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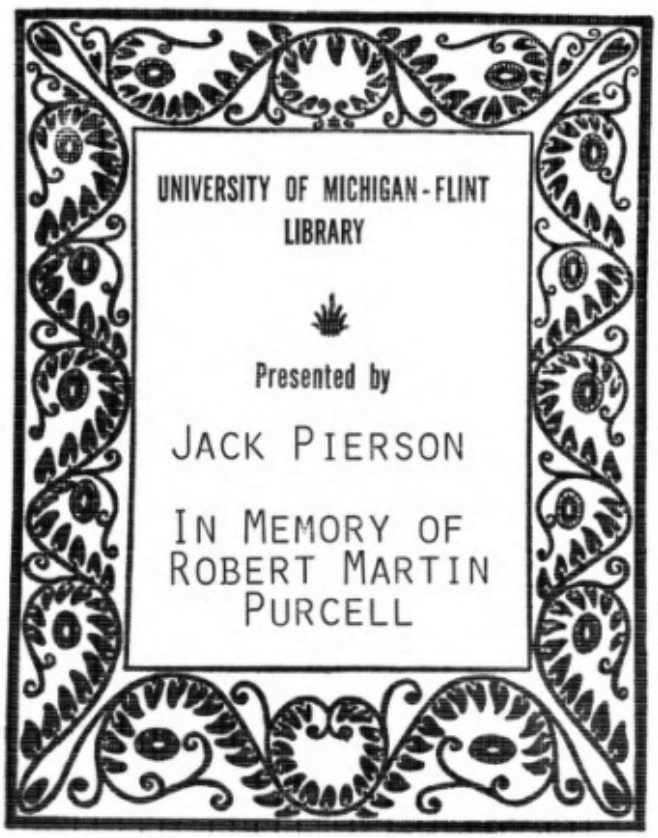

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The Corpse With The Eerie Eye

A TOLEFREE MYSTERY,

by

R. A. J. WALLING

Fifth *Series*

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NEW YORK

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To my friend

THAYER HOBSON

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The Corpse with the Eerie Eye

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Chapter One

ANTHONY BERESFORD LOOKED in the shaving-glass, brushed his short moustache, pulled his tie. Out of a bold face a pair of grey eyes peered at him beneath a high forehead crowned by a cap of brown hair.

Rather a hard face, with a square jaw. About the eyes were wrinkles, not too marked, but indisputable wrinkles—the feature he liked least. The touch of grey in the brown hair was almost unnoticeable. For thirty-five it did not do badly. But the wrinkles betrayed the passage of time and other things.

He saw a straight nose, rather thin, which combined with the high brow to modify the bold impression. A finicking nose, he thought, but less conspicuously out of tune with the rest of the countenance now than it was a year ago, when the skin was roughened by exposure. Since he came back and lived a civilized life again, the complexion had come into better harmony with the features.

And his nerves were quieter. There was only the occasional involuntary twitch of the right eyebrow, intensified during those long years of absence, which, though not now so pronounced, refused to leave him.

He turned away from the glass and walked to the window. He looked south across a valley where, below him,

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the grey roofs of a little town baked in the sun. Leaning out, he could catch to the right a glimpse of a sturdy round tower on a conical hill above the roofs. His foreground was a garden, sloping downward in two terraces. He idly followed the movements of the woman who wandered about with scissors among the flowers.

Not a bad show. Desperately slow. But it suited him. One could get re-accustomed to polite society here without too much trouble or expense.

He had never thought that he might settle down in a place like Castle-Dinas. It was a strange place, rather unlike anything he had ever struck. It had little money, but it had an air. It not only had an air. It gave itself airs. It had royal traditions and traded on them. It had pretensions to culture, which made him smile. It was exclusive, caste-ridden. Caste!—ye gods! It set boundaries. There were people one must know; they were few. There were people one might know; more of them. There were people of whose existence one might be aware; they kept shops. And a vague number of hewers of wood and drawers of water, the noises off in the social drama of Castle-Dinas.

He had found that strangers did not easily get access to the people one must know. The way to them lay through the people one might know—the professional people, the rector, the lawyer, the doctor. It was fortunate for him that Trahair, the lawyer, had links with everybody, for he had managed to interest Trahair. Fortunate also that Dr. Mapperley had a few young people about him, who came and went, like Jardine, who was a gentleman and rather laughed at the pretensions of Castle-Dinas and was not

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inclined to be exclusive. Not too clever, Jardine, but a useful man to know. He made a convenient liaison with the Lowells; and when he had smashed down the pride of the Lowells, Beresford would have reached his goal.

His first step towards it that afternoon had not been a failure. Indeed, according to Trahair it was a remarkable success for any person who had been in Castle-Dinas only a few months, especially a bachelor. For any bachelor to carry off a Castle-Dinas tea-party so well, even with the assistance of a cocktail bar, was unknown. It would certainly be talked about in the drawing-rooms for weeks.

"You've made 'em curious, Beresford," said Trahair. "A new bachelor establishment isn't a common object of the countryside."

Quite a representative slice of Castle-Dinas society had come and admired the view from the windows and drunk the tea dispensed by a white-capped maid under the superintendence of Mrs. Young, or sipped side-cars in the little room across the hall.

True, they were mostly the people one might know; but two had accepted from the circle one must know—Jardine, and Miss Lowell who came with him. The ancient house of Menadon on the opposite hill had thus not entirely refused to make acquaintance with the new house which Beresford had rented for a year, furniture and all.

Nothing else mattered. His drawing-room had been full of inconsiderable people who made a background for the startling beauty of Miss Lowell. She was slight, dark, with perfectly modelled features. She looked intelligent, alive, sensitive; but she had been curiously quiet—interested, he thought. She was going to be an important per-

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sonage for him; he risked nothing and fell in with her mood. He had said, when Jardine introduced her,

"Very good of you to honour a bachelor, Miss Lowell. I hope Mr. and Mrs. Lowell are well?"

And she had said, "Quite. I brought their apologies. Mr. Jardine is good enough to squire me. What a lovely garden you have."

If she wanted to say no more of Menadon than that, well and good; plenty of time.

The only other remote link with Menadon was Sharpe, also one of Dr. Mapperley's young men, who, as Trahair said, seemed a fish out of water. A keen-looking fellow, Sharpe, whose dark eyes surveyed the room and the whole outfit with incessant movement. He did not look like a highbrow, but was one, as Beresford discovered in talk of books and travel.

It took place in the cocktail room, where that queer fish Captain Pugsley, whom he had met at the Club in Castle-Dinas, was anything but a fish out of water. He swam in his favourite element. It was he who brought up the topic of travel, which Beresford would have readily avoided. Somebody had published a new book about Egyptology, and Pugsley had once taken a trip up the Nile—though he probably spent most of his time in the bar of the steamer. But if Pugsley knew no Egyptology, Sharpe knew a lot—and also other ologies; and, through a question Sharpe asked, Beresford was driven to saying something about the years he desired to forget.

"I understand you've knocked about the world a bit, Beresford," he said, invitingly.

"Too much." There was a tincture of bitterness in his

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tone. "I grudge the seven years I spent in the East and the antipodes and America. Wish I'd found Castle-Dinas first."

He was compelled to give some idea of the adventures of a rolling stone. He felt relieved when the talk turned from customs and occasions abroad to the annual great occasion of Castle-Dinas.

It went off well, though. Only one thing puzzled him. Jardine and Sharpe and Miss Lowell were standing together when little Trahair came in. The lawyer, a touch old-fashioned, bowed over Miss Lowell's hand as he said, "Good afternoon, Katherine." Then he turned to Sharpe. He said, "Sharpe, you look like a fish out of water. Didn't expect to find you here. Jardine—you lose your bet."

The girl had asked, "What have you two been wagering about? I thought Mr. Sharpe was the only gambler."

"Oh, he never gambles. He's a card-sharper pure and simple. Knows so much mathematics that you simply can't beat him," said Jardine.

But what Jardine had bet with Trahair did not become known.

Yes, it went well. Ann had done the thing to a T, from the moment when she added the last touches to the flowers in the drawing-room as Jardine and Miss Lowell came in. She stayed for a few minutes giving directions to the white-capped maids. She returned discreetly once or twice to see that everything was in order.

Undoubtedly some of the women looked at her with hardly veiled curiosity. She was a striking woman, was Ann, with her yellow hair—naturally yellow, however deeply her complexion, her lips and her finger-tips were in debt to the cosmetic shop.

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But Ann took no notice. She played the Compleat Housekeeper to perfection. She spoke not at all, nor did she smile more than an automaton.

Beresford had not reaped from his first party that invitation to Menadon to meet Mr. and Mrs. Lowell which he desired almost as much as anything on earth just now. But there was plenty of time. And Miss Lowell was interested.

That was a rather boring talk about the great annual Feast of Castle-Dinas, coming off in three weeks' time. Trahair and Sharpe had been very learned about it for his benefit. Seemed to be the Day of the Patron Saint, when Castle-Dinas went gay, the one day of the year when it was permissible to know everybody, when the people you must know and those you might, and the tradesmen all mingled with noises off, danced together through the streets, held revels on the castle green, and took a thrilling look at the famous dungeon in which the malefactors of old spent dark and insanitary years.

Trahair's local archæology and Sharpe's scientific derivation of the Feast from some remote pagan bacchanal left Beresford cold. But it warmed him to think that on this occasion Menadon would come out of its shell.

The yellow-haired woman came in from the garden. He went down and met her in the hall.

"Well, Mrs. Young?"

"How did I do, Tony?"

"Norma Shearer never did better, Ann. Come and have a drink."

He put his arm round her waist and pulled her into the little room.

"You're rather taken with that girl, Tony," she said, slipping away, her voice metallic and her eyes hard.

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"She's going to be useful, Ann."

"All right. But hold your horses. You fall for 'em too easily."

"Trust me. Have some of this muck?—or a spot and splash? Notice the scarecrow who drank cocktails for a pastime?"

"A Mr. Pugsley?"

Beresford nodded. "You don't know him, and he doesn't know me. But I know him."

"I'm not so sure I don't know him," said she.

"No, Ann. You don't know him. I insist that you don't know him. Understand?"

"Very well. Is he the reason why you came to this God-forsaken hole, Tony?"

"No—and I didn't want him here, Ann. He could be awkward. So—watch him."

2

Jardine parked his car next morning in the Market Square and walked to Trahair's office in one of the narrow streets near by.

"Glad to see you, Bruce," said the lawyer. "Don't throw away your cigarette. How did Katherine enjoy the party?"

"Rub it in! You won your bet. Five bob, wasn't it?"

Trahair waved it away. "You can stand me a drink at the Club some time. I'm quite satisfied with the gloat which is my due—being a better judge of women than you."

"You've known more. But I fancied I knew Katherine. And I didn't. She wanted no pressing. When I said, 'Are

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you going to see the Mystery Man?' she said, 'Of course.' "

"Of course?—the *mot juste*, Bruce. What did you expect?"

"Her father and mother didn't seem too pleased," said Jardine, evading the question.

"Ah, I daresay they didn't. They have antique ideas. But the young—what do they say?—they'll try anything once."

"Once?" Jardine grinned. "The *mot juste*. I'll bet Katherine doesn't try it again. What did you think of the party?"

"Highly interesting," said Trahair. "I've been trying to guess why Beresford gave it. He doesn't strike me as a man overflowing with the milk of human kindness."

"I don't like the cynical beggar."

"Not the sort of man you'd expect to spend a lot of money on social climbing in Castle-Dinas, eh? Man of the world. Probably frequented society a bit more thrilling. Travelled a lot. He keeps me speculating hard. Why did he throw that party?"

Jardine shrugged. "You say."

"Didn't you notice that he seemed anxious for a personal success? It looked so to me. But I'll have a second bet with you. If he throws another it won't be a success."

"Shouldn't wonder. You're a sportsman who only bets on certainties, Trahair. So I'm not a taker. But why?"

"He set the ladies of Castle-Dinas by the ears. That housekeeper—"

"Didn't particularly notice her."

"Katherine occludes the landscape for you. I wager

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Katherine particularly noticed her! A housekeeper about thirty with golden hair and a Hollywood make-up—"

"I say! That's a slight exaggeration, eh?" Jardine exclaimed.

"Perhaps a little. Anyhow, not the sort of housekeeper known and approved by Castle-Dinas. If Beresford's ideas were purely social, he'd have kept her in the background. Therefore—but he's a queer chap altogether. If he wanted to stagger the burgesses he couldn't have thought of anything more explosive. However, he's interesting. Good style. Good fund of information. Been in some wild places and has an eye for country. Did you hear him say he'd never in the world seen a lonelier spot than Goonbarrow Downs?"

"Yes. And I'd guess he's right about that. A weird spot to have so close home."

"Well, the Mystery Man's still a mystery, Bruce. But you didn't come to talk about Beresford. What is it you want?"

Jardine pulled up his chair to the table and stubbed out his cigarette. Trahair, watching his pleasant, open face, noted the frown that creased the brow.

"Trahair," said he, "I want some advice from you. Not as my lawyer. As a friend. Afraid of making a fool of myself. Want you to stop me. And yet I don't. I'm puzzled to death about the Lowells. You know them well—see as much of them as anybody. I'm deeply interested in the Lowells—naturally, being determined to marry Katherine. Have you seen anything—well, anything amiss lately?"

Trahair looked long at him before he answered.

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"That's a curious question, Bruce. Won't you be a little more—er—specific?"

"Deuce of it is, I simply can't be specific. I know there's something wrong. But I'm unable to specify. I can't even say a word to Katherine, not to mention her father and mother. I have a feeling of something gone awry in the Lowell family. I wondered if anybody else—if you'd noticed it."

Trahair pushed back his chair, took a cigarette, lit it, puffed it.

"Well, what have you noticed?" he asked.

"It's nothing tangible. The first thing was a sort of perpetual preoccupation in Mr. Lowell. He seemed to be —sort of not there. And a nervousness in Mrs. Lowell. To put the lid on it, Katherine's getting difficult—not herself. Not so keen. Used to be merry as a grig. Now deadly serious. Hardly ever has a laugh. Doesn't want to go places—"

"She went to Beresford's party."

"That puzzles me most of all. I'd never have believed she would go. The fact is, Trahair, some cloud's come down on 'em all. And it's damned uncomfortable. That's as specific as I can be."

Trahair made no answer while he blew several long puffs from his cigarette.

"Well," said Jardine, "have you noticed anything?"

Trahair said, "Lowell's my client. I can't discuss him. But you're my friend. I can discuss you and Katherine. How long are you staying with Doctor Mapperley this time, Bruce?"

"Oh, indefinitely. He likes to have me around."

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"Think he's conscious of anything unusual at his brother-in-law's?"

"You know him—a Sphinx in trousers."

Trahair nodded. "Well, I confess you don't surprise me. There really is something strange in the atmosphere at Menadon. What it is I don't begin to guess. Lowell's a man you can't probe. But he has just that preoccupation, and Mrs. Lowell has nerves—as you say. But I can't tackle it for you—haven't a right to inquire and can't give advice unless I'm asked for it. You're in a different position. If your engagement to Katherine's at stake—"

"You put it into words for me, Trahair!" cried Jardine. "That's what's driving me frantic. Not only that. She's unhappy."

"Spoken to her about it?"

"Sounded her more than once. Nothing. Not a word or a hint. Displeases her to hear a suggestion of anything fishy in her young life. I daren't go any further."

"Naturally."

"You're Lowell's man of affairs. Haven't you an idea?"

"Not a vestige, Bruce. If you're thinking affairs may have something to do with it, set your mind at rest. Lowell's affairs are in a perfect state of order and prosperity."

They sat looking at each other for two minutes.

Trahair spoke again. "I suppose you'd do anything to prevent your hopes from blowing up?"

"Anything in the world!" said Jardine, fervently. "You know how it's been between Katherine and me."

There was another long pause.

"Well, Bruce," said Trahair at last. "Whatever strange and secret thing's affecting Menadon seems like affecting

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you. Would you like to do something strange and secret in reply?"

"Not if it's going to harm Katherine. What d'you mean?"

Jardine looked astonished and doubtful.

"I'll tell you, without any names, something my London Agent, William Bland, told me last year. A client of his had to face something as inexplicable and mysterious as the blight on Menadon. He talked to a man he knows and trusts in the City who has a flair for hidden secrets, sent him down to see what he could make of it, and got a perfect explanation, for which his client was grateful. I'm told he's quite a presentable person. I have his name somewhere. What about an invitation to him to pay a visit to Castle-Dinas?"

Jardine still looked doubtful. "Barging in—not knowing what we may find?"

"A mere idea, Bruce. If you don't like it—"

"I think I'd want to see the man."

"You could. Why not? I can't be mixed up in it, but I can write to Bland for an introduction and you can invite him to meet you. Have him at your place if you like and vet him. If you don't like him, you needn't go any further."

Trahair unlocked a drawer and fished about among the papers.

"Calling a spade a spade," said Jardine, "I suppose this fellow's a private detective?"

"With a difference, according to Bland."

Jardine took a cigarette and lighted it. He too did some contemplative puffing.

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"Of course, Trahair, you wouldn't suggest this to me unless you wanted me to do it."

"I'd be sorry to see your hopes crash, my boy. You mustn't push me too far. I can't accept any responsibility. But I'm rather fond of Katherine. I should like to know what the trouble is."

"In other words, you have half a notion, you can't see your way to confirm it, and you pass the buck to me!"

"Now," Trahair exclaimed, "you're pushing me too far. I shan't go. Here's the fellow's name and number. You run off and think it over. Send the invitation or not, just as you please. I'm due at the Court in ten minutes. See you some time."

Trahair finished scribbling on a card, passed it to him, and rose.

Jardine looked at the paper and read the name and address of one Philip Tolefree.

3

As the train ran down the narrow valley along a river bank, beneath overhanging woods, a turn and a clearing gave Tolefree his first glimpse of Castle-Dinas. He saw through a gap a pinnacle of old houses clinging to a hill, and, crowning it and dominating them, a great Norman keep above which a flagstaff lifted a royal standard to the sky.

It was a strange, un-English-looking, tumbled hill-town which seemed to have jutted up out of the Middle Ages.

A glimpse and no more: the train was pulling into a prosaic railway station and the porters were shouting "Castle-Dinas!"

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One of them took Tolefree's bags towards the exit. Tolefree followed, scrutinizing the few people who stood on the platform. Jardine had said in his letter that he would carry a stick, which, in these days, would sufficiently discriminate him from his fellow-men. But Jardine had identified Tolefree first. He happened to be the only passenger alighting there who had baggage.

A tall, fair young man, clean shaven, in tweed and flannel, displaying an ash-stick, walked towards him.

"Hardly any need to ask if you're Mr. Tolefree," said he, holding out his unoccupied hand. "These your bags? Take them to my car please, William."

The porter went ahead. Jardine said, "Longish journey. I suppose you lunched?"

"Sumptuously," Tolefree assured him.

"Then we may as well get along to Nantivet right away. I'm supposed to be staying here with a friend, but I want you to meet my mother. Castle-Dinas is getting all worked up about Feast Day on Wednesday, as you see." He pointed up the steep street facing them, festooned with flags, in a vista which ended at an old arched gateway decked in greenery.

"Looks good," said Tolefree. "I saw the standard flying on the castle as I came along in the train. I thought nobody was allowed to fly that flag but the royal family?"

"A dispensation," Jardine told him. "It's a royal castle. We're mighty proud of our right to the standard in Castle-Dinas. Gives us an air, don't you think?"

Tolefree liked this friendly, smiling young man. He was far less pretentious than his car, which betokened a well-lined purse and was presently sliding up the one-in-eight

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of the steep street with scarcely more fuss than a purr. Listening to a few off-hand remarks about the gateway, the ancient market square, the astonishing grey church with its bloom of carving in granite, the hotel which had been part of a religious house, the crooked, narrow streets about the market, Tolefree was carried swiftly through Castle-Dinas, down the slope on the other side, and up into the higher country beyond.

In fifteen miles the car swirled left through a gateway and a long avenue of beeches and chestnuts to an old, grey, gabled house of two storeys under the shoulder of a moorland bluff.

Nantivet had no distinction from a hundred other houses save its situation on the side of a wooded glen, now deep in foliage, with a stream curling through the bottom, one reach of it visible.

"My mother and I live very simply," Jardine said. "James, here, is our man of all work"—as a gardener in a green apron came up to the door. "Take the bags up, James. I'll bring Mr. Tolefree along."

One of the rooms with the mansard windows overlooking the glen was Tolefree's portion. Having changed, he spent a spare twenty minutes before dinner and his introduction to Mrs. Jardine in gazing upon the scene and speculating on the possible reasons why a young man of Jardine's quality, placed in this idyllic country, wanted to import into it a private detective. Bill Bland had been able to tell him nothing of Jardine. The lawyer Trahair was but a name. Jardine's own letter had brought Tolefree down. He liked its sincerity and modesty. He recalled the words which ended it,

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I have nothing to go upon, but the mystery threatens to ditch my best hopes. If you can unravel it you will either make two human beings happy or prove that happiness is not for me.

Tolefree was not a heart-specialist. Love-affairs whose course failed to run smooth were none of his business. But a bare hint in the letter pointed to some disturbance under the surface which had nothing to do with the lovers.

Evidently, though, he was not to get to work on the mystery at once. He observed with mild amusement that he had been brought to this pleasant house for a day or two to be passed himself under observation. First, by Jardine and the now fragile and sedate lady who had brought him into the world. He met her at dinner—a piece of Dresden china in appearance but, in fact, a woman of strong common sense. Jardine was the apple of her eye and the heir of her dead husband's estate. She, first of all, would decide whether Tolefree passed muster as a confidant of secrets.

The next day he came under surveillance by a truly remarkable man—one Dr. Mapperley, who lived near Castle-Dinas and had family connections with the great houses round. He dined at Nantivet.

The meeting with this big, gruff personage startled Tolefree. His large head was made immense by a shock of iron grey hair and a bush of dark beard. Penetrating the bush to the well-remembered features underneath, Tolefree watched for any sign of recognition in the dark eyes. He caught a questioning look now and then—but Mapperley soon gave up the quest. There was no recognition.

They soon got on terms. He towered over Tolefree and even over Jardine, who was no midget. He had a terse,

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jerky fashion of speech. He had learning—his degree a doctorate of Laws and not a practising one of medicine as Tolefree first thought. He and Mrs. Jardine, of about an age, round the fifties and sixties, were contemporaries in understanding and attitudes as well as in years. They had one particular interest in common—Jardine. Mapperley's business at Nantivet was to push or probe into his quality. Tolefree felt it searching the recesses of his knowledge, taste and discretion.

Never averse from thrust if he could see his way to riposte, he soon discovered that Mapperley had a strong suit which was also a weak spot. It was psychology. He contrived to engage him in an argument on the lines of his own interminable disputations with Professor Gregory Pye. In Jardine's den that evening, to Jardine's bewildered amusement, between Mapperley with a huge cigar and Tolefree with his pipe, there flew a rattling fire of causation and causality, free will and determinism, motive and motivation, and a hundred other deathly missiles. They kept it up to an hour unheard of at Nantivet.

What Mapperley thought of Tolefree would doubtless appear in due course. What Tolefree thought of Mapperley was expressed to Jardine next morning.

"A shrewd person," he said.

"A learned person," Jardine admitted. "But shrewd? Is that a compliment?"

Tolefree smiled. He wasn't thinking of the doctor's powers of ratiocination, he said, but of his powers of observation. "I intended a compliment. Very little in the conduct of his fellow-men escapes Doctor Mapperley, I imagine. Of course, you've confided your mystery to him?"

Jardine baulked at the question. To some extent he had.

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But there was a difficulty. "In a way, you see, he's in the mystery himself. Mrs. Lowell is his sister."

"Yes?" Tolefree waited.

"So, you see, it's in the family."

Tolefree raised his eyebrows.

"Damn it!" cried Jardine— "I can't stall any longer. Let's get out and walk over the hill. I'll tell you the whole thing. You've been so patient I could hardly believe you were true. Good for an hour's walking?"

"Or three," said Tolefree.

The woods above Nantivet thinned two or three hundred feet higher and finally gave place to an open moor. The rough land stretched east and north for many miles, without roads save for one narrow ribbon and a narrower of rude cart-tracks, a high plateau clothed with a fine turf, ling and patches of furze, depressed here and there into folds where small streams ran.

"Goonbarrow Downs," said Jardine as they came over the edge and stopped to look. Not a building showed, not a thing moved, between them and the far horizon. "I've heard this called the loneliest place in the world. Castle-Dinas that way—a dozen miles, in the valley beyond."

Tolefree said, "A bracing air—and a good place for confidences."

"Yes," Jardine answered. He looked down with the symptom of a grin. They strode away over the turf when their path had petered out. "The first confidence has to be a confession, Tolefree. About Mapperley. He's a great friend of mine and of my affair with Katherine. Known me and my family all my life. The Mapperleys had Carnmarth, a place near the town. A huge house. Came to them by marriage long ago. He and Mrs. Lowell are the

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only Mapperleys left. Many years between them—ten or perhaps twenty, I guess. Fine people; all the same they're both highbrows."

"Oh?" said Tolefree. "Ladies are not often metaphysicians."

"No—and she's not. But donnish. Broke loose from home, university and all that, and went to profess something or other up north. Force of example, perhaps. He'd been a don ever since she could remember. I think she hardly knew her mother—died when she was a small kid. Old Mr. Mapperley went out aged eighty about five years ago. Doctor Mapperley inherited the estate and enough to live on while he writes his book."

"Philosophy?" Tolefree asked.

"No—history. Age of William the Silent or some such thing. He's still collecting material. Thinks that'll take ten years and the writing another ten, so he's fitted out with a programme for life. We never disagree about anything but the comparative importance of the fifteenth century and the twentieth."

"William the Silent versus Winston Churchill?"

"I'm a complete philistine, Tolefree. But he's fond of me as well as of his highbrow devotees like Sharpe. You'll like Sharpe. But the point is that Lowell married Mapperley's sister not long after the time of Mapperley's inheritance. Lowell bought a lovely old place, Menadon, about two miles away, expressly so that she could live in her own country. He's much older than his wife—he was a widower and Katherine was a school-girl when they married."

"A rich man?"

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"Bags of money. Son of a woollen manufacturer in Yorkshire. A fine type. Devoted to his wife and daughter. You'll see. Never was a jollier house until— But I'd better short-circuit the story. My concern is Katherine. I fell for her the first time I met her at Mapperley's. I pestered her till she agreed to marry me. I adore her. My mother does too. Lowell and his wife like me. We were perfectly happy till two or three months ago."

"And then?" Tolefree encouraged him.

"And then of a sudden something went wrong. It wasn't a jolly house to me any more. Whenever I'm there Lowell seems to squeeze back in his shell and go into a coma. Mrs. Lowell is all nerves. Katherine, who'd been the brightest thing on earth to me, has changed completely. She hasn't said she wants to break the engagement, but if I broke it I believe she'd be glad in a way."

"No doubt you've a clean sheet?" said Tolefree. "Nothing to do with you?"

"Certainly nothing that I'm conscious of. And nobody else in Katherine's life that I can see. It's a mystery. Mapperley seems to suspect something, but I get nothing out of him."

"I feel sure," Tolefree mused, "that Doctor Mapperley was quite aware of me last night."

That, Jardine declared, was another point in his confession. "Trahair and I talked it over. He thought I ought to tell Mapperley I was inviting you down and why. So I did."

"And how did he react to that?"

"He made a condition, or rather two. First that I should allow you to do nothing till he'd seen you. Next that, if

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you did stay on to explore the affair, both you and I should go to stay at Carnmarth. I often do stay there. It's near Katherine. Are you offended?"

"Not so easily as that," Tolefree smiled. "But you see what it means? Either he knows nothing definite whatever he suspects. Or, if he does know, he means to control the inquiry. We're to be under his eye."

Jardine nodded. "Evidently. Will it make any difference to you?"

"Not an atom. I'd have thought, by the way, that the solicitor, Trahair, might be more likely to have detected the nigger in the woodpile than anyone else."

"I challenged him," said Jardine. "But he rides off on the sacred relations of lawyer and client. He says he's as much in the dark as I am; but I fancy he's come across some evidence of trouble. You know, it was he who suggested your name."

"Yes . . . Well, we'll wait and see. I shall be happy to improve Doctor Mapperley's acquaintance."

"No difficulty about that, Tolefree. He took to you last night. If you agreed, I was to bring you along to Carnmarth to-morrow . . ."

Jardine was an ingenuous young man. Sincere—and simple, said Tolefree to himself. If Mapperley and Trahair both wanted a private detective on the spot, there was something more in the wind blowing across this delectable country than Jardine's love-troubles—and with a fishier smell.

"I'm dining at Menadon to-night," said Jardine when they were returning from the walk on Goonbarrow Downs. "Lowell would like you to come too. Is that all right?"

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Tolefree looked surprised. "Does Mr. Lowell also know of me?" he asked.

"Not at all. You're just a friend staying with me. I thought—"

"Of course," said Tolefree.

Perhaps Jardine was not so simple after all.

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Chapter Two

AFTERWARDS, Tolefree reflected that this dinner-party at Menadon was the mildest and most decorous introduction to wild tragedy that irony ever designed.

They were six at table: all the Mapperleys left in the world in the persons of the vast doctor and his sister, Mrs. Lowell. All the Lowells of the piece in the persons of Henry Lowell and his daughter Katherine. And Jardine and himself.

They dined in a rich-looking old room, with the aftermath of sunset glowing through the windows, and soft shaded table-lights, and soft-footed maids to serve them. Mr. and Mrs. Lowell received him cordially as a casual guest and Jardine's friend. Dr. Mapperley seemed to lay himself out to show Tolefree off to the family, and kept the talk flowing across the table to him. But he stole chances now and then to observe his hosts and their daughter.

Katherine Lowell was a strikingly lovely girl, manifestly the darling of her father's heart. She took no part in general talk, speaking in asides to Jardine occasionally, but mostly listening to Mapperley and Tolefree with unobtrusive curiosity. He got the impression that, if Lowell and his wife accepted him at his face value, the girl had a speculative eye on him.

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She was very good to look upon. If this seventeenth-century room was not the most appropriate setting for her modishness it seemed to emphasize her dark beauty, as Jardine's fair skin and hair and his bulk foiled her warm colouring and her lissome figure. They were a well-assorted couple. Tolefree understood Jardine's anxiety about any threat to the partnership.

Lowell gave no hint of the coma described by Jardine. He was quiet—perhaps a little withdrawn, but not too far to listen to an argument, as he showed by putting in a perceptive word to Tolefree or Mapperley. He was a dark, grey-haired, clean-shaven man, blue-eyed, with fine features; athletic-looking for all his more than fifty years. A chance smile betrayed a natural good humour. A polished manner put him in startling contrast with his big, hirsute, casually-dressed brother-in-law, who sat beside the girl, ate his dinner with gusto and chopped badinage with her in the intervals of his bouts with Tolefree.

Mrs. Lowell, much younger than he, perhaps in the early thirties, fair and handsome, on an ampler plan than her step-daughter, had some of her brother's largeness without his incult roughness. She realized Jardine's account of her, but she neither flaunted her high brow nor displayed the harrowed nerves of which Tolefree had been told.

Whatever strain of trouble or mystery might be in the background of the Lowell family, it did not now appear at this dinner-table.

How the talk got round to travel, Tolefree could hardly have said; but presently Mapperley was holding forth on Egypt and turning to ask whether he knew anything of the country. He sorrowfully admitted that his acquaint-

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ance with it was confined to a call or two at Port Said and a few hours' scurry around the city of Alexandria where his ship once put in to do a day's business.

"Ah?" said Mapperley. "Juliet—you and Henry have a soft place in your hearts for old Alex, eh?"

Tolefree saw a smile pass between them, but there was no sequel till Mapperley supplied it.

"These two met on a Nile boat and got married in Alex," said he. "Regular forcing house for romance, Egypt. Not that Alexandria has anything more to do with Egypt than Brighton or Atlantic City."

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Lowell pursued the subject. Tolefree, turning over the evening, came to the conclusion that Mapperley had dragged this privacy into the light for his special benefit.

Up to this point, in fact, the party made Jardine's fears seem a figment of fancy. Either Lowell and his wife were serene and happy people without a shadow on their horizon, and Katherine was a young woman without a serious care in the world—or they were all great actors.

Then, while the talkative Mapperley held forth on Egyptian marriage customs, with various sly digs at his sister and her romance, a maid came to call Mrs. Lowell's attention to a message. She excused herself, went to the telephone, and was absent for some minutes. The maid came a second time to speak to Lowell. Tolefree saw an angry flash in his blue eyes. He said to his brother-in-law, "Martin—look after our guests. Juliet wants to consult me about something."

Tolefree glanced at Katherine. She saw the glance and met it boldly. Turning to Jardine, she said,

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"Bruce—some stuff about your precious old Feast Day, I bet."

"Very likely. But, my girl, that tone's high treason in Castle-Dinas, and don't you forget it. Watch your step!"

Mapperley put in, "Has anyone told Tolefree about Feast Day?" and launched into a disquisition on the origin and meaning of the festival, keeping it up till at last Lowell and his wife came back to the room.

The interlude had lasted ten minutes. Tolefree had a jerk of the nerves when he caught sight of Mrs. Lowell as she entered. Her face was a tragedy, so worn that she looked ten years instead of ten minutes older. In the next half-hour he understood perfectly what Jardine had told him. The three Lowells had completely withdrawn from them into some private world of misery.

Frowning and glooming under his bushy eyebrows, Mapperley went ploughing on about Feast Day. Katherine made a brave effort to pretend that all was normal, but she almost leaped at Jardine's suggestion that he and Tolefree had better be starting for Nantivet. The hospitality of Menadon had collapsed. Mapperley rose with them.

"You needn't go yet, Martin, need you?" said Mrs. Lowell.

He went into the hall with Jardine and Tolefree, said he understood they would both be staying at his house from to-morrow, shook hands and went back.

"You see?" said Jardine.

"Very queer indeed," said Tolefree, getting into the car beside him. "Has it happened like that before?"

"Like what?"

"Has a telephone-call transformed a delightful dining-room into a torture-chamber?"

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"No, Tolefree—at least not in my presence. It's the first time I've seen anything you could call an incident—and I never saw Juliet so broken up."

Tolefree was silent for a few minutes.

"Useless to ask what you make of it?" Jardine said at last.

"What is there to make of it? Merely that Mrs. Lowell heard some bad news on the telephone, that Mr. Lowell knew it would be bad news, that it was bad enough to call for a consultation, and that Doctor Mapperley, if he doesn't know all about it, is well aware of bad news in the offing. I don't think you need me, Jardine, or anything I could possibly do. Whatever the trouble may be, it's a family affair."

"How d'you mean—about Mapperley?"

"Every gesture he makes shows that he's in the confidence of the Lowells. Even if I could make a shot I should be stymied at every hole."

"For Heaven's sake don't think of clearing out, Tolefree! If Mapperley's going to be awkward, you're my only chance. Stick it. See Trahair. Size it up. This means everything to me."

Tolefree said kindly, "Of course, I'll not clear out immediately. Certainly not before I've had a heart-to-heart talk with Doctor Mapperley. But, my dear Jardine, realize that you may be up against something insurmountable. A family's a terrible organization to challenge."

"I know. But somehow I can't believe there's no way of preventing Katherine and me from foundering. I want to know what it's all about. I believe you can find out. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

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2

With his kit in the back of the car, Tolefree was driven by Jardine to Castle-Dinas next morning.

In other circumstances the Feast Day ceremonies would have provided him with a pleasant study of the survival into the twentieth century of a medieval Merry England festival. He was, however, from the first too deeply puzzled by the Lowell family to pay much attention to the dancing through the gaily-flagged streets and on the castle green, or to the delights of the fair, the play-acting of children and the rejoicing horse-play of the multitude which thronged the town.

For Lowells, Mapperleys, Jardines and the like, the heart of the affair was the castle green. There under the shadow of the Norman Keep the élite of Castle-Dinas assembled to hear speeches from the vicar in full canonicals and the mayor in scarlet robes, to listen to brazen band music, to watch the folk-dancing before lunch, and afterwards to make the annual ceremonial tour of the castle ruins.

Jardine's unerring eye picked out Katherine and her party immediately they arrived. Presently Tolefree found himself sitting on a bunting-covered bench among the Lowells and Mapperley and other people in privileged prominence. Then Jardine was introducing him to a thin, dark man of about thirty who stopped in front of the bench.

"Hello, Sharpe! Looking bored as usual. You don't know Mr. Tolefree? This is Christopher Sharpe, Tolefree

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—sort of satellite of Doctor Mapperley, or do I mean acolyte?"

Sharpe nodded to Tolefree, made a pass at Jardine, and sat down between them.

"Great doings in Castle-Dinas," said he. "You down for the show, or—?"

"Didn't Mapperley tell you he's asked Tolefree to stay at Carnmarth?" asked Jardine.

"Oh!—so you're the man? He did say something about a guest of Jardine's. You must be an expert on William the Silent, of course. We're nuts on William just now."

Tolefree told him that the only William he could place with any confidence was William of Normandy 1066.

"Ah—he mayn't be a dog on history, Sharpe—but you should hear him and Mapperley chopping logic on metaphysics!" Jardine exclaimed.

"I refuse, Jardine—absolutely. Ghastly bore, metaphysics. And what's logic got to do with it, anyhow? Now, if you said they chopped logic on criminology—" He gave Tolefree a keen look out of his dark eyes.

"Don't mind him, Tolefree. He has a low nature," said Jardine.

Tolefree, returning Sharpe's glance, answered him: "Doctor Mapperley interested in criminology? He didn't impress me that way."

"I never heard of it, either," Jardine declared. "Sharpe's invented it."

"What you don't know about Mapperley is quite a lot, Jardine. What's stuffed into that great cranium would surprise you, Tolefree. But hist!—he comes."

Dr. Mapperley had risen from his place at the other end

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of the bench and stood before them. A look passed and Sharpe got up.

"No—don't move, Christopher," said the doctor. "Try Tolefree on causation. I'm going for a walk round."

Sharpe sat down as Mapperley strolled away.

"You've seen something, Tolefree, that mortal eye ne'er saw before!" he said.

"What's that?"

"Doctor Mapperley going for a walk by himself when he had a chance of holding forth to somebody else. What's the causation there? But hold!—I perceive it, if my eyes deceive me not."

Tolefree looked where Sharpe and Jardine were staring.

"Beresford?" Jardine said under his breath.

"The Mystery Man," said Sharpe.

A powerful-looking fellow, well-built, square-jawed, with rather close-set grey eyes, a straight nose and a military moustache, a well-dressed man of good carriage, was walking up the green slope towards the bench. He raised his hat as he approached Miss Lowell, nodded to Jardine and Sharpe, and began to talk to her.

Katherine said, "How do you do?" Mr. and Mrs. Lowell made no sign.

"Won't you introduce me to your mother and father?" he asked.

"Mother—Mr. Beresford." The girl turned for an instant to look at Jardine, and Tolefree caught a glimpse of Mrs. Lowell's face as she inclined her head an inch to the newcomer, who stared her boldly in the eye. Lowell did not so much as nod. He said, "Juliet, I see Trahair beckoning to us," and rose. Mrs. Lowell said, "Excuse

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