Fire Brigade in attendance at another fire, no other course of action could have

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saved the twelve helpless little prisoners. This heroic feat, coupled with his work for Mapleton, had brought Sir Eustace a baronetcy in the last Birthday Honors' List. Which fact had also caused much heart-burning among the other Aldermen and Councillors of the before-mentioned County Borough. To say nothing of Mayor and Ex-Mayors! Sir Eustace extended his hand towards his guests—a gesture requesting a silent audience.

"Father Jewell makes far too much of an ordinary deed," he said, with impressive quietness. "I merely did my duty as any Englishman would and must have done in similar circumstances—and I was rewarded. It is nothing to mention."

The Mayor of Mapleton—Alderman Alfred Venables—began to feel a sense of annoyance. He felt aggrieved that even at a Christmas banquet of this nature he was unable to escape the shadow of Vernon's baronetcy. He muttered something to his wife—under his breath almost—and glared fiercely at the standing figure of his host.

"My reward," continued Sir Eustace, "was not the honor that His Majesty was pleased to confer upon me. I do not desire that you should misunderstand me." He paused abruptly—with the inevitable result that Alderman Venables' accompanying snort got "well over."

Helen looked across at him with strong indignation in her face. Emily Venables returned her look for look. The amenities of guest and hostess were temporarily forgotten.

Sir Eustace went on. "It was in the eyes of the

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first little girl whom I was able to get to safety. That is all I have to say." He sat down and picked up the red bonbon of crinkled paper that lay beside his plate. The others saw the action and recognized it as the signal to pick up their own. The noise of the pulling of the crackers snapped through the room. Suddenly Sir Eustace's face went the color of cigar-ash and his eyes held a strange anxiety. His more intimate neighbors noticed the rapid change in his facial color. He half-rose in his chair and then sank back again as though uncertain what to do. His eyes sought Purvis. The butler met them and came obediently to his master's side. Sir Eustace motioned him to bend down and then whispered something in his ear in the lowest of tones. Purvis nodded understanding and made his way slowly down the spacious room. Sir Eustace watched his figure pass and then rose again—his body and voice alike a trifle unsteady, and wavering. He spoke with difficulty.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said—"I should be extremely obliged if the ladies of the party would adjourn at once and if the gentlemen would join them at their discretion. I am compelled to leave you for a little time, but I hope to be with you again very shortly. Please accept my sincere apologies for the apparent discourtesy, but I assure you that it is beyond my control. I would give much for it not to have happened. I have received some very bad news."

The faces of his guests followed him—startled yet sympathetic—as he walked down the room—absentmindedly as it were and sorely troubled in spirit. For he had carried away from the table two red bonbons

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in his right hand. Ruby Trentham saw them plainly as Sir Eustace passed through the door. She realized that one was his own and that he had picked up also the bonbon that had been intended for her.

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# CHAPTER II

## HAMMOND SCREAMS

DOCTOR CARRINGTON declared afterwards, upon due reflection, that he was absolutely certain at that particular moment of the grim presence of Tragedy. How the conviction came to him he was unable to explain—all the same he was definitely aware of it. However, he appears to have said nothing to that effect. None of his companions is able to remember that he did, which is moderately conclusive. He himself is not sure. Anyhow, the ladies withdrew as Sir Eustace Vernon had suggested and which is more—had obviously desired. About half an hour later, that is to say—about thirty-five minutes past nine—the gentlemen left the dinner-table and joined them. Terence Desmond led the way into the sumptuously-furnished lounge and the others followed him. But by this time—and now very much more pronounced—there was an indefinite something in the air that seemed to hang like a pall over the proceedings and cause almost everything to fall unutterably flat. Conversation was desultory to the extreme. Languishing attempts to revive the spirit and *élan* of the evening were one and all doomed to failure. Two hours dragged slowly by. A card-party was formed after a time—and a game of Auction Bridge started—the players being the two Venables, Morris Tren-

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tham and Diana Prendergast. Helen Ashley, Major Prendergast and Father Jewell wandered into the music-room adjoining the lounge, while Desmond and Carrington migrated to the billiard-room, just as the former put it, "to knock the balls about a bit." Each was somewhat above the average in billiards' skill. It may be remarked at this period of the story that the lounge communicated directly with the music-room, which in its turn opened on to the billiard-room.

"What are you going to do, Ruby?" asked Helen, as she herself sat down to the piano—"you seem at a loose end. If you stay in here, I'll sing you something. Tell me something you'd like."

"Thanks—but I've rather a 'head.' It's been coming on for some time now. If you don't mind I'll go and watch the boys in the billiard-room."

The pallor of her face seemed to intensify the truth of her words. She turned and left Helen sitting there.

Thus was the stage of Vernon House set at about a quarter to twelve on that Christmas night for the enacting of one of the strangest cases that ever fell to an investigator's lot to unravel.

Suddenly Helen Ashley looked at the ormolu clock upon the mantelpiece. "Good gracious, Terry," she exclaimed, "look at the time—whatever can it be to have kept Uncle Eustace all this time? If he isn't back by the time it strikes twelve, I shall have to go and look for him."

Terence looked grave. "It certainly is most extraordinary—he's been away now just on three hours. I've been worried about it for some time now. Good-

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ness knows what his news could have been—on a Christmas night, too! When you start on your voyage of discovery, Helen, I'll come with you."

Venables crossed the room towards her. "Mrs. Venables and I must be going shortly, Miss Ashley. Within half an hour, I'm afraid! I ordered my car for twelve-thirty. If your uncle doesn't show up before then, please pay my respects and explain to him—will you? It doesn't do for me to have Mrs. Venables out too late, you know. The night air and her asthma don't exactly ——"

At that precise moment, as Alderman Venables was making his historic contribution, there rang through Vernon House a blood-curdling scream. It was a scream of fright—but of far more than ordinary fright. It contained a note of horror and above that a note of stark terror! It came from a person who, in the scream, had entirely epitomized all the gamut of Abject Fear. It seemed to come from the same side of the hall as the lounge—but from the part that lay towards the back of Vernon House.

"Good God!" cried Morris Trentham—"what on earth does that mean? It's a woman!"

Without waiting to answer him the whole crowd of them dashed across the hall, seeking the meaning of the scream. Everything now was silent. Whoever it was that had screamed had no life to scream again. The investigators stopped—uncertain of their next step, uncertain of their exact destination. Lionel Carrington turned to Father Jewell behind him.

"Where did it come from, Father?" he asked with agitated lips—"any idea?"

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The priest shook his head helplessly, and to stifle his emotion—caught at his breast with his two hands.

Helen Ashley quietly interposed. "I think it came from my uncle's study," she said—with a tremor in her voice. "Certainly from that direction." She explained more fully. "The room at the end on the right. It leads on to the garden."

"I think so too, Helen," cried Terence Desmond—"come on then—as quickly as possible."

Prendergast and he outdistanced the others and reached the door first. It was locked, and there was no key in the lock on the outside.

"Put your shoulders to it," cried Major Prendergast, as the others panted up. "Keep back, ladies—please. This is a job for men."

The men flung their united weight against the door. "I know a better way than that," cried Desmond. He turned and ran back—through the lounge, music-room and billiard-room—round into the garden. Helen Ashley watched him with anxious and wondering eyes. For a time the door held—defying all the efforts of the men to move it. Strive how they would to dislodge it—the door held. Then it began to yield by inches. But the surrender seemed painfully slow to all of them in their feverish impatience. However, although slow, it was nevertheless sure, and suddenly without imminent warning the door gave to the force of their onslaught. Thus it was that when the entrance was ultimately effected Terence Desmond had already gained access to the room through the French doors leading from the garden. Helen Ashley was conscious of his white startled face confronting her as

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she surged into the room at the rear of the men and contrary to the instruction given just before by Major Prendergast. An instruction which she found it impossible to obey. On the carpet—just in front of the French doors—lay a woman's body—inert—lifeless.

"It's Hammond," exclaimed Helen—"one of the kitchen-maids—whatever's the matter with her? What is she doing in here?"

Doctor Carrington strode quickly and noiselessly towards the girl's body and went down on both knees to make his preliminary examination. The crowd of guests stood round them in an expectant semicircle—each one reflecting horror and dread in his or her watching eyes. Then Carrington made an announcement that seemed to surprise them all. "She's only fainted," he said, curtly—"smelling-salts—anybody? And will somebody bring me a glass of cold water?"

Diana Prendergast, hovering on the fringe of the crowd at the back, heard the request and quickly satisfied it. Within a few moments—under the doctor's professional attention—the color came slowly back to the cheeks of the prostrate girl. Then she opened her eyes—dilated with the terror of her last conscious experience, whatever it chanced to have been.

"Come, my girl," said Carrington—"what's all this about? Pull yourself together and tell us." As he spoke he assisted the still-trembling girl to her feet and subsequently into a chair. A shudder came from her body and she looked fearfully round the room, her eyes wide open and terror-stricken.

"That hand!" she exclaimed. "That icy hand!" She shuddered again. "I shall never forget it. It

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was awful!" She turned and clung to Doctor Carrington's arm. "Don't let it touch me again, sir," she entreated, "I can't bear it."

"That's all right, my girl," he intervened—"that's all right. Calm yourself and collect yourself. Let's hear what's upset you. The sooner you tell us what it was that frightened you—the quicker, in all probability—we shall be able to help you. Now then—what's it all about?" He looked at her with very close scrutiny.

"I'll tell you," replied Hammond, recovering herself a little, "I was coming up the garden ——"

Interruption came immediately. "What were you doing in the garden at this time of night, Hammond?" Helen Ashley's question cut into the tense atmosphere of the room with imperious insistence, and everybody realized that she had put into words the question that had been in everybody's mind.

"I had been to the Kennels, Miss Helen." Hammond looked calmly at her interrogator. "Boris—the wolfhound—hasn't been too well. He's been on special diet for three days. Owing to something or other—Stevens couldn't feed him at his proper time—so to-night, during the evening, he asked me to see to him. I forgot it for a time, but remembered it just now."

"Go on," said Helen Ashley.

"As I came up the garden path—I was surprised to see that the French doors of this room were wide open. The moon was shining beautifully and I could see the open doors quite plainly. It was almost like daylight. I thought it very strange, so I came up to

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them—just in order to look and see that everything was all right—as you might say. It was quite dark in the room—the electric light was not turned on—so I stood just inside the doors—listening. Suddenly, I thought I heard a peculiar rustling noise—coming from that direction." She pointed to the left-hand corner of the room. A heavy *portière,* suspended from a thick brass rod, marked the entrance to another apartment. All eyes were instinctively turned to it as Hammond told her story. She continued. "I peered into the patch of darkness—it was very dark in the corner there—although I was strongly tempted to take to my heels and run. All of a sudden—a horrible figure dashed out on to me—carrying something shining in its hand. I think it must have been a huge knife. It seemed to flash in the darkness. An icy hand and icy fingers were pressed against my face. Then I screamed."

"Yes—we heard you," said Doctor Carrington grimly—"you certainly did scream all right."

"But who was it, Hammond? Have you any idea?" questioned Desmond, coming to the point.

She shook her head blankly.

"Was it anybody you knew at all?" demanded Morris Trentham, with just a hint of aggressiveness.

"I didn't recognize the figure at all," repeated Hammond, vaguely—"there wasn't time enough—I could only see one thing about it."

"What's that?" queried Major Prendergast, eagerly, "any little point is sure to help us in a matter of this kind. What was the point you noticed?"

"It was a *woman,*" replied Hammond.

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"What makes you think that?" asked Desmond again.

"I don't think—I know," answered the girl. "I know," she repeated—"because as she dashed past me—in the darkness—I felt her frock or her skirt."

As she spoke the various clocks of house, home, church and building—non-coincident—seconds behind each other and seconds in front—struck twelve. Midnight!

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# CHAPTER III

## THE TERROR CONTINUES

"COME over here, gentlemen, will you, please?" asked Helen Ashley, very quietly. She was standing by her uncle's table—her face bearing a very strained expression and white as death. The others hurried across to her—Doctor Carrington leading the way. "Look," she said, in a curiously unemotional voice—"look! What is that little patch there on the blotting-pad?" She pointed to the white expanse of blotting-pad that lay on Sir Eustace Vernon's writing-table. All eyes followed her gesture, and from Father Jewell there came a quick and startled exclamation. On the white blotting-paper at which they gazed there had spread a tiny dark red patch. Its shade of color was not the tint of red ink. That fact was plain to everybody. The terror that it told seemed to lay a cold hand round the hearts of all.

"Looks like blood, certainly," contributed Doctor Carrington. "Be calm, Miss Ashley! You mustn't jump to conclusions, you know. Even now, everything may be all right. Don't immediately imagine the worst has happened—just because of this." He threw a sharp glance in Helen Ashley's direction as though not quite sure of her.

"My uncle," she murmured, "my uncle. I'm frightened."

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The cold December air penetrated through the open doors, intensifying the chill of this last discovery. It was strange to see the varying effects that had been produced upon the faces of the different members of the party. Major Prendergast and his wife were attempting to encase themselves within what can be best termed, an aristocratic aloofness—they seemed to be desirous of showing these other people who were with them as sharers in and partakers of the same experience that the word Fear was not to be found within their vocabulary. Alfred and Emily Venables—plebeian and purse-proud—were at no pains to conceal the extent of their agitation. Mrs. Venables' false teeth chattered audibly, and if the occasion had not held such a fierce hint of dark and dreadful tragedy —Terence Desmond felt that he would have burst into riotous laughter. Laughter which would have been amply justified. "When her tongue doesn't chatter—her teeth do," he thought, grimly, to himself. But at the moment his own face was white with strain and anxiety—and it was easy for an intelligent observer to see that the worry and foreboding were more for the sake of Helen Ashley than for anybody else. Continually his eyes travelled towards her—wistfully anxious. She, however, seemed to have surrendered herself with infinite resignation, to something that she regarded in the light of a Stronger Force—a Higher Power. It had entered her life quite suddenly and for the moment had paralyzed her into a condition of peculiar inactivity. It would pass—she knew—but the time for the passing was not yet. She would have to suffer before that time came.

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Father Jewell stood at Doctor Carrington's side—austere in his thin-lipped asceticism—his black cassock adding a touch of the "macabre" to the proceedings. The lines of his face, rigid and severe, betrayed no sign of his present emotions, but in his deep-set—almost sunken eyes—there lurked a brooding watchfulness. They held a fire that at any time might leap into being. The two Trenthams held their place upon the fringe of the onlookers. The self-complacent pomposity of Morris Trentham had undoubtedly undergone some disturbance—a fact that his fat, and line-creased face unmistakably showed. Ruby's eyes were widely distended, and had the French system of "Heart-beat Registration" been brought into operation at that particular moment, the machine—in her case—would have told an alarming tale. Doctor Carrington himself seemed to be fighting to save the doctor from becoming submerged by the man. Terence—watching him carefully—was amazed to see the muscles of his face and jaw set with an almost iron-like sternness. Major Prendergast lit a cigar to steady his nerves and smoked silently. Carrington turned again to Hammond, who by this time had recovered her equanimity and self-possession, with such a degree of success that she now appeared to be the coolest and calmest of the entire gathering.

"You are quite sure that only *one* person came out of the room when you entered it?"

Hammond nodded confidently. "As far as one *can* be sure, sir, in the dark as I was. Pitch-dark it was, too, in that corner." Once again she pointed to the heavy *portière* that she had indicated previously.

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"What do you say, Doctor Carrington"—exclaimed Major Prendergast—"shall we investigate? Don't you think it's our duty?" He nodded in the direction of Hammond's finger.

"I think so. I think we owe it to Miss Ashley—I am right, I think, Miss Ashley, in assuming that the *portière* there marks the entrance to your uncle's library? That is so, is it not?" Helen assented mutely. "You have no objection to the Major and me?"—he raised his eyebrows in interrogation.

"None whatever, Doctor," came her quiet reply. "I realize that it is very necessary. If you don't mind, though, I'll remain here until ——"

"Certainly, Miss Ashley. I understand your desire perfectly."

He motioned with his eyes to Terence Desmond to stand by the girl in case of need—because he feared what the next few minutes might bring forth. Desmond required no second bidding, and before the Doctor and the Major could enter the inner apartment he had ranged himself by her side. Major Prendergast pulled the *portière* along the rod and the two men entered. For a moment, after they passed through, there was an ominous silence. Then the Doctor's face appeared again round the corner of the heavy curtain.

"Do you mind coming in here a moment, Miss Ashley?" he inquired. She scanned his face with anxious inquisitiveness—seeking to read there what it was he wanted her to see and know before she obeyed his request. He observed what she did. "It's quite all right," he affirmed, reassuringly—"there's nothing

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at all of which you need be frightened. I want you to help us over something—that's all."

Helen crossed over to him quietly, but swiftly. She passed into the library behind him. The others, with the exception of Desmond, crowded over towards the hanging *portière*.

"Look here, Miss Ashley," said Doctor Carrington —"what does this mean?" The door of a small safe in the wall stood wide open, the key—one of many on a key-ring—in the lock. "You knew of the existence of this safe in the wall here, of course?" inquired the Major.

"Of course, Major Prendergast. I have been to it many times."

All the drawers inside the safe were fastened—locked.

"Can you say, by looking at it as it is, if anything has been taken, Miss Ashley?"

Helen shook her head—doubtfully. "I don't know what my uncle kept in here under lock and key," she declared. "I haven't the least idea—but on the face of it—nothing appears to have been touched. As far as I can tell—that is—of course." She shook her head again, more doubtfully. "But where is uncle?" she murmured—"he would tell you—everything looks all in order to me."

Major Prendergast pulled at the handles of the drawers that had been fitted within the safe. They were all secure. "Strange—the safe-door left swinging open like this," he muttered—"the key left in the lock too—looks as though somebody had been here but had been suddenly surprised and hadn't had time

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to complete what they wanted to. Don't you agree with me, Doctor?"

Doctor Carrington gestured an acquiescence. "Certainly looks like it," he declared. Then he—in turn—shook his head dubiously and almost forebodingly. "But I can't make head or tail of it! Who was it in here that caused Hammond's fright? What was she doing here? And where is our host?"

A sharp exclamation from Terence Desmond still in the room which the Doctor had just vacated arrested his attention.

"Doctor! Major Prendergast! Come back here, quickly, will you, please?"

The agitation clearly apparent in his voice was more than enough to bring the two men immediately to his side. In his hand there fluttered a sheet of white note-paper. "Read this!" He pushed it into Doctor Carrington's outstretched hand and went quickly across to Helen. He braced his shoulders as he took up his position by her. What was coming was about to test her fortitude more than anything that had yet transpired, and Desmond knew it. "I found that down there on the carpet—curled against the base of the table-leg." He put his right arm round the girl's waist with a movement of protection. The others saw the Major peer over the Doctor's shoulder in an abortive attempt to read the message on the writing-paper. For a brief moment there was a tense silence—unbroken save for the breathing of the knot of people in the room.

"What is it?" cried Trentham, sharply. "For goodness sake, Doctor, don't stand there like that—

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put us out of our suspense, if you can't do anything else."

"It is bad news, Miss Ashley—do you think you can ——"

Helen intervened with nervous abruptness. "I would much rather know, Doctor Carrington. Anything is less intolerable than this suspense. What does it say?"

"I can't understand what's happened at all. I can't make anything fit properly. On the face of things this letter seems absurd—incredible. Especially to those of us who knew Sir Eustace—intimately. But I'll read it to you." The message that had caused him so much misgiving was not a long one. He read it out to them as they huddled together as people do under the numbing instinct of a gregarious fear.

"Vernon House,
"Rodding,
"Xmas Night.

"My dear Helen and all dear friends!

"Something has come into my life to-night—quite unexpectedly—that I find it impossible to face. I am therefore taking what is, perhaps, 'the coward's way out.' That question, however, is a matter of opinion. Anyway, I am taking a path that should be quick to lead me to a painless end.

"Good-bye, everybody—and a Happy New Year to all.

"EUSTACE VERNON."

Again, for a moment, no sound broke the silence.

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Then Helen Ashley, freeing herself temporarily from the restraining and supporting grasp of Desmond, held out her hand to Doctor Carrington and spoke in a low tense voice.

"May I see the letter—please?"

The doctor handed it to her—at the same time watching her face intently. She examined it carefully, as though clinging to a last strand of hope. Then she shook her head slowly. For that last strand of hope had snapped and failed her. "It's my uncle's handwriting," she admitted. "I thought perhaps ——"

Venables came to her side and looked at the letter.

"No doubt of that, Miss Ashley," he supplemented —"I've seen it far too many times not to know it."

Father Jewell broke in impatiently. "If Sir Eustace Vernon has laid violent hands upon himself" —he put his hands to his breast with a curious gesture that seemed to betoken reverence—"and it is reasonable to suppose that he has from the evidence upon the blotting-pad—where's his body?"

"Just what I've been thinking," said the Major.

Desmond intervened excitedly. "Fools that we are to stand arguing in this fashion! He may have failed in his attempt and even now be lying wounded somewhere near at hand."

Prendergast turned quickly to his wife. "Diana! Take charge of the ladies—please. Get them back into one of the other rooms—we men must get to work outside. Poor Vernon may be anywhere in the grounds and needing our help badly. Desmond is undoubtedly right."

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Diana Prendergast put her right arm round Helen and motioned to Ruby Trentham and Mrs. Venables. "Come, Helen dear," she said, sympathetically. "Come with us—perhaps the men will find something and everything will be all right after all—come on, dear. You must try hard not to worry."

"Thank you, Mrs. Prendergast. It is most kind of you, I know—but I shan't break down if that's what you mean. Don't be afraid of that. I've too much to think about for that to happen."

"Would you like me to get you anything, Miss?" inquired Hammond, solicitously.

Before Helen could find time to reply—Terence Desmond broke in upon them with another interruption. "We'll get a search-party out then, at once. You take command, will you, Major? Hammond—get Stevens—the chauffeur—to let us have half a dozen of the lanterns that used to be kept down in the old stables—will you? Anybody got a flash-lamp handy?"

"I have," returned Major Prendergast in prompt support—"I always carry one at this time of the year in this part of the country. In fact, I should be lost without it. When the lanterns come—let each man get about a dozen paces from his neighbor and advance in as nearly a straight line as possible. If anybody finds anything——" His words stopped short for, for the second time that night, a piercing scream of horror rang through the stillness of Vernon House. This time it seemed to come from a greater distance off than had the scream of Hammond.

"Good God!" said Prendergast—unconsciously

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echoing Morris Trentham's words that followed the hearing of the first scream—"whatever's doing to-night?"

Some of the others looked paralyzed with fear. Their recent experience had served to unnerve them thoroughly.

"A Merry Christmas," muttered Alderman Venables, with grim irony in his tone, but Helen, unheeding him, caught Desmond impetuously by the sleeve.

"That came from the servants' quarters, Terry," she said, excitedly. "I expect somebody has found poor Uncle Eustace." Her hands worked nervously at her throat.

"Very likely, Miss Ashley," said Doctor Carrington, with more zeal than discretion—"I had better get down there at once. It's possible that I may be wanted. There may be just a chance——"

"This way, Doctor," said Desmond, decisively—"follow me."

Carrington and Desmond dashed off—Major Prendergast and Father Jewell close upon their heels. Morris Trentham turned to Alderman Venables. "You stay here with the ladies, Venables. It isn't safe for anybody to be alone to-night in this infernal place it seems to me—no matter in what room you may chance to be. You stay with the girls. Somebody should be with them. I'll cut along after the others."

Carrington and Desmond—holding the lead with which they had started—did not have very far to go before they received news that could not be disregarded. Round the corner of the long passage that

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wended its way to the servants' quarters they almost collided with a girl—running and breathless. White-lipped—white-faced and with fear showing in her eyes! It was another of the maids, and there was no mistaking the extent of her fright. Desmond knew her. It was the maid who had dropped the tray during dinner to occasion Sir Eustace Vernon so much agitation. Also he remembered her from his previous visits to Vernon House. It was Palmer—he recalled her name at the very instant that he stopped her in her tracks.

"Was that you who screamed, Palmer?" he asked peremptorily.

The girl stopped, and swayed towards the two men as though about to fall.

"Hold up!" said Carrington—"hold up! What's amiss, my girl? What's frightened *you?*"

Palmer clenched her two hands and stabbed unsteadily with her fingers in the direction of what Desmond knew was the butler's pantry.

"Purvis!" she exclaimed. "In there—go at once, please!"

The four men needed no further bidding. The door was open. Seated in a chair by the small table was Purvis. His face was livid and bloated. Carrington lost no time. He shook the limp body by the shoulders. There seemed to be complete muscular relaxation. Carrington pushed his thumbs under the eyelids and examined the pupils of the eyes, which were strange-looking and very much contracted. He felt the pulse—put his ear to the heart—and then felt the face, neck and arms. They were all alike—stone

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cold. Carrington looked up at his companions and shook his head.

"Quite dead," he said. "Poisoned!"

"How?" snapped Prendergast. The excitement and tension of the last few hours had worn his nerves and his manners to shreds.

"Chloral, I fancy," replied the Doctor—"I'll tell you for certain, later. But the symptoms—the muscular relaxation and the strange condition of the eyes—point to poisoning from Chloral Hydrate." His eyes wandered to the table and the eyes of the other men followed him to see immediately what was attracting his attention. On the table stood a glass—empty—of the type known in the trade as "a pony." Carrington picked it up and held it to his nose. He sniffed round the rim. "Whisky—I think. Chloral Hydrate crystals are peculiarly pungent, both to smell and taste. Neat whisky may well have been used to disguise them. Extraordinary business—don't you think, gentlemen? All of it! It means communicating with the police now—there's no help for it I'm afraid."

"What do you think, Doctor?" said Father Jewell, reverently crossing himself as he gazed at the dead body of Purvis, "is it suicide?"

"Quite probable, Father, I should say. There is no reason to suspect anything else—as far as I can see. But the police had better see him just as he is. Desmond, 'phone to Mapleton, will you? Tell Inspector Craig that Doctor Carrington wants him immediately at Vernon House—tell him a case of a sudden death requires investigation as the attendant

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circumstances are somewhat peculiar. We others had better get back to that business of Sir Eustace. Don't tell him—Craig, I mean—anything about Sir Eustace yet—let that wait until he arrives here. It will be easier to explain then—perhaps we shall know more. It's all most disturbing. One doesn't know what to do for the best. But there's one thing, we must certainly go to see if we can find poor Vernon—just as we intended before we struck this last ghastly business. Come, Major!"

Terence Desmond nodded his agreement with Doctor Carrington, and then gave a sharp exclamation. "What's that?" he cried. He pointed to the inside pocket of the butler's dress-coat. Something red showed—just protruding from the depth of the pocket. Father Jewell bent down, and following the direction of Desmond's indicating finger inserted his fingers into the pocket and drew out the red object that Desmond had noticed. It was a bonbon.

"Curious," declared the Major—"strange thing to carry in one's pocket."

But the Roman Catholic priest was curiously examining one end of the red bonbon. The others watched him fascinatedly. From the crinkled end in question he pulled out a piece of ordinary note-paper. He unfolded it. On it were a few written words. The men bent over Father Jewell's stooping shoulder, eager to see what the words were. They were as follows—"One hour to live: *You pay your debt—to-night!!*" Father Jewell looked fearfully at the four other men. "This is not suicide, gentlemen, as Doctor Carrington supposed. This is murder! Cold-

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blooded murder! The sooner we get the police here and find Sir Eustace Vernon, the better!" His dark eyes blazed with the vehemence of his words, but Desmond felt a shiver run through his frame.

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# CHAPTER IV.

## SHOCK FOLLOWS SHOCK

"FATHER JEWELL is undoubtedly right," said the Major. "There's no getting away from it. Desmond—get on to Mapleton Police Station at once, and ask for Inspector Craig, as I told you. The rest of us must try to find Vernon—don't you agree, Carrington?"

"Yes. You get along as you suggest. In the circumstances—taking this new discovery into account—I'll stay here with the body until Craig turns up. It will be better for me to do so—officially—you know."

Desmond gave a quick nod of assent and dashed off to the telephone. "I'll be with you again, Major," he cried, "in two minutes. If the lanterns are handy, get one ready for me and wait for me to come back to you. Two minutes on the 'phone should be ample. Don't start off without me."

"Very well," called Prendergast, sharply—"we'll leave the Doctor here as he suggests and wait for you by the study windows."

"I don't like the look of things at all, Major," put in Trentham, as the three men made their way back. He glanced nervously behind him. "I'm shivering—and not with cold either. When I think of the body of the butler there, and that room of Vernon's—empty—the safe open—the French doors open—the stain

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on that blotting-paper and the screams of those two girls—it makes my blood run cold. If I'd known what I know now I'd never have ——"

Major Prendergast cut short his flow of recrimination. "Pull yourself together, Trentham. It's a nasty experience for each one of us. For goodness sake remember that it's up to us to find Vernon. 'Shivering' won't find him. It's a question of action now."

The ladies were still huddled together in the study under the somewhat doubtful protection of Venables. Stevens, the chauffeur, was waiting with the lanterns ready for use. Desmond was quick to rejoin the party. He looked inquiringly at Major Prendergast, who was alert to comprehend his meaning.

"Purvis has had some sort of a seizure," he announced. "Doctor Carrington has seen him and is stopping with him for a time while we concentrate upon finding Sir Eustace. Diana! Take all the ladies back to the lounge, will you—please? As soon as we have really definite news, Miss Ashley, we will return to you." Helen inclined her head in silent understanding. "Come, gentlemen! You come as well, Stevens, will you? You may have the chance of being useful."

Slowly and steadily the search-party made their way into the grounds of Vernon House. "Shout, at once, if you come across anything," cried Prendergast, leading the way.

Terence Desmond was immediately conscious of a feeling of complete unreality. It seemed to him that but a few moments had elapsed since dinner, and he felt that he had suddenly stepped out of a real and

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tangible existence into the grotesque cast of a kind of gigantic pantomime. At the same time his senses were acutely alert and keyed up to the highest pitch, and as he flashed his lantern on the ground in front of him and all around him, he was determined to miss nothing that might tend to aid them in their quest. The moon was up and helped considerably when it scudded from the clouds. All was quiet—the only sound to disturb his ears being the occasional foot-falls of his fellow-searchers. He could see them working along in a slowly advancing line of light. The effect was ghostly in the extreme. But no shout of heralded discovery disturbed the clear stillness of the December night. "Must be morning now," he thought to himself, and calculated the time—"although one can't visualize 'morning' out of conditions like these." Keats' lines suddenly flashed through his mind. To his amazement he found himself quoting them aloud—

> "In a drear-nighted December
> Too happy, happy Tree,
> Thy Branches ne'er remember,
> Their Green Felicity."

Midway about the second verse, he stopped. Something just to his right had attracted his attention. His swinging lantern had picked out a dark object lying on the rimed grass in front of him. He bent down to pick it up. To his surprise his hand held a slab of what is usually termed "hard" tobacco. He slipped it into the pocket of his dress-trousers, but finding its shape and hardness distinctly discomforting

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and interfering considerably with ease of movement, he transferred it to the breast pocket of his dress-coat. He soon reached the brick walls of the grounds, that ran along the Rodding road, and then turned to commence to work his way back six yards or so away from the track he had pursued previously. But to no purpose. There was no sign of Sir Eustace Vernon. Eventually the others joined him, one by one. They had very little to report. Only Trentham had anything of consequence to mention.

"The garage doors are not shut," he said. "Also, Sir Eustace Vernon's car is not in there. Mine is there and another car, that I take to be the Mayor's —of course I'm not sure that it is. But Sir Eustace's car has gone."

"Sure of that?" queried Father Jewell.

Morris Trentham nodded. "Quite. I know Sir Eustace's car well. It's a 'Wolseley.'—Saloon-de-luxe. I've travelled with him in it many times."

"Perhaps Vernon's gone away in it somewhere. Perhaps to——" Prendergast stopped short, but each one of his companions silently completed the unfinished sentence with the thought that was uppermost in his mind. Then Desmond thought of his find, and at once an alternative theory was born in his brain.

"Perhaps somebody else has gone away in it," he contributed.

"What do you mean?" said Father Jewell. "Who could have——?"

Desmond cut in. "I've an idea—just an idea—that's all," he submitted. "Stevens!" He called to the chauffeur.

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"Yes, Mr. Desmond."

Terence pulled out the dark cake of tobacco and held it up for the chauffeur's observation. "Do you know anybody round here who smokes tobacco of this description?"

Stevens shook his head negatively.

"You don't smoke it yourself, by any chance?" continued Desmond.

"Not on your life, sir! 'Gaspers' for me, every time. I haven't seen a bit of 'hard' since the—that reminds me, though, sir—although I don't exactly know ——" He broke off for a moment seemingly undecided and uncertain.

"What do you mean, Stevens? What is it you want to say?"

"Well, sir, Hammond, the maid, is keeping company with a sailor—I do know that. And sailors have rather a partiality for that kind of stuff. That's what I was thinking."

"Is that so, now? What's this chap's name, do you know?"

Stevens shook his head again. "There you've done me, sir. But he's a Mapleton man, I can tell you that—he's home on 'leaf' now, sir. I could find ——"

"What have you there, Desmond?" interrupted Major Prendergast.

Desmond passed his find over for inspection. "I found it on the grass over there—about thirty yards, I should say, from here. I should think it had been dropped fairly recently. It was comparatively dry, despite the state of the grass."

"Extraordinary," commented Prendergast—"hang

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on to it. You never know. Suppose we go in to see if the police are here yet. They should be. What do you say?"

Father Jewell assented somewhat eagerly. "I don't think we can accomplish much good out here." The others agreed.

Helen Ashley came to meet them as they passed through the doors of the study. Desmond shook his head in denial in reply to her unspoken question. "There's no need for you to worry about the worst —yet," he supplemented. "There's absolutely no trace of anything wrong out there in the grounds," he continued—"all we can think of is that your uncle may have rushed off somewhere by car."

"Why?" queried the girl.

"His car isn't in the garage—so Trentham says—and the doors of the garage have been left open—so we conclude that the bad news he mentioned at dinner may have necessitated a journey of some kind on the spur of the moment. Personally, I think there's no doubt about it. Judging the facts as we found them," he added, rather unconvincingly.

Helen turned a troubled face towards him. "I can't think that Uncle Eustace would do anything like that. I can't believe such a thing for a moment—besides, there's that farewell message of his that we've found. How can you explain that away? Then there's this scare about Purvis." She stopped and scanned his face searchingly and critically. "Terence, you're not telling me the truth! Is Purvis dead? Tell me—I'm not a child to be fended off with fairy-tales. Tell me, Terence—please don't hold *any* of the

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truth back from me—it's vital with uncle missing that I should know all—is Purvis dead?"

Desmond looked helplessly at his companions—in the hope, apparently, that one of them would throw him a suggestion of help. But unavailingly—none came! He therefore assumed responsibility. He could see no way out.

"Purvis is dead," he said, very quietly and simply. "We left Doctor Carrington with him, and we have sent down to Mapleton for the police. We could do nothing else in the circumstances. We didn't tell you before because we didn't want the other ladies to be upset over it."

"I knew it," she said—"I felt certain of it."

"How?"

"I don't know—something seemed to tell me. I can't tell you what it was. Call it instinct, if you like—or say that I'm 'fey' to-night." She laughed hysterically, and the unaccustomed note that he detected in her voice caused him to look at her sharply and with genuine concern.

"Is the Inspector here yet?" he queried.

"He wasn't when I came away from the others just now—let's go back to see."

But Major Prendergast had forestalled her. As she turned to Desmond with the suggestion he came forward to speak to her.

"Inspector Craig from Mapleton has just this minute arrived," he announced. Then he stopped for a moment, uncertain as to what he ought to say, for he found the situation awkward, to say the least. She waited for him to proceed. "Shall I inform him

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about—or would you rather Desmond or you yourself ——?"

"About my uncle? I think the best thing to be done will be to tell Inspector Craig everything quite frankly—all that we know—and all that we've done—in the exact chronological order in which it has occurred. It should be done as thoroughly and as carefully as possible. If you will be good enough to do so—it will be a kindness."

Prendergast nodded and looked inquiringly at all the others, only to receive similar signs of acquiescence.

The Inspector stood in the hall, having as his companion Doctor Tempest, the Divisional Surgeon. Each was heartily cursing the unkind Fate that had brought him out to a case of this nature on a Christmas night of all nights. Craig had been summoned from the bosom of his family and the warmth of his own fireside, and Doctor Tempest from a most attractive bridge-party at Colonel Ridout's—half-way between Mapleton and Rodding. They stood waiting for a second or two—irresolutely—having been admitted by the very frightened maid—Palmer. The death of the butler, it will be observed, had seriously disorganized the *régime* of Vernon House.

"What was your 'phone message, Inspector—a suspected murder?"

Craig lowered his voice. "That's what is suspected, Doctor Tempest. The 'phone message was from a gentleman giving the name of Desmond. I didn't take it myself, as you know. He didn't say who it was they feared was murdered—simply would we send

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up at once? Leastways, that's how the message came to me."

The Divisional Surgeon was about to frame a reply when he caught sight of the four men approaching. "Here we are, Inspector," he said—"now we shall hear all about it."

Prendergast wasted no time. In as few words as possible he told the Inspector all that had transpired just in the manner that Helen Ashley had suggested he should do. Also he added an explanation. "Miss Ashley and the other ladies are in the lounge, Inspector. I am Major Prendergast. I am acting as Miss Ashley's spokesman at her own expressed request. I hope it will not be necessary for you to worry any of the ladies to-night. We have all been thoroughly alarmed, and for them it must have been excessively disturbing and trying."

"I understand. Unless I am absolutely forced I will not trouble them at all. Take me to Purvis. I presume from what you have told me that Doctor Carrington is still with the body?"

"That is so, Inspector."

"Right—we'll get along there then, at once."

For the second time since dinner they traversed the distance to the butler's pantry. Doctor Carrington was standing deep in thought just inside the door. When he saw the *personnel* of the approaching company, he pulled at his lip for a moment as though in doubt as to whether he should come to a decision. It was clear that something was worrying him. Seemingly he reached a satisfactory solution, for as his visitors entered he pulled-to the door silently and closed

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it behind them. Before Craig or Doctor Tempest could speak, Carrington took charge of the situation. He felt that he was compelled to do so—that he would be failing in his duty if he did not. He spoke very quietly, but very much to the point.

"Prior to you making your examination, Doctor Tempest, and also you, Inspector, I feel that I must give you some very important information. Startling as well as important. Information that I have discovered only very recently. And discovered too—professionally. This body here *is the body of a woman!*"

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# CHAPTER V.



"WHAT on earth do you mean?" gasped Desmond, complete incredulity showing in his eyes. "That can't possibly be—I've known Purvis for years."

"So have I," retorted Carrington coldly—"as long as you have, I expect. But that fact doesn't alter the case. You simply accepted appearances the same as I did. The person that both you and I and Sir Eustace Vernon and all the rest of the world knew as Purvis—was a woman. We've been deceived. That's all there is to it."

"Very strange," muttered Craig—"and coming on top of what Major Prendergast had just told me of all that's been happening here in Vernon House to-night, it makes it seem very remarkable to me. Still ——" He paused for a moment—then thought of the Divisional Surgeon. "Have a look at the body, Doctor Tempest, will you?"

But Tempest's action had preceded the Inspector's words, and he was already bending over the huddled body of the butler. Carrington slipped quickly to his side and bending down spoke quietly in his ear. The others saw Tempest look up and then nod decisively. "That was what prompted me," they heard Carrington say, and then there followed more head-noddings

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