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IN SEARCH OF A VILLAIN

ROBERT GORE-BROWNE

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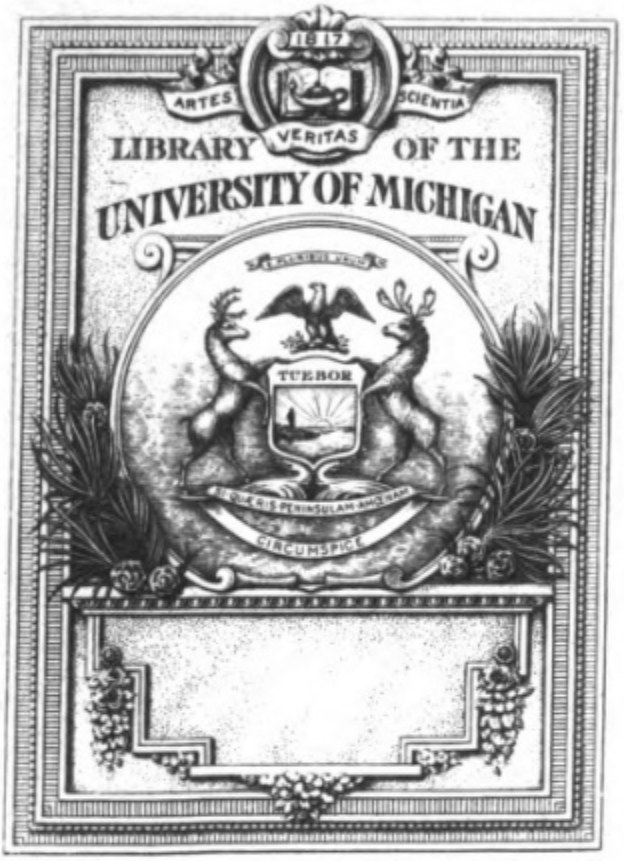

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IN SEARCH OF A VILLAIN

A STORY OF DETECTION

BY ROBERT GORE-BROWNE

AUTHOR OF "THE CRATER"

PUBLISHED FOR

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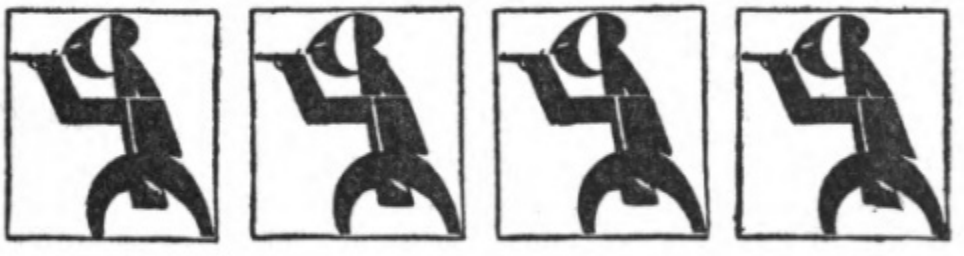

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FIRST EDITION

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"I ever thought a cutler should distinguish the cause of my death rather than a doctor."

—*John Webster.*

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IN SEARCH OF A VILLAIN

CHAPTER I

"THE worst of getting middle-aged," I said to my man, "is that nothing ever happens."

Black heard my complaint in disapproving silence. So apparently did the Devil.

"I am going out to dinner," I continued.

"It's a nasty night, sir," said Black.

("*A good night to show him*," *thought Satan*).

"In Soho," I added.

"Very good, sir," said the former.

("*The very place*," *thought the latter*).

. . . . . .

I had nearly finished dinner when Signora Dona moved ponderously to my table and remarked without originality that the night was wet. As if to confirm her words, a gust of wind sent the rain spattering against the window of the Restaurant Farnesina.

"Nobody come to-night," she added gloomily, "only three parties beside the Signor."

I thought it optimistic to describe the silent individuals who sat round the little room at separate tables as "parties."

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"Yesterday and before yesterday we were full," she claimed. "Perhaps the Signor tells his friends?"

"Oh, yes," I lied. That was the last thing I did. The moment these Soho places get known, their prices go up and their cooking goes down.

I changed the subject to my fellow guests.

"The Signor has not seen them before?" asked the Italian. "No, not the little one, he never come. But the others?"

I shook my head as I glanced at these habitués. I was not drawn to the big man who sat at the table by the window. Technically clean-shaven, he could not prevent the beard on his pale cheeks from showing blue. His eyes too were pale. He reminded me of a suet pudding, if a suet pudding can be imagined that needs to shave before dinner.

"Foreigner?" I asked.

Signora Dona nodded. "I think Russian or Rumanian." She sank her voice. "I think politics."

"Bolshie?" I suggested.

"I don't know," she replied without conviction. "I don't know about politics. That would not be good business, as you say."

The wind howled down the narrow street as if in protest at her tolerance. The steamy warmth of the little restaurant seemed to defy its indignation. I asked the Signora to make me a *sabaglione* and not to spare the marsala. When she returned carrying the frothy eggs, her appetite for gossip was unquenched.

"The other Signor," she jerked her chin towards him, "the red one—he is English."

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That night the Farnesina *clientèle* seemed to run to hair. At first sight the second diner was chiefly remarkable for an aggressive red beard, a shock of fine red hair and a long reddish nose. He looked up and revealed a contradiction. His eye was as cold and blue as the rest was red and hot. He stared at me without any pretence of politeness.

"Another politician?" I asked.

"Oh, no," replied the Signora, "he paints pictures. Very good. He was a famous man. A portrait painter, very clever. But now——" she nodded in the direction of his glass.

"Drinks too much?" I said.

"And what he says, it's so rude. How do you say? So——" she made a hissing sound.

"Sarcastic," I suggested.

"Yes. Then his pictures. He paints his clients how he sees them; not how they see themselves. They do not like it."

"I can imagine that."

An anæmic youth who combined the functions of scullion and waiter carried the sarcastic painter a brown earthenware dish that contained, as my nose assured me, some compound of veal and mushrooms. At least the man was not a vegetarian.

"Before he lost his clients," the Signora was whispering, "he painted many famous people. Sir Gordon Liebstein——"

"The financier?"

"He painted him with a big, curved nose——"

"He had one," I put in.

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"And the Scottish petticoat."

"Kilt," I corrected. "How absurd!"

"And General—what was the name? Gold something."

"Goldsmith? Who lost two divisions on the Somme?"

"I do not know. Round his neck he painted a bit of rope."

"A noose? What shocking taste!"

"Then one of your great ladies. Her picture is always in the paper."

"I wonder which that would be. How did he paint her?"

"In her drawers."

"Abominable. No wonder the fellow came to grief."

"But he's a very clever man. A pity he drinks!"

Her regrets were interrupted by the third diner, who had diffidently been trying to catch her eye. Compared with the couple we had just discussed he was agreeably commonplace. A squat little man with hollow eyes and hair making a last stand at the back of his head.

Signora Dona took him his bill on a plate.

"This is the first time he come here," she said, when she had waddled back to my table, "but I know him."

"Who is he?" I asked. Really I felt little interest. He might be a senior clerk in some unprogressive firm; he might have his own business—haberdashery or grocery—in the suburbs. He had not, I thought, enough imagination for a house agent or presence for an undertaker. Whatever his walk in life, it was not prosperous. That resigned, patient look—

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"That," said Signora Dona, approaching her lips to my ear, "is Signor Heppel of——"

Her confidences were interrupted by that mild little man himself. Carefully arranging a low pile of coins in the exact centre of his bill, he rose to his feet, dusted some crumbs from his blue serge suit and walked modestly to the door. He looked out into the street, and daunted, I thought, by the weather, came back to the restaurant. He seemed to have mistaken his table, for he stopped in front of the foreigner. For a moment he was silent, but when he spoke it was in the clear tones of one accustomed to read the lessons on Sunday.

"Finish your supper, Max," he said, "and come along with me."

The Russian seemed to grow even paler.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Scotland Yard," said Signor Heppel apologetically.

Sweat formed on the foreigner's forehead like the steam that condensed on the window.

"To tell us what you know about the murder of Sir Arthur Baxter at Lincot last night," added the detective slowly.

The foreigner gripped the edge of the table. I felt that the restaurant had suddenly turned cold.

"My God!" he breathed. "My God! Is he dead?"

The detective's eyes never left his face. He nodded.

"Am I arrested?"

"No," said Heppel gently. He dropped his eyes. "Not yet."

The foreigner turned suddenly to his plate. "I swear

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I didn't do him in," he protested with his mouth full. The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"Come along, Max," he said, "and tell us where you were last night."

Max shifted uneasily in his chair. The detective laid a hand on his shoulder. His voice was still persuasive, but I saw that his grip was firm. "There's a cab outside."

They had reached the door before the silence that the onlookers had kept was broken. The red-haired artist had half-risen to his feet. He sat down abruptly and banged his fist on the table. The coarse crockery clattered.

Heppel looked round.

"You blasted fool," said the once famous painter, "you blasted fool, you've got the wrong man." His voice was low but I was struck by its tone of conviction. How much did this dissolute bohemian know about the tragedy?

The detective must have had the same thought for he half-turned towards his assailant.

"Trust the police to mess things up," the derelict continued. "If I paid income tax, I'd get you the sack."

Heppel glanced at the empty bottle on the artist's table. His look was intercepted.

"And I'm not tight either, you poor mutt," added the man who had once painted society. "I'm no more tight than that ugly-looking Dago is a murderer."

His vehemence seemed to have deprived the men he insulted of speech.

"Have him chucked out as a blasted alien," the artist suggested, "or put him in a lethal chamber because you don't like his face. But don't pretend he murdered old Baxter, you ruddy sleuth!"

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The detective spoke at last.

"I wish you would not use bad language," he said.

. . . . . .

"Brandy, Signora!" said the artist, when the door had closed behind the policeman and the man called Max. The threshold was wet where the rain had blown in.

"And leave the bottle on the table," he added. He turned to me. "Talking to fools makes one thirsty."

The man's arrogance was intolerable.

"There is no finer body of men than the English police."

I regretted my words before they were spoken.

"I can't hear," he said and picked up his bottle by the neck.

"My name's Clay," he went on, seating himself at my table. "Have a drink? Lucien Clay. You know my work. What's that about the police?"

I refused the drink, concealed my ignorance of his art, and declined to be drawn into an argument.

"Of course you believe the usual legend of your class," the painter continued, pouring out the brandy. "The police are intelligent, tactful, incorruptible, and so on."

"Well, aren't they?" I hazarded.

"Did you ever offer a bobby half-a-crown?" he asked aggressively. He called the waiter, and sent him for a bigger glass. "The poor know better. Do you know what they say?"

I shook my head.

"'Never take lodgings where a man in blue hangs his hat.' Jolly good rule too."

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I asked if he thought that Max had been taken up for failing to bribe the police. The arrival of the larger glass saved him from the difficulty of answering. When it had been filled, I was given to understand that corruption was not their only shortcoming. Colossal stupidity was another.

"You think that Max is innocent?" I asked.

"Not for a moment," was the reply. "But he's not a murderer."

"How do you know?" I fired at him.

Lucien Clay did not reply. He steered an indirect course to the door and looked out.

"Perfectly foul," was his verdict. "I may as well waste the time here as anywhere."

I thanked him but received no apology. He sat for some time drinking in silence. The wine seemed to mellow his opinion of the police. He went so far as to remark tolerantly that he didn't entirely blame them for all the murders that were never discovered.

"Murder is out of their class," he said.

I asked why.

"I didn't think you would understand," he said disagreeably. "Hasn't it ever struck you that criminals form one of the professional classes? That your thief, forger or burglar thieves, forges or burgles for a living? And blackmailers, coiners and bigamists make a business of guilty secrets, bank notes and marriage? Just as you do out of shares."

I asked him how he knew I was on the Stock Exchange. He pointed to a copy of the *Oil World* that lay on the table.

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"No one but a company promoter, a flat or a stockbroker would read that paper," he stated. "You're not rich enough for a promoter or poor enough for a flat. You're a stockbroker."

I laughed and asked what that had to do with undiscovered murders.

"Wait," he said. "Will you admit that ninety-nine criminals out of a hundred are professionals?"

I nodded for the sake of peace.

"But murderers," he asserted, "as any criminologist will tell you, are almost always amateurs. Hate and opportunity make the murderer, not the professional instinct."

"Well?" I said, as he paused for me to admire his epigram.

"The police are trained and exercised on professional crooks. How can they be expected to understand the technique of an amateur?"

He reached for the diminishing bottle.

"Then the origin of the average detective! The middle-class isn't given to murder. How can it foresee the working of instincts it has never felt? It is psychologically isolated."

I asked him what that meant.

"It can't understand the classes where murderers are found," he declared.

"The lower classes?" I asked.

"And the upper. The two drinking classes. They go together. The bourgeois is separate—the thinking class."

He cracked a walnut under his heel.

"Our ancestors," he remarked, "had the sense to see

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that a man's crime should be judged by his peers. Our children will have it detected by them."

I thought I had listened long enough. The rain no longer beat against the glass. But Lucien Clay had not finished.

"You remember," he demanded, "the case of Lord Glebe?"

I nodded. His lordship had been found dead in a lavatory compartment on a Great Eastern Express.

"The police said suicide," he snorted. "But no one of his own class would for a moment conclude that the unfortunate nobleman chose that spot to end his life."

I asked what his own theory was.

"Why, the valet," was the answer. "A drop of arsenic in his master's thermos and an arm to help him along the corridor. Just what a valet would think of. And just what the police would miss."

"You can't have every policeman a peer," I objected. "And if birth is all they lack——"

"It isn't," he cut in rudely. "Imagination! Do you think that chap who's just gone out has a grain of it? How can he cope with an intelligent assassin?"

"Patience, system, courage——" I began.

"Aren't a ha'porth of use without imagination."

"According to you, a poet would make a detective!"

"A good one, certainly. Think of Shakespeare and the Macbeth Mystery. But most of them are too romantic; like the police themselves. Shelley fussing about a skylark would be as useless as a bobby who lets a pretty girl get in front of the crowd to see Queen Mary. You must have a realist."

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I inquired what sort of man he thought would make the best detective. He seemed surprised that I should ask.

"Why! A painter, of course," he declared. "A portrait painter." He banged the table with his fist. "Imagine a Big Four of painters! Sargent, Rembrandt, Raeburn and Velasquez. The criminal would become rarer than the okapi."

I suggested that the masters he mentioned would need training.

"Nonsense!" he said. "What secret had Philip that he could hide from Velasquez!"

I had to admit that the painter had certainly read the heart of his royal sitter.

"What Jew could bluff Sargent?" he went on. "Which of his burgomasters could keep his thoughts from Rembrandt?"

I saw that argument was useless.

"And yet——" he said, and paused.

I encouraged him to finish.

"I have proved to you that the perfect sleuth must be well bred." He sighed. "Would the masters' genius make up for that?" He sighed again, and relapsed into a slightly sodden silence.

"The Clays are the oldest family in Kent," he said simply.

. . . . . .

The owner of the Restaurant Farnesina looked at the clock and rose from her desk.

"It is time, Signori," he said, appropriating the bottle that had once held brandy.

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"England, the home of Liberty!" declaimed the artist, swaying a little as he got to his feet.

I left him and paid my bill. Signora Dona apologized for the manners of my new acquaintance.

"He is a very clever man," she alleged in excuse.

Against my will I was impressed with the reasoning of this drunken, ill-spoken failure, but I did not care to admit it. So I said that for a clever man he talked a great deal of nonsense.

"And sense too, Signor," she persisted. "He has helped me. Only last week when Giuseppe stole the entrée dish."

"He drinks too much." I said.

She agreed. "Perhaps you would see the Signor home," she whispered, as she helped me on with my coat. "It is not far but I am not sure——"

I was not sure either. Clay's brain seemed steadier than his legs.

"I'm going your way," I said to the painter, as he steered himself dubiously through the door of the restaurant. "You haven't told me yet why you would acquit that man Max."

Outside the rain had ceased but the wind blew cold. The artist had disappeared into the recesses of a regrettably ginger-coloured ulster.

"Set a painter to catch a murderer." He pointed to the lighted blinds of the Farnesina. "There were three of us in there, three not counting Max. You, a stockbroker of fair intelligence and average education——"

"Really——" I began.

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"The middle-class detective," he continued unmoved, counting on his long white fingers, "drilled by Scotland Yard in the stereotyped struggle against professional crooks."

"His name is Heppel," I said.

"And I," he concluded, jerking his beard towards the sky, "Lucien Clay, the portrait painter. Now how would the brain of each register what happened?" He stopped and leaned against the wall of a house.

"There wasn't very much——" I began.

"You can guess at Heppel's reaction." In a monotonous voice he began a parody of a policeman's report. "At eight-fifteen I followed the accused into the Farnesina Restaurant, situated at number 393 Great Compton Street, Soho. Taking my seat at the second table to the left of the door I observed the accused for the duration of dinner. At nine-three, after assuring myself that P.C. 77 was within call, I approached the accused and informed him that he was wanted at Scotland Yard. The accused stated——"

He broke off and laughed. I protested that the imaginary Heppel had given all the facts.

"Facts," said the artist in disgust. "Who wants facts?"

The black oilskin cape of a policeman shone under a street lamp. I induced Clay to leave the support of the wall.

"What did *you* think about it all?" he challenged me.

I found it difficult to answer.

"I can tell you," he cut in. "You didn't think at all, till you'd finished your dinner. Then you lit your cigar,

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looked at Max, and reflected he'd be the better for a shave. And 'that's the worst of Soho,' you thought, 'so many foreigners.'"

I had to admit the truth of this.

"When Heppel, whom you'd dismissed as a nonentity, walked over to Max's table your ideas of privacy were outraged. But when you saw he was a policeman, you knew he must be right and the Russian wrong!"

He stopped and looked hard at me from under his raised, vermilion eyebrows. I shrugged my shoulders.

"In fact you saw nothing," he said rudely. "You just confirmed your prejudices."

I felt injured and did not answer. Clay rolled a cigarette.

"I haven't a match," he stated, and took my box. "The artist," he said, with conscious superiority, "is different. He sees with the fresh, careful eyes of the child. When he is a genius, he has the television of genius."

"What then?" I asked, unimpressed.

"That is how I knew," he said, blowing a cloud of smoke through his wide nostrils, "that Max, whom I never saw before, is not a murderer."

"How?" I persisted.

"You can't explain how instinct works," he declared. "My art has taught me to recognise types, to interpret expression, to read character."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"It may be easy to you," he snapped, "you do it so well."

I changed the subject. What had he started from?

"To begin with, Max is a Russian."

"How do you know?"

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"By his face and gestures and the way he crossed himself before dinner."

"Catholics and Anglo-Catholics do that."

"From top to bottom and then from left to right. The Russian reverses it."

There seemed to be rather more in his deductions than I had supposed. I began to be interested.

"Well, suppose he's a Russian," I admitted. "What next?"

"Russians talk, they don't act," he affirmed, with his obstinate jerk of the beard.

"What about Lenin?" I hazarded.

Exceptional Russians, he stated, had exceptional faces. He went on to distinguish between the rat type and the dog type. Max's sort had to be drunk to kill.

I asked how he knew that Max had not been intoxicated.

"You didn't notice he drank water at dinner?" he asked, cocking one eyebrow higher than the other. "If in drink you had murdered a man one night, would you take water the next?"

I conceded drunkenness.

"A murderer needs enterprise, determination. In a word 'guts.' There's no room for that quality in Max's narrow head, or behind his long nose, thick lips and little pointed chin."

I said that I did not believe in physiognomy as a guide. The ginger ulster swelled with scorn.

"Your blasted prejudices again. One feature may be misleading, but when half a dozen——" he threw away his cigarette end with a disgusted gesture. "Don't you

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tell me that a hand with those weak thumbs could kill a man!"

"Was he strangled?" I asked.

"You blithering idiot!" shouted Clay. "Weak thumbs, weak nature!"

It would be silly to take offence. "Mightn't a weak man murder?" I asked humbly.

"Not an inert man," declared Clay. "Then look at his other traits. He's a talker."

"Why?"

"A politician of a sort. You can tell it by his head—high at the back of the crown."

"Is that a sign?"

"And his prominent lips, and that heavy fold under the eye. All signs of the politician or speaker. I've painted them by the dozen."

"And a politician would never commit a murder?" I asked sceptically.

"He'd get some one else to do it for him," Clay replied, avoiding a lamp post with some care.

"Brutus?" I suggested.

"He was an idealist. You don't get them in politics nowadays. Mind you, when I say 'politician' I'm probably flattering the fellow. No doubt he's a political agitator, encouraging bolder men to do what he daren't do himself."

"But you're sure he's innocent?"

Clay stopped abruptly in the middle of the main road. A taxicab whizzed profanely by.

"Good Lord!" he said. "Not *innocent*."

I pulled him on the pavement. His opinion appeared to

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be that living on immoral earnings was likely to be the Russian's most enterprising venture. He might rise to kicking the woman if her earnings were too small. But murder—no.

I suggested that a face revealed a great deal to him.

"Face and behaviour," he agreed seriously.

I asked what behaviour had told him.

"Would a creature of that sort have the guts to eat a big dinner the night after a murder?" he asked.

"Not if he was hungry?" I protested.

"If you're hungry, do you order whitebait and lamb cutlets?"

We had reached a square west of Tottenham Court Road. It was badly lit and smelled of gas.

"Here we are," said Lucien Clay, and without interval, "did you see his face when Heppel accosted him?"

"He went pale. I thought it was a bad sign."

"He held his breath," corrected the artist, "till Heppel said the word 'murder.' Then he let it go. He expected a different word."

"You mean he was relieved the charge was not——"

"What he had really done," ended the painter. "This is the house."

We stood before a large, Victorian mansion. An alderman had, I supposed, once lived there. But now the stucco peeled.

"When Heppel said 'murder,' Max helped himself to pudding," remarked Clay. "Is that the way a weak, guilty man acts when he's caught?"

By now the painter seemed in a condition to dispense with my escort. Refusing an invitation to mount to his

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studio at the top of the tall house and join him in another bottle I started for home.

At Oxford Circus I stopped to light a cigarette. My match-box, I found, was missing. As it was a present and made of gold, I decided to call on the artist in the morning to see if he had pocketed it.

I could not know that the disappearance of my match-box was a move in the Devil's emphatic demonstration that adventure can happen to the middle-aged.

If I had, I would probably have let it go.

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CHAPTER II

A DOZEN hours later I stood, a little out of breath, on the dusty landing outside Lucien Clay's studio. Although the door was open, I could see no sign of the painter. Unwilling to face the stairs a second time, I made up my mind to wait until he came back.

Looking round the gray, disorderly apartment I thanked heaven I was not an artist. In spite of its size there seemed no room to move. A book—one of the *Notable British Trials* series—lay open on the gas cooking-stove; a pair of elastic-sided boots stood on a Sheraton table; a square of old French brocade covered a birdcage. In the centre of the room a fine glass chandelier from some Venetian palace hung perilously askew. In the corner rose a heap of wine bottles, some empty, some broken, some full. Canvases lined the walls. To judge by the dust that covered them, they had been stacked there for years. And when their faces were turned to the light, the neglect they had suffered was sufficiently explained.

For a world-renowned statesman could hardly be expected to buy a portrait, however penetrating, that stressed his likeness to a stoat. The *doyen* of the diamond fields would naturally prefer that posterity should see him seated in his library at Park Lane than on the parapet of Baboon Hill, Regent's Park. A famous actress had

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cause to be angry that under the surface of her triumphant beauty showed the bosses and recesses of a skull.

This want of taste and a certain lack of finish marred work that was at once powerful and profound. It could not obscure the evidences of a remarkable insight into human nature and its failings. I began to wonder if I had not judged Clay's theories of the art of detection too lightly.

My reflections were interrupted by a voice. I turned in its direction. All that was visible was a screen pasted with the portraits of prize-fighters in militant attitudes.

"Did any one speak?" I asked.

"Yes," replied the voice, and the beard and hair of the artist flamed over the top of the screen. "What the hell do you want?"

I told him.

"Oh, it's you. Did I? All right, look in my clothes."

I asked where.

"On the floor, of course. Do you think I sleep in them?"

The space behind the screen seemed to rank as bedroom. The artist lay on a divan under a striped Italian blanket. He was wearing a pair of sea-green silk pyjamas which heightened the colour of his hair.

"There's my wardrobe," he said, jerking his head towards some heaps of clothes. "Help yourself!"

It was impossible to miss the ginger ulster. I took my match-box from its pocket and with an apology to Clay for disturbing him, turned to the door.

"Don't go," he said, and invited me to join him at breakfast.

I told him I had already breakfasted, and, as I watched

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him fill a tea cup with brandy and heat a kidney on the gas stove, was glad of my refusal.

"Anything in the papers about that murder?" he asked over his shoulder.

I told him there were two columns and half a dozen headlines. Sir Arthur Baxter had been found dead at Lincot House. The police were following a clue.

"We saw them," he said, jabbing a fork into the kidney.

I reminded him that Sir Arthur had been a leader of the movement to "turn out the Reds." If, as he said, Max was a Russian agitator, Heppel might well be on the right track.

"It's very kind of you to think that," said a mild voice behind me.

I turned and looked into the deep-set eyes of the little detective.

"What the hell——?" began Clay again. It seemed to be his formula of welcome.

"I found the door open and the bell doesn't ring," apologised Heppel.

The stocky figure and neat serge suit of the detective seemed oddly out of place in the grotesque confusion of the studio. Beside him the painter looked like a skeleton that drunken students had dressed in a false beard and tattered pyjamas.

"Found the murderer?" he asked.

"Why, yes, Mr. Clay!" was the reply. The speaker's gaze wandered round the room and was hurriedly averted from a cylindrical nude that occupied the easel. "You saw me find him."

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Clay glanced at me and returned to his kidneys. They smelt abominable.

"I happened to be passing," lied the superintendent, "so I thought I'd look in to ask you what you know about this business."

"Nothing," replied the artist with his mouth full.

"And Max Rothmann?" went on the detective gently.

"Never seen him before!"

"Odd!" commented Heppel, "when you told Mr.——" he paused inquiringly.

"Dale," I said.

"That he was a Russian agitator!" he went on.

Clay laughed.

"And last night you were so sure he was innocent!"

"Well, isn't he?" said Clay, draining his tea cup.

The detective walked to the wall and straightened a picture. "There is plenty of evidence against him," he stated.

"The police will attend to that!" said Clay.

I saw that the detective suspected Clay of knowing more than he cared to reveal, and, guessing that the malice of the artist might encourage the mistake, I intervened. Mr. Clay's knowledge of Rothmann went no further, I explained, than an uncanny insight into human nature.

"What do you mean?" asked the detective.

I rapidly sketched the painter's methods so far as he had revealed them to me. The policeman was not impressed.

"Guesswork, Mr. Dale!" he said. "Pure guesswork! Hit and miss. Miss and hit. The police can't afford to miss."

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"I've noticed that!" said Clay, who had begun to dress.

"Patient attention to detail," went on the arm of the law, "has hanged more men than guesswork, however clever."

"The wrong ones then," said Lucien Clay, putting on his trousers.

The detective turned to take his hat. Clay stopped him.

"I want to hear about the murder. How was Baxter killed?"

Heppel shook his head regretfully. He was not allowed to say anything that had not been given to the Press.

"I never read the papers," said Clay arrogantly.

Superintendent Heppel picked the elastic-sided boots off the Sheraton table, looked at them dubiously and aligned them against the wall.

"I like to see things in their proper place," he said.

The artist was not to be put off.

"You can at least tell me what has appeared in the papers," he insisted.

"That's not very much," replied the detective. "They report that shortly before midnight Sir Arthur Baxter was found by his butler on the floor of the library in his country house, dead."

"And there is no doubt he was murdered?" I put in.

"A bayonet was sticking in his back," said Heppel. "It would be hard to do that to oneself."

"An odd weapon for a murder!" I remarked.

"It was taken from a trophy of arms on the wall."

"Where does Max Rothmann come in?" asked Clay.

"Not in the papers!" answered Heppel.

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"You're very discreet, superintendent," gibed the artist.

"I thought you knew all about Max already," was the retort.

"You'll never find the murderer," snapped the artist, "by yourself."

"That's as may be," said Heppel cheerfully.

Clay looked at him intently. Then with the air of a millionaire distributing prizes at a workhouse sports, "I'll come with you," he said, "to Lincot!"

"What for?" asked the detective.

"To find him for you. But of course you'll have to give me the facts."

I looked at Clay to see if he was joking. The clear blue eyes had a serious light.

"I'm afraid I haven't your confidence in intuition," said the detective gently.

"Suppose I tell you I'm coming?"

Heppel replied apologetically that he doubted he would be let in.

Without a word the erratic artist strode to the untidy divan. From under the Union Jack cushion that served him as a pillow, he drew an orange envelope.

"I think they'll let me in," he said.

I tried to read the telegram over the detective's shoulder. The office of origin was Lincot, the signature *John Baxter*.

"You know the deceased's nephew?" asked Heppel, showing surprise for the first time. "Why does he want you at Lincot?"

"To help the police," said Lucien Clay. He took pity

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on the detective's bewilderment and told him how some time before he had gone to Lincot to paint Sir Arthur's portrait. During his visit Lady—— (he mentioned a name that headed two columns in Debrett) inconsiderately took some pearls out of a fellow-guest's room.

"By means of 'guesswork,' as you call it," he continued, "I was able to identify the thief and recover the jewels. Meanwhile the local police, giving the patient attention to detail that the superintendent recommends, arrested a ladies' maid."

"Then you suppose——" I began.

"That John Baxter remembered this when he telegraphed for me."

Heppel made no comment. He appeared to be thinking things over. Apparently his decision was to make friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness, for with a genial smile he admitted that he must have underrated the artist's powers, and with an open manner tendered his apologies. He expressed his pleasure that so talented an investigator was coming to Lincot. "Two heads," he remarked with more truth than originality, "are better than one. We can help each other. I'll tell you what I know about Rothmann and you'll tell me a thing or two I want to hear."

Clay laughed. "A little bit of sugar for the bird!" he quoted vulgarly. "In exchange for a kind word and some dud information, I'm to let myself be pumped about the Baxter establishment. Is that it?"

Heppel did not reply. He walked to the far end of the studio and stared at a picture of still life that hung crookedly on the wall.

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"Would that be a rabbit or a hare?" he inquired, and without waiting for an answer, remarked that it was no good trying to bluff any one as astute as the artist. Cards on the table, he declared unconvincingly, had always been his motto, and he did not mind admitting that a line on the people at Lincot would be a help to the police.

"I dare say it would," said Clay, rolling and lighting a cigarette.

The detective was not deterred.

"You're going to Lincot," he said, "to look about on your own. I'm going too. Now suppose some one told you something they wouldn't tell me?" He paused but received no encouragement. "It would be your duty to report it."

"I don't give a hoot!" said Clay and blew a cloud of smoke.

There seemed no satisfactory answer. The detective stared at the ceiling.

"Do you know, Mr. Clay," he remarked, "I doubt if that candle affair is safe. You ought to have it re-hung."

The artist did not seem interested in the fate of the chandelier.

"Of course," continued the superintendent, "I'm not suggesting a one-sided arrangement. You tell us what you know and we tell you."

Clay meditated, scratching his fine red hair. "To pool information," he said at last. "Is that it?"

Mr. Heppel nodded blandly.

"All right," said the artist, "on two conditions." The detective waited.

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"I must tell my host that what I hear goes on to the police."

Heppel's protests were ignored.

"And I keep my conclusions to myself till they're complete."

The detective's delight was incompletely concealed.

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CHAPTER III

LUCIEN CLAY dragged forward an oak arm-chair that had once, he alleged, accommodated the person of the Virgin Queen. More recently it seemed to have been used as a wash-stand.

"Sit down," he said, "and tell me why you arrested Rothmann."

The detective looked doubtfully at the royal relic, and said he would prefer the kitchen chair that stood against the wall. After wiping its seat with a blue and white spotted handkerchief, he began his story.

It was a bald account of the merciless slaughter of an old, defenceless man. It opened with the mysterious visit of a stranger in a brown suit.

About ten o'clock on Monday night he rang the bell at Lincot and asked to see Sir Arthur Baxter. Political visitors—constituents and others—had been known to call at that late hour, and the butler who admitted him classed him with these. He took him too for a foreigner, but the name of Mr. W. Johnstone which was printed on his card did not confirm this impression. He showed him into the library and left him alone with the baronet.

"That was the last that was seen of the man in the brown suit!" said Superintendent Heppel.

Half an hour later Sir Arthur Baxter came out of the library alone. In the adjoining room two ladies, his cousin

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and his adopted daughter, were sitting. They could see into the library through the door that their kinsman left open. The room appeared to be empty. They assumed that the stranger had been shown out of the French window to the terrace, which was used as a short-cut to the station path.

The old man drank a whisky and soda and returned to the library, locking the double doors behind him. He was not again seen alive.

"When was the murder discovered?" I asked.

"About half-past eleven the butler knocked at the library door. There was no answer. He tried it. It was locked. Alarmed, he got through the dining-room window to the terrace to look into the library. The curtains were drawn but a light was burning. No one answered his tap on the glass. He pushed at the window. It was open. On the green carpet, half-hidden by a large desk, lay the corpse of Sir Arthur Baxter with a bayonet driven into its back."

The detective paused at this tragic discovery and cleared his throat.

"The point of the weapon," he continued, "stuck out in front of the body. A very powerful blow."

He looked at his hearers as if expecting some comment.

"Ghastly!" I said. "But no great mystery."

"The cases that look the simplest," Superintendent Heppel declared, shaking his head, "are often the hardest to solve."

The County police were summoned by telephone and made a thorough examination of the premises. Their report lay in Heppel's pocket. It favoured the theory that

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Sir Arthur, at the conclusion of his interview with the man in the brown suit, had shown him the short-cut to the station. Going to drink his whisky in the next room, he had left the window unfastened. During his brief absence, his visitor returned by the open window and hid behind the long curtains. The locked door made escape for his victim impossible.

"No cry was heard?" I asked.

Heppel shook his head.

"And there were no finger-prints?"

"Not even on the bayonet."

I suggested that the murderer had worn gloves. The detective agreed.

"Mr. Johnstone," he said, "was not so careful with his visiting card."

For when on Tuesday morning the County police invoked the aid of the C.I.D., reference to records identified Mr. W. Johnstone's thumb-mark with that of a certain Max Rothmann, who had been arrested for inciting to violence during the General Strike of 1926.

The political interests of Rothmann taken with his nationality suggested a motive for the murder, since the late baronet had been prominent in and out of Parliament for his attacks on the Bolshevists.

"So, as Max was a foreigner, you arrested him," said Clay, throwing his cigarette-end on the floor. "Trust a bobby to down on a Dago."

The detective ignored the remark.

"Acting on the report of the Finger-print Department, I sent a man to search Rothmann's lodgings in his absence."

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"How reckless of you!" exclaimed the painter.

"And what he found decided me. In the bottom of a cupboard were hidden a pair of brown trousers. On the legs were certain stains. Our analysts declared them to be——"

"Soup," interrupted the artist.

"Blood!" said the detective impressively. "Recent, human blood."

"If the regulations about aliens were stricter——" I began.

"The trousers," went on Heppel, "were sent by special messenger to Lincot. They were identified at once by the butler with those worn by Johnstone. Under twenty-four hours elapsed between the discovery of the murder and the detention of the Russian. Which wasn't bad for the police!" he concluded, rubbing his hands.

"Which would not have been bad for the police," corrected Clay, "if they had got the right man!"

"There's every reason to suppose they have," said the detective. "A suspicious visit, the wrong card, a blood-stain."

Clay interrupted him.

"What does Rothmann say?

"He's put in an alibi. We're investigating it. Alibis have been faked before now."

"Psychology hasn't, retorted the artist.

"I won't argue with you about that, Mr. Clay. But I'll tell you one thing. If Rothmann did not do it, then it must have been some one living in the house."

"Why?"

"I can show you better at Lincot."

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"What time's our train?" asked Clay.

"I am going down by the one fifty-five."

"An hour to get packed and to the station," said Clay, lifting a Gladstone bag off a marqueterie bureau.

"And to tell me a bit about the Baxter household," Heppel added.

"It may have changed," replied the painter. "But when I was there, they were as harmless a lot as you'd find."

"Give me the names!" said Heppel.

"There was Baxter himself, his nephew John, his cousin Sophie de Manca, who ran the house, and a secretary chap."

"Lewis Hope?" the detective suggested.

"That's right. Then staying in the house were Mr. and Mrs.——"

The detective cut him short. "Only the regular lot," he said. "Wasn't there a Miss Eyre?"

"Away!" said the artist. "On a visit to an invalid sister. Just my luck, they say she's lovely. The old man wanted me to paint her. That was before he saw his own. Said I made him look like a sheep. Well, he was!"

He opened the Gladstone bag and shook it. A dozen white shirts unexpectedly fell to the floor and made room for what he called his "things." These seemed to consist mainly of sketching apparatus.

"Have you noticed," he asked us as he bent over his packing, "that while films are quite untrue to Life, Life is very often true to the film?"

I confessed that I had not.

"At Lincot, for instance, you might have been living

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inside the brain of a Hollywood movie magnate. Baxter would have been his *beau ideal* of an Old English gentleman. In reality he was a very average die-hard backbencher. Only a communist would take him seriously, just as he took communists seriously. He was a precise, rather fussy man, but not to the point of murder."

"He was a J.P.," I remarked, "and did valuable service on various boards."

"I dare say," said Clay, who seemed to like to monopolise the conversation, "he hadn't much to do. He was an unmarried man with an eye for a pretty woman. Lady——" (he mentioned the name of the pearl fancier) "had the forehead of a Botticelli Madonna."

He rolled up a violent-hued dressing gown and stuffed it into the bag.

"That may have been why he adopted this girl, Delia Eyre. Another cinema type. Sweet young thing. Orphan and all that. Adrift on an Indifferent World. Purity and a Typewriter. A Haven out of the Storm."

He paused in his packing. "You should grow a beard," he said to the detective. "It saves so much luggage. No razors, shaving soap. Fewer collars——"

The superintendent brought him gently back to Lincot.

"Oh, yes!" he said. "Delia Eyre! She came to Baxter as his secretary. Typed his speeches about the Red Peril and the Hand of Moscow. A year or so ago he adopted her.

"But she kept her own name?" I asked.

"Yes. Sense of duty to her dead father. That's what young Baxter—the nephew, you know—told me. I fancy he has a scheme of his own for getting her to change her name."

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"Do you know Sir John Baxter, as we must call him, well?" asked Heppel.

"Where the hell did you put my boots?" asked the artist irritably. The detective showed him. "Know John Baxter well? I used to see him at the Jawbone pretty often."

"Then he's an artist?" assumed Heppel, for the Jawbone is where Chelsea spends its nights out.

"No. Keen on a model who went there." Clay thrust a couple of stiff collars into the boots that he held in his hand and forced them into the Gladstone bag.

The detective pursed up his lips, and said that he had understood Sir John was attracted by Miss Eyre.

"Can't a man want two women at once?" was the painter's deplorable sentiment. "In any case the model affair was over years before John went to Lincot." With the aid of his foot he compressed the contents of his luggage.

"When was that?"

"Not before he had to!"

The superintendent stooped to help Clay shut his bag. When they had done with it, it looked like a fish after feeding time in an aquarium.

"John Baxter," declared Clay, "was another film personality. Two in fact! A mixture of the Strong Silent Man and the Impetuous Young Hero. He had gone straight to the war from the Varsity. During his years of residence, Lord's cricket ground—he was a fast bowler—and Queen's football-field—he was a formidable member of the pack—had loomed larger in his life than the midnight lamp and the Honour Schools.

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"After collecting an M.C. and bar in Flanders, he volunteered for service with the White Armies in Russia. He was next heard of running a ranch in the Argentine. The failure of that venture brought him back to London to spend the last of his patrimony on the lady from Chelsea. When she had ultimately disappeared with a Mayfair Jew, an attempt to forget her by encouraging silver foxes to breed in Hudson Bay almost ended fatally. Had his uncle not sent him the money to pay his passage home, he would have starved."

"So he settled at Lincot?" said Heppel.

"That was the old man's condition."

"He seems to have been rather a rolling stone."

"He couldn't do much rolling on what his uncle allowed him!"

The detective picked up a sketch book and turned the pages.

"And now he inherits the Baxter fortune?" he said casually.

The painter supposed so. He was the dead man's next-of-kin and succeeded to the baronetcy. But part of the money might go to Sophie de Manca.

"Sir Arthur's cousin?" supplied Heppel.

"And protégée," said Clay, "and another double film type. The Ageing Vamp coupled with the Poor Relation."

As a young woman Sophie Baxter had succumbed to the fascination of a Portuguese count. He was reputed to be immensely rich, but that, said Clay, was insufficient excuse for marrying him. Political developments in his motherland counselled a visit to the Portuguese colonies in Africa. Only a year elapsed before his young wife was

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assisting at his death bed ("gin aggravated by malaria" was Clay's diagnosis) but there had been time for him before that "happy event" to invest his capital in a gold mine. In due course Sophie de Manca returned to England by the third class and accepted her kinsman's offer of a home.

"Where she acts as a sort of housekeeper?" said Hepel.

"Yes!" answered the artist. "But Sir Arthur is careful of her feelings and does not pay her."

The detective glanced at his watch. "You've time to tell me about Mr. Hope," he said.

"Plenty!" agreed Clay. "For I know nothing. He's a man who doesn't talk about himself."

"What impression did you get of him?"

"A big man. Rather fat. Clean-shaven, with circular gold-rimmed spectacles. Not a common movie variety. Perhaps the Silent-Footed Amanuensis."

"You don't know where he comes from?"

"No. He took Delia Eyre's place, I believe."

"You wouldn't know anything about the servants?"

The artist agreed that he would not. There was a butler who insisted on putting out a clean collar for him every day. Face like a cod.

"That sounds like Freeman!" said the detective.

A church clock struck the half-hour.

"Time we started," said Clay to me.

"We?" I queried.

"I must have some one who will at least listen to my theories."

I protested I had no clothes.

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"I'll lend you some," offered the painter.

Rather than that, I hurried to the wine merchant at the corner ("Where," stated Clay unnecessarily, "they know me.") to telephone for my man to bring my suitcase to the station.

The painter and the policeman were descending the stairs when I came back. I felt bound to hint that the auburn ulster into which Clay was struggling seemed to me a trifle conspicuous. He asked indignantly whether I imagined that he was going to wear blue glasses with a false nose and crawl around on his stomach, examining flower-beds with a magnifying glass. "I leave all that to Heppel," he declared, clapping a rusty black hat with a wide stiff brim on his head.

The detective smiled and signalled to a passing cab.

"There's one character you left out," I remarked to Clay, "in your cinema cast."

"What's that?"

I watched the taxi fetching a circle through the traffic.

"The villain!" I said.

"I've supplied him," interposed Heppel, "with my friend Max."

"Rubbish!" cried Clay. "That little pointed chin——"

Without answering Heppel climbed stolidly into the cab.

"You're right, Dale," announced the artist. "I will have to re-cast our company and find the missing character."

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CHAPTER IV

SIR JOHN BAXTER met us at the station. I wondered what conclusion Clay drew from his hand. I was only conscious that its rough, almost brutal clasp had left my fingers limp. He swung the artist's bag on to the top of the limousine as if it had been empty, and, doubling the legal limit, soon had us speeding toward Lincot House.

Small talk was not his strong suit, and his only utterance during the drive was to express his relief that the detective and the artist seemed harmonious. He had, he told me, wired to the latter before he knew that Scotland Yard were sending a man. The local police were very good chaps but—he lapsed into silence.

From my seat by his side, I watched the young giant's dark, rather heavy face. His eyes were hollow and he looked as if he had not slept. Behind his reserve I felt there were fires smouldering.

As we drew up at our destination, I heard the superintendent remark to Lucien Clay on the age of the house. "They didn't build this in the last hundred years," were his words.

"Nor in the last three hundred," answered the painter.

Our host gave a short laugh. "Lincot was not new when Oliver Cromwell burnt the east wing," he said.

The high red walls throw a shadow on the gravel. Unwarmed by the autumn sun, the air felt chill. The country,

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dipped in that limpid light, was very quiet. Not a bird chirped; even the farm across the fields was silent. The house seemed cold—cold with the chill of age and death.

If a man, reading in a silent room, looked up from his book and found facing him in an upright chair, with sunlight on gray cheeks that rouge made ghastly, nodding a bald, shrivelled head that her wig did not disguise, no ghost but one who had dreadfully—lived on, he would know how old that house looked when I saw it first. And when I saw it first, one of the upstairs windows had a brown blind drawn down. Behind that blind must lie the house's last owner. While perhaps in the next room—the window with yellow curtains—sat, anxiously calculating what track he had left uncovered, his murderer.

I was not sorry when the front door opened and I could follow the detective into the hall. His matter-of-fact manner denoted no reaction to the atmosphere that the place exhaled. Lucien Clay, on the other hand, seemed excited; his face was pale and his wide nostrils were quivering.

The butler addressed our host in an undertone. Remembering that it was he who had found the body, I gave him my attention. A middle-aged man, bald, deferential and obese, he allowed no glimpses of our common humanity to appear in his prominent eyes.

"Freeman says that Dr. Gillman is here," said Baxter to the detective. "I telephoned to him when I got your wire."

"Then with your permission, I'll get to work," replied Heppel. "Where is——" he paused.

"In his bedroom," replied Sir John. "The police allowed us to move him."

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I raised my eyes to the top of the stairs where I supposed the bedroom lay. They fell on the slim figure of a girl with a sad, white face. She must have made up her mind to meet us, for soon her little high-heeled feet came tapping down the stairs.

"Delia!" said Sir John and his tired eyes looked less strained. "Miss Eyre," he introduced.

Her hand was very cold and her wide-set eyes the colour of wet turquoise. Her plain black dress set off the fairness of her skin and short, curled hair. Her small, curved mouth was clean of paint and her delicate face with its rounded chin was unpowdered. I felt sorry that one who appeared a credit to her sex should be dragged into the middle of a police investigation.

"If there's anything I can do to help?" she asked.

Heppel smiled and shook his head. "I don't think this is much in your line, Miss Eyre," he said.

When she had left us the silence of the house seemed to close in. Even our footsteps on the oak stairs sounded muffled. We turned into a broad passage and walked to its end. Before a closed door our host faltered.

"I won't come in," he said, and added, "unless you want me." He turned away suddenly.

. . . . . .

The room was darkened by the brown blind. A spruce little man in check breeches and cloth leggings met us with an outstretched hand. More like an auctioneer, I thought, than a doctor.

A bull-necked constable rose from his chair beside the four-poster bed and released the blind. The light fell on

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the bed and its occupant. As I looked at the silent form covered by a sheet, I thought of the effigies on tombs that time and decay have in part obscured.

Heppel was shaking hands with the doctor, whom, in his civil way, he thanked for coming so promptly.

"They've given me your report," he said, "and I've seen the police surgeon. But I'd like a few words with the man who was first on the spot."

He walked calmly to the bed and turned down the sheet. Although his action was not without reverence, it was the reverence of a collector for a book. Lucien Clay followed and looked over his shoulder, his eyes alight with interest. His mind, I felt, was riveted on the solution of a problem in which pity had no part.

For myself I was filled with compassion for the man I had never known. His bald head and the white hair that had grown on his chin proclaimed his age and his title to mercy. He had been a decent, kindly Englishman of the best class in the country, meriting the esteem and protection of his fellows. No man could have been less prepared for violent death. Age and distinction apart, he might have been myself.

For some minutes the detective was busy at the bed. Then he turned and drew a bulky envelope from his pocket. He spread its contents on a writing table by the window and asked the doctor to take a seat.

"I see, Dr. Gillman," he said, with his eyes on a type-written paper, "from Sergeant Wood's report that you reached the house about midnight."

Dr. Gillman nodded.

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"The state of the body led you to the conclusion that Sir Arthur had been dead for at least an hour?"

The doctor bowed again.

"And the police surgeon confirms your opinion," said the detective. "Would you be prepared to reduce the period to narrower limits?"

"About an hour; probably a little longer," was as far as Dr. Gillman would go.

"The evidence of the body therefore goes to suggest that the murder was probably committed between half-past ten and eleven?"

The doctor agreed.

"You found the body lying on its side with its knees drawn up and its hands clenched. There was no sign of a struggle?"

Death, said the doctor, as might be expected in a case where a weapon completely transfixed the heart, seemed to have been instantaneous. He had embarked on a technical description of the lesions when Clay interrupted.

"Where's the weapon?" he asked.

The detective walked to the table by the bed, and without speaking lifted a towel that covered the sort of oblong white dish they use in hospitals.

On the bottom of the dish ran a little blood. In it lay a bayonet of unfamiliar pattern. It was much longer than the army model, measuring perhaps a couple of feet.

"There are a lot of those things on the library wall," said the doctor. "Russian bayonets from the field of Balaclava."

The detective was examining the fatal implement minutely. He measured it with a steel foot-rule that he

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