

# **THE NINESCORE MYSTERY AND OTHER STORIES**

Baroness Orczy

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# THE NINESCORE MYSTERY AND OTHER STORIES

## Baroness Orczy

### *THE NINESCORE MYSTERY*

*I*

WELL, you know, some say she is the daughter of a duke, others that she was born in the gutter, and that the handle has been soldered on to her name in order to give her style and influence.

I could say a lot, of course, but "my lips are sealed," as the poets say. All through her successful career at the Yard she honoured me with her friendship and confidence, but when she took me in partnership, as it were, she made me promise that I would never breathe a word of her private life, and this I swore on my Bible oath—"wish I may die," and all the rest of it.

Yes, we always called her "my lady," from the moment that she was put at the head of our section; and the chief called her "Lady Molly" in our presence. We of the Female Department are dreadfully snubbed by the men, though don't tell me that women have not ten times as much intuition as the blundering and sterner sex; my firm belief is that we shouldn't have half so many undetected crimes if some of the so-called mysteries were put to the test of feminine investigation.

Do you suppose for a moment, for instance, that the truth about that extraordinary case at Ninescore would ever have come to light if the men alone had had the handling of it? Would any man have taken so bold a risk as Lady Molly did when----- But I am anticipating.

Let me go back to that memorable morning when she came into my room in a wild state of agitation.

"The chief says I may go down to Ninescore if I like, Mary," she said, in a voice all a-quiver with excitement.

"You!" I ejaculated. "What for?"

"What for--what for?" she repeated eagerly. "Mary, don't you understand? It is the chance I have been waiting for--the chance of a lifetime? They are all desperate about the case up at the Yard; the public is furious, and columns of sarcastic letters appear in the daily press. None of our men know what to do; they are at their wits' end, and so this morning I went to the chief-----"

"Yes?" I queried eagerly, for she had suddenly ceased speaking.

"Well, never mind now how I did it--I will tell you all about it on the way, for we have just got time to catch the 11 a.m. down to Canterbury. The chief says I may go, and that I may take whom I like with me. He suggested one of the men, but somehow I feel that this is woman's work, and I'd rather have you, Mary, than anyone. We will go over the preliminaries of the case together in the train, as I don't suppose that you have got them at your fingers' ends yet, and you have only just got time to put a few things together and meet me at Charing Cross booking-office in time for that 11.0 sharp."

She was off before I could ask her any more questions, and anyhow, I was too flabbergasted to say much. A murder case in the hands of the Female Department! Such a thing had been unheard of until now. But I was all excitement, too, and you may be sure I was at the station in good time.

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Fortunately, Lady Molly and I had a carriage to ourselves. It was a non-stop run to Canterbury, so we had plenty of time before us, and I was longing to know all about this case, you bet, since I was to have the honour of helping Lady Molly in it.

The murder of Mary Nicholls had actually been committed at Ash Court, a fine old mansion which stands in the village of Ninescore. The Court is surrounded by magnificently timbered grounds, the most fascinating portion of which is an island in the midst of a small pond, which is spanned by a tiny rustic bridge. The island is called "The Wilderness," and is at the furthest end of the grounds, out of sight and earshot of the mansion itself. It was in this charming spot, on the edge of the pond, that the body of a girl was found on the 5th of February last.

I will spare you the horrible details of this gruesome discovery. Suffice it to say for the present that the unfortunate woman was lying on her face, with the lower portion of her body on the small, grass-covered embankment, and her head, arms, and shoulders sunk in the slime of the stagnant water just below.

It was Timothy Coleman, one of the under-gardeners at Ash Court, who first made this appalling discovery. He had crossed the rustic bridge and traversed the little island in its entirety, when he noticed something blue lying half in and half out of the water beyond. Timothy is a stolid, unemotional kind of yokel, and, once having ascertained that the object was a woman's body in a blue dress with white facings, he quietly stooped and tried to lift it out of the mud.

But here even his stolidity gave way at the terrible sight which was revealed before him. That the woman—whoever she might be—had been brutally murdered was obvious, her dress in front being stained with blood; but what was so awful that it even turned old Timothy sick with horror, was that, owing to the head, arms and shoulders having apparently been in the slime for some time, they were in an advanced state of decomposition.

Well, whatever was necessary was immediately done, of course. Coleman went to get assistance from the lodge, and soon the police were on the scene and had removed the unfortunate victim's remains to the small local police-station.

Ninescore is a sleepy, out-of-the-way village, situated some seven miles from Canterbury and four from Sandwich. Soon everyone in the place had heard that a terrible murder had been committed in the village, and all the details were already freely discussed at the Green Man.

To begin with, everyone said that though the body itself might be practically unrecognizable, the bright blue serge dress with the white facings was unmistakable, as were the pearl and ruby ring and the red leather purse found by Inspector Meisures close to the murdered woman's hand.

Within two hours of Timothy Coleman's gruesome find the identity of the unfortunate victim was firmly established as that of Mary Nicholls, who lived with her sister Susan at 2, Elm Cottages, in Ninescore Lane, almost opposite Ash Court. It was also known that when the police called at that address they found the place locked and apparently uninhabited.

Mrs. Hooker, who lived at No. 1 next door, explained to Inspector Meisures that Susan and Mary Nicholls had left home about a fortnight ago, and that she had not seen them since.

"It'll be a fortnight to-morrow," she said. "I was just inside my own front door a-calling to the cat to come in. It was past seven o'clock, and as dark a night as ever you did see. You could hardly see your 'and afore your eyes, and there was a nasty damp drizzle comin' from everywhere. Susan and Mary come out of their cottage; I couldn't rightly see Susan, but I 'eard Mary's voice quite distinck. She says: 'We'll have to 'urry,' says she. I, thinkin' they might be goin' to do some shoppin' in the village, calls out to them that I'd just 'eard the church clock strike seven,

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and that bein' Thursday, and early closin', they'd find all the shops shut at Ninescore. But they took no notice, and walked off towards the village, and that's the last I ever seed o' them two."

Further questioning among the village folk brought forth many curious details. It seems that Mary Nicholls was a very flighty young woman, about whom there had already been quite a good deal of scandal, whilst Susan, on the other hand—who was very sober and steady in her conduct—had chafed considerably under her younger sister's questionable reputation, and, according to Mrs. Hooker, many were the bitter quarrels which occurred between the two girls. These quarrels, it seems, had been especially violent within the last year whenever Mr. Lionel Lydgate called at the cottage. He was a London gentleman, it appears—a young man about town, it afterwards transpired—but he frequently stayed at Canterbury, where he had some friends, and on those occasions he would come over to Ninescore in his smart dogcart and take Mary out for drives.

Mr. Lydgate is brother to Lord Edbrooke, the multi-millionaire, who was the recipient of birthday honours last year. His lordship resides at Edbrooke Castle, but he and his brother Lionel had rented Ash Court once or twice, as both were keen golfers and Sandwich Links are very close by. Lord Edbrooke, I may add, is a married man. Mr. Lionel Lydgate, on the other hand, is just engaged to Miss Marbury, daughter of one of the canons of Canterbury.

No wonder, therefore, that Susan Nicholls strongly objected to her sister's name being still coupled with that of a young man far above her in station, who, moreover, was about to marry a young lady in his own rank of life.

But Mary seemed not to care. She was a young woman who only liked fun and pleasure, and she shrugged her shoulders at public opinion, even though there were ugly rumours anent the parentage of a little baby girl whom she herself had placed under the care of Mrs. Williams, a widow who lived in a somewhat isolated cottage on the Canterbury road. Mary had told Mrs. Williams that the father of the child, who was her own brother, had died very suddenly, leaving the little one on her and Susan's hands; and, as they couldn't look after it properly, they wished Mrs. Williams to have charge of it. To this the latter readily agreed.

The sum for the keep of the infant was decided upon, and thereafter Mary Nicholls had come every week to see the little girl, and always brought the money with her.

Inspector Meisures called on Mrs. Williams, and certainly the worthy widow had a very startling sequel to relate to the above story.

"A fortnight to-morrow," explained Mrs. Williams to the inspector, "a little after seven o'clock, Mary Nicholls come runnin' into my cottage. It was an awful night, pitch dark and a nasty drizzle. Mary says to me she's in a great hurry; she is goin' up to London by a train from Canterbury and wants to say good-bye to the child. She seemed terribly excited, and her clothes were very wet. I brings baby to her, and she kisses it rather wild-like and says to me: 'You'll take great care of her, Mrs. Williams,' she says; 'I may be gone some time.' Then she puts baby down and gives me £2, the child's keep for eight weeks."

After which, it appears, Mary once more said "good-bye" and ran out of the cottage, Mrs. Williams going as far as the front door with her. The night was very dark, and she couldn't see if Mary was alone or not, until presently she heard her voice saying tearfully:

"I had to kiss baby——" then the voice died out in the distance "on the way to Canterbury," Mrs. Williams said, most emphatically.

So far, you see, Inspector Meisures was able to fix the departure of the two sisters Nicholls from Ninescore on the night of January 23rd. Obviously they left their cottage about seven, went to Mrs. Williams, where Susan remained outside while Mary went in to say good-bye to the child.

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After that all traces of them seem to have vanished. Whether they did go to Canterbury, and caught the last up train, at what station they alighted, or when poor Mary came back, could not at present be discovered.

According to the medical officer, the unfortunate girl must have been dead twelve or thirteen days at the very least, as, though the stagnant water may have accelerated decomposition, the head could not have got into such an advanced state much under a fortnight.

At Canterbury station neither the booking-clerk nor the porters could throw any light upon the subject. Canterbury West is a busy station, and scores of passengers buy tickets and go through the barriers every day. It was impossible, therefore, to give any positive information about two young women who may or may not have travelled by the last up train on January 23rd—that is, a fortnight before.

One thing only was certain—whether Susan went to Canterbury and travelled by that up train or not, alone or with her sister—Mary had undoubtedly come back to Ninescore either the same night or the following day, since Timothy Coleman found her half-decomposed remains in the grounds of Ash Court a fortnight later.

Had she come back to meet her lover, or what? And where was Susan now?

From the first, therefore, you see, there was a great element of mystery about the whole case, and it was only natural that the local police should feel that, unless something more definite came out at the inquest, they would like to have the assistance of some of the fellows at the Yard

So the preliminary notes were sent up to London, and some of them drifted into our hands. Lady Molly was deeply interested in it from the first, and my firm belief is that she simply worried the chief into allowing her to go down to Ninescore and see what she could do

## 2

AT first it was understood that Lady Molly should only go down to Canterbury after the inquest, if the local police still felt that they were in want of assistance from London. But nothing was farther from my lady's intentions than to wait until then.

"I was not going to miss the first act of a romantic drama," she said to me just as our train steamed into Canterbury Station. "Pick up your bag, Mary. We're going to tramp it to Ninescore—two lady artists on a sketching tour, remember—and we'll find lodging in the village, I dare say."

We had some lunch in Canterbury, and then we started to walk the six and a half miles to Ninescore, carrying our bags. We put up at one of the cottages where the legend "Apartments for single, respectable lady or gentleman" had hospitably invited us to enter, and at eight o'clock the next morning we found our way to the local police-station, where the inquest was to take place. Such a funny little place, you know—just a cottage converted for official use—and the small room packed to its utmost holding capacity. The entire able-bodied population of the neighbourhood had, I verily believe, congregated in these ten cubic yards of stuffy atmosphere.

Inspector Measures, apprized by the chief of our arrival, had reserved two good places for us well in sight of witnesses, coroner and jury. The room was insupportably close, but I assure you that neither Lady Molly nor I thought much about our comfort then. We were terribly interested.

From the outset the case seemed, as it were, to wrap itself more and more in its mantle of impenetrable mystery. There was precious little in the way of clues, only that awful intuition, that dark, unspoken suspicion with regard to one particular man's guilt, which one could feel hovering in the minds of all those present.

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Neither the police nor Timothy Coleman had anything to add to what was already known. The ring and purse were produced, also the dress worn by the murdered woman. All were sworn to by several of the witnesses as having been the property of Mary Nicholls.

Timothy, on being closely questioned, said that, in his opinion, the girl's body had been pushed into the mud, as the head was absolutely embedded in it, and he didn't see how she could have fallen like that.

Medical evidence was repeated; it was as uncertain—as vague—as before. Owing to the state of the head and neck it was impossible to ascertain by what means the death blow had been dealt. The doctor repeated his statement that the unfortunate girl must have been dead quite a fortnight. The body was discovered on February 5th—a fortnight before that would have been on or about January 23rd.

The caretaker who lived at the lodge at Ash Court could also throw but little light on the mysterious event. Neither he nor any member of his family had seen or heard anything to arouse their suspicions. Against that he explained that "The Wilderness," where the murder was committed, is situated some 200 yards from the lodge, with the mansion and flower garden lying between. Replying to a question put to him by a juryman, he said that that portion of the grounds is only divided off from Ninescore Lane by a low brick wall, which has a door in it, opening into the lane almost opposite Elm Cottages. He added that the mansion had been empty for over a year, and that he succeeded the last man, who died, about twelve months ago. Mr. Lydgate had not been down for golf since witness had been in charge.

It would be useless to recapitulate all that the various witnesses had already told the police, and were now prepared to swear to. The private life of the two sisters Nicholls was gone into at full length, as much, at least, as was publicly known. But you know what village folk are; except when there is a bit of scandal and gossip, they know precious little of one another's inner lives.

The two girls appeared to be very comfortably off. Mary was always smartly dressed; and the baby girl, whom she had placed in Mrs. Williams's charge, had plenty of good and expensive clothes, whilst her keep, 5s. a week, was paid with unfailing regularity. What seemed certain, however, was that they did not get on well together, that Susan violently objected to Mary's association with Mr. Lydgate, and that recently she had spoken to the vicar asking him to try to persuade her sister to go away from Ninescore altogether, so as to break entirely with the past. The Reverend Octavius Ludlow, Vicar of Ninescore, seems thereupon to have had a little talk with Mary on the subject, suggesting that she should accept a good situation in London.

"But," continued the reverend gentleman, "I didn't make much impression on her. All she replied to me was that she certainly need never go into service, as she had a good income of her own, and could obtain £5,000 or more quite easily at any time if she chose."

"Did you mention Mr. Lydgate's name to her at all?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, I did," said the vicar, after a slight hesitation.

"Well, what was her attitude then?"

"I am afraid she laughed," replied the Reverend Octavius, primly, "and said very picturesquely, if somewhat ungrammatically, that 'some folks didn't know what they was talkin' about.'"

All very indefinite, you see. Nothing to get hold of, no motive suggested—beyond a very vague suspicion, perhaps, of blackmail—to account for a brutal crime. I must not, however, forget to tell you the two other facts which came to light in the course of this extraordinary inquest. Though, at the time, these facts seemed of wonderful moment for the elucidation of the mystery, they only helped ultimately to plunge the whole case into

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darkness still more impenetrable than before.

I am alluding, firstly, to the deposition of James Franklin, a carter in the employ of one of the local farmers. This man stated that about half-past six on that same night, January 23rd, he was walking along Ninescore Lane leading his horse and cart, as the night was indeed pitch dark. Just as he came somewhere near Elm Cottages he heard a man's voice saying, in a kind of hoarse whisper:

"Open the door, can't you? It's as dark as blazes!"

Then a pause, after which the same voice added:

"Mary, where the dickens are you?" Whereupon a girl's voice replied: "All right, I'm coming."

James Franklin heard nothing more after that, nor did he see anyone in the gloom.

With the stolidity peculiar to the Kentish peasantry, he thought no more of this until the day when he heard that Mary Nicholls had been murdered; then he voluntarily came forward and told his story to the police. Now, when he was closely questioned, he was quite unable to say whether these voices proceeded from that side of the lane where stand Elm Cottages, or from the other side, which is edged by the low brick wall.

Finally, Inspector Measures, who really showed an extraordinary sense of what was dramatic, here produced a document which he had reserved for the last. This was a piece of paper which he had found in the red leather purse already mentioned, and which at first had not been thought very important, as the writing was identified by several people as that of the deceased, and consisted merely of a series of dates and hours scribbled in pencil on a scrap of notepaper. But suddenly these dates had assumed a weird and terrible significance: two of them, at least—December 26th and January 1st followed by "10 a.m."—were days on which Mr. Lydgate came over to Ninescore and took Mary for drives. One or two witnesses swore to this positively. Both dates had been local meets of the harriers, to which other folk from the village had gone, and Mary had openly said afterwards how much she had enjoyed these.

The other dates (there were six altogether) were more or less vague. One Mrs. Hooker remembered as being coincident with a day Mary Nicholls had spent away from home; but the last date, scribbled in the same handwriting, was January 23rd, and below it the hour—6 p.m.

The coroner now adjourned the inquest. An explanation from Mr. Lionel Lydgate had become imperative.

### 3

PUBLIC excitement had by now reached a very high pitch; it was no longer a case of mere local interest. The country inns all round the immediate neighbourhood were packed with visitors from London, artists, journalists, dramatists, and actor-managers, whilst the hotels and fly-proprietors of Canterbury were doing a roaring trade.

Certain facts and one vivid picture stood out clearly before the thoughtful mind in the midst of a chaos of conflicting and irrelevant evidence: the picture was that of the two women tramping in the wet and pitch dark night towards Canterbury. Beyond that everything was a blur.

When did Mary Nicholls come back to Ninescore, and why?

To keep an appointment made with Lionel Lydgate, it was openly whispered; but that appointment—if the rough notes were interpreted rightly—was for the very day on which she and her sister went away from home. A man's voice called to her at half-past six certainly, and she replied to it. Franklin, the carter, heard her; but half an hour



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afterwards Mrs. Hooker heard her voice when she left home with her sister, and she visited Mrs. Williams after that.

The only theory compatible with all this was, of course, that Mary merely accompanied Susan part of the way to Canterbury, then went back to meet her lover, who enticed her into the deserted grounds of Ash Court, and there murdered her.

The motive was not far to seek. Mr. Lionel Lydgate, about to marry, wished to silence for ever a voice that threatened to be unpleasantly persistent in its demands for money and in its threats of scandal.

But there was one great argument against that theory—the disappearance of Susan Nicholls. She had been extensively advertised for. The murder of her sister was published broadcast in every newspaper in the United Kingdom—she could not be ignorant of it. And, above all, she hated Mr. Lydgate. Why did she not come and add the weight of her testimony against him if, indeed, he was guilty?

And if Mr. Lydgate was innocent, then where was the criminal? And why had Susan Nicholls disappeared?

Why? why? why?

Well, the next day would show. Mr. Lionel Lydgate had been cited by the police to give evidence at the adjourned inquest.

Good-looking, very athletic, and obviously frightfully upset and nervous, he entered the little court-room, accompanied by his solicitor, just before the coroner and jury took their seats.

He looked keenly at Lady Molly as he sat down, and from the expression of his face I guessed that he was much puzzled to know who she was.

He was the first witness called. Manfully and clearly he gave a concise account of his association with the deceased.

"She was pretty and amusing," he said. "I liked to take her out when I was in the neighbourhood; it was no trouble to me. There was no harm in her, whatever the village gossips might say. I know she had been in trouble, as they say, but that had nothing to do with me. It wasn't for me to be hard on a girl, and I fancy that she has been very badly treated by some scoundrel."

Here he was hard pressed by the coroner, who wished him to explain what he meant. But Mr. Lydgate turned obstinate, and to every leading question he replied stolidly and very emphatically:

"I don't know who it was. It had nothing to do with me, but I was sorry for the girl because of everyone turning against her, including her sister, and I tried to give her a little pleasure when I could."

That was all right. Very sympathetically told. The public quite liked this pleasing specimen of English cricket, golf and football-loving manhood. Subsequently Mr. Lydgate admitted meeting Mary on December 26th and January 1st, but he swore most emphatically that that was the last he ever saw of her.

"But the 23rd of January," here insinuated the coroner; "you made an appointment with the deceased then?"

"Certainly not," he replied.

"But you met her on that day?"

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"Most emphatically no," he replied, quietly. "I went down to Edbrooke Castle, my brother's place in Lincolnshire, on the 20th of last month, and only got back to town about three days ago."

"You swear to that, Mr. Lydgate?" asked the coroner.

"I do, indeed, and there are a score of witnesses to bear me out. The family, the house-party, the servants."

He tried to dominate his own excitement. I suppose, poor man, he had only just realized that certain horrible suspicions had been resting upon him. His solicitor pacified him, and presently he sat down, whilst I must say that everyone there present was relieved at the thought that the handsome young athlete was not a murderer, after all. To look at him it certainly seemed preposterous.

But then, of course, there was the deadlock, and as there were no more witnesses to be heard, no new facts to elucidate, the jury returned the usual verdict against some person or persons unknown; and we, the keenly interested spectators, were left to face the problem—Who murdered Mary Nicholls, and where was her sister, Susan?

### 4

AFTER the verdict we found our way back to our lodgings. Lady Molly tramped along silently, with that deep furrow between her brows which I knew meant that she was deep in thought.

"Now we'll have some tea," I said, with a sigh of relief, as soon as we entered the cottage door.

"No, you won't," replied my lady, dryly. "I am going to write out a telegram, and we'll go straight on to Canterbury and send it from there."

"To Canterbury!" I gasped. "Two hours' walk at least, for I don't suppose we can get a trap, and it is past three o'clock. Why not send your telegram from Ninescore?"

"Mary, you are stupid," was all the reply I got.

She wrote out two telegrams—one of which was at least three dozen words long—and, once more calling to me to come along, we set out for Canterbury.

I was tea-less, cross, and puzzled. Lady Molly was alert, cheerful, and irritatingly active.

We reached the first telegraph office a little before five. My lady sent the telegram without condescending to tell me anything of its destination or contents; then she took me to the Castle Hotel and graciously offered me tea.

"May I be allowed to inquire whether you propose tramping back to Ninescore to-night?" I asked, with a slight touch of sarcasm, as I really felt put out.

"No, Mary," she replied, quietly munching a bit of Sally Lunn; "I have engaged a couple of rooms at this hotel and wired the chief that any message will find us here to-morrow morning."

After that there was nothing for it but quietude, patience, and finally supper and bed.

The next morning my lady walked into my room before I had finished dressing. She had a newspaper in her hand, and threw it down on the bed as she said, calmly:—

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"It was in the evening paper all right last night. think we shall be in time."

No use asking her what "it" meant. It was easier to pick up the paper, which I did. It was a late edition of one of the leading London evening shockers, and at once the front page, with its startling headline, attracted my attention:—

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#### *MARY NICHOLLS'S BABY DYING*

Then, below that, a short paragraph:—

"We regret to learn that the little baby daughter of the unfortunate girl who was murdered recently at Ash Court, Ninescore, Kent, under such terrible and mysterious circumstances, is very seriously ill at the cottage of Mrs. Williams, in whose charge she is. The local doctor who visited her to-day declares that she cannot last more than a few hours. At the time of going to press the nature of the child's complaint was not known to our special representative at Ninescore."

"What does this mean?" I gasped.

But before she could reply there was a knock at the door.

"A telegram for Miss Granard," said the voice of the hall porter.

"Quick, Mary," said Lady Molly eagerly. "I told the chief and also Measures to wire here and to you." The telegram turned out to have come from Ninescore, and was signed "Measures." Lady Molly read it out aloud:—

"Mary Nicholls arrived here this morning. Detained her at station. Come at once."

"Mary Nicholls! I don't understand," was all I could contrive to say.

But she only replied:

"I knew it! I knew it! Oh, Mary, what a wonderful thing is human nature, and how I thank Heaven that gave me a knowledge of it!"

She made me get dressed all in a hurry, and then we swallowed some breakfast hastily whilst a fly was being got for us. I had perforce to satisfy my curiosity from my own inner consciousness. Lady Molly was too absorbed to take any notice of me. Evidently the chief knew what she had done and approved of it; the telegram from Measures pointed to that.

My lady had suddenly become a personality. Dressed very quietly, and in a smart close-fitting hat, she looked years older than her age, owing also to the seriousness of her mien.

The fly took us to Ninescore fairly quickly. At the little police station we found Measures awaiting us. He had Elliott and Pegram from the Yard with him. They had obviously got their orders, for all three of them were mighty deferential.

"The woman is Mary Nicholls right enough," said Measures, as Lady Molly brushed quickly past him, "the woman who was supposed to have been murdered. It's that silly bogus paragraph about the infant brought her out of her hiding-place. I wonder how it got in," he added, blandly; "the child is well enough."

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"I wonder," said Lady Molly, whilst a smile—the first I had seen that morning—lit up her pretty face.

"I suppose the other sister will turn up, too, presently," rejoined Elliott. "Pretty lot of trouble we shall have now. If Mary Nicholls is alive and kickin', who was murdered at Ash Court, say I?"

"I wonder," said Lady Molly, with the same charming smile.

Then she went in to see Mary Nicholls.

The Reverend Octavius Ludlow was sitting beside the girl, who seemed in great distress, for she was crying bitterly.

Lady Molly asked Elliott and the others to remain in the passage whilst she herself went into the room, I following behind her.

When the door was shut she went up to Mary Nicholls, and assuming a hard and severe manner, she said:—

"Well, you have at last made up your mind, have you, Nicholls? I suppose you know that we have applied for a warrant for your arrest?"

The woman gave a shriek which unmistakably was one of fear.

"My arrest?" she gasped. "What for?"

"The murder of your sister Susan."

"'Twasn't me!" she said, quickly.

"Then Susan is dead?" retorted Lady Molly, quietly.

Mary saw that she had betrayed herself. She gave Lady Molly a look of agonized horror, then turned as white as a sheet and would have fallen had not the Reverend Octavius Ludlow gently led her to a chair.

"It wasn't me," she repeated, with a heartbroken sob.

"That will be for you to prove," said Lady Molly dryly. "The child cannot now, of course, remain with Mrs. Williams; she will be removed to the workhouse, and——"

"No, that she shan't be," said the mother excitedly. "She shan't be, I tell you. The workhouse, indeed," she added, in a paroxysm of hysterical tears, "and her father a lord!"

The reverend gentleman and I gasped in astonishment; but Lady Molly had worked up to this climax so ingeniously that it was obvious she had guessed it all along, and had merely led Mary Nicholls on in order to get this admission from her.

How well she had known human nature in pitting the child against the sweetheart! Mary Nicholls was ready enough to hide herself, to part from her child even for a while, in order to save the man she had once loved from the consequences of his crime; but when she heard that her child was dying she no longer could bear to leave it among strangers, and when Lady Molly taunted her with the workhouse she exclaimed, in her maternal pride:

"The workhouse! And her father a lord!"

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Driven into a corner, she confessed the whole truth.

Lord Edbrooke, then Mr. Lydgate, was the father of her child. Knowing this, her sister Susan had for over a year now, systematically blackmailed the unfortunate man—not altogether, it seems, without Mary's connivance. In January last she got him to come down to Ninescore under the distinct promise that Mary would meet him and hand over to him the letters she had received from him, as well as the ring he had given her, in exchange for the sum of £5,000.

The meeting—place was arranged, but at the last moment Mary was afraid to go in the dark. Susan, nothing daunted, but anxious about her own reputation in case she should be seen talking to a man so late at night, put on Mary's dress, took the ring and the letters, also her sister's purse, and went to meet Lord Edbrooke.

What happened at that interview no one will ever know. It ended with the murder of the blackmailer. I suppose the fact that Susan had, in a measure, begun by impersonating her sister, gave the murderer the first thought of confusing the identity of his victim by the horrible device of burying the body in the slimy mud. Anyway, he almost did succeed in hoodwinking the police, and would have done so entirely but for Lady Molly's strange intuition in the matter.

After his crime he ran instinctively to Mary's cottage. He had to make a clean breast of it to her, as, without her help, he was a doomed man.

So he persuaded her to go away from home and to leave no clue or trace of herself or her sister in Ninescore. With the help of money which he would give her she could begin life anew somewhere else, and no doubt he deluded the unfortunate girl with promises that her child would be restored to her very soon.

Thus he enticed Mary Nicholls away, who would have been the great and all-important witness against him the moment his crime was discovered. A girl of Mary's type and class instinctively obeys the man she has once loved, the man who is the father of her child. She consented to disappear and to allow all the world to believe that she had been murdered by some unknown miscreant.

Then the murderer quietly returned to his luxurious home at Edbrooke Castle unsuspected. No one had thought of mentioning his name in connexion with that of Mary Nicholls. In the days when he used to come down to Ash Court he was Mr. Lydgate, and, when he became a peer, sleepy, out-of-the-way Ninescore ceased to think of him.

Perhaps Mr. Lionel Lydgate knew all about his brother's association with the village girl. From his attitude at the inquest I should say he did, but of course he would not betray his own brother unless forced to do so.

Now, of course, the whole aspect of the case was changed; the veil of mystery had been torn asunder owing to the insight, the marvellous intuition, of a woman who, in my opinion, is the most wonderful psychologist of her time.

You know the sequel. Our fellows at the Yard, aided by the local police, took their lead from Lady Molly, and began their investigations of Lord Edbrooke's movements on or about the 23rd of January.

Even their preliminary inquiries revealed the fact that his lordship had left Edbrooke Castle on the 21st. He went up to town, saying to his wife and household that he was called away on business, and not even taking his valet with him. He put up at the Langham Hotel.

But here police investigations came to an abrupt ending. Lord Edbrooke evidently got wind of them. Anyway, the day after Lady Molly so cleverly enticed Mary Nicholls out of her hiding-place, and surprised her into an admission of the truth, the unfortunate man threw himself in front of the express train at Grantham railway

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station, and was instantly killed. Human justice cannot reach him now!

But don't tell me that a man would have thought of that bogus paragraph, or of the taunt which stung the motherly pride of the village girl to the quick, and thus wrung from her an admission which no amount of male ingenuity would ever have obtained.

### *The Fordwych Castle Mystery*

1

CAN you wonder that, when some of the ablest of our fellows at the Yard were at their wits' ends to know what to do, the chief instinctively turned to Lady Molly?

Surely the Fordwych Castle Mystery, as it was universally called, was a case which more than any other required feminine tact, intuition, and all those qualities of which my dear lady possessed more than her usual share.

With the exception of Mr. McKinley, the lawyer, and young Jack d'Alboukirk, there were only women connected with the case.

If you have studied Debrett at all, you know as well as I do that the peerage is one of those old English ones which date back some six hundred years, and that the present Lady d'Alboukirk is a baroness in her own right, the title and estates descending to heirs-general. If you have perused that same interesting volume carefully, you will also have discovered that the late Lord d'Alboukirk had two daughters, the eldest, Clementina Cecilia—the present Baroness, who succeeded him—the other, Margaret Florence, who married in 1884 Jean Laurent Duplessis, a Frenchman whom Debrett vaguely describes as "of Pondicherry, India," and of whom she had issue two daughters, Henriette Marie, heir now to the ancient barony of d'Alboukirk of Fordwych, and Joan, born two years later.

There seems to have been some mystery or romance attached to this marriage of the Honourable Margaret Florence d'Alboukirk to the dashing young officer of the Foreign Legion. Old Lord d'Alboukirk at the time was British Ambassador in Paris, and he seems to have had grave objections to the union, but Miss Margaret, openly flouting her father's displeasure, and throwing prudence to the winds, ran away from home one fine day with Captain Duplessis, and from Pondicherry wrote a curt letter to her relatives telling them of her marriage with the man she loved best in all the world. Old Lord d'Alboukirk never got over his daughter's wilfulness. She had been his favourite, it appears, and her secret marriage and deceit practically broke his heart. He was kind to her, however, to the end, and when the first baby girl was born and the young pair seemed to be in straitened circumstances, he made them an allowance until the day of his daughter's death, which occurred three years after her elopement, on the birth of her second child.

When, on the death of her father, the Honourable Clementina Cecilia came into the title and fortune, she seemed to have thought it her duty to take some interest in her late sister's eldest child, who, failing her own marriage, and issue, was heir to the barony of d'Alboukirk. Thus it was that Miss Henriette Marie Duplessis came, with her father's consent, to live with her aunt at Fordwych Castle. Debrett will tell you, moreover, that in 1901 she assumed the name of d'Alboukirk, in lieu of her own, by royal licence. Failing her, the title and estate would devolve firstly on her sister Joan, and subsequently on a fairly distant cousin, Captain John d'Alboukirk, at present a young officer in the Guards.

According to her servants, the present Baroness D'Alboukirk is very self-willed, but otherwise neither more nor less eccentric than any north-country old maid would be who had such an exceptional position to keep up in the social world. The one soft trait in her otherwise not very lovable character is her great affection for her late sister's child. Miss Henriette Duplessis d'Alboukirk has inherited from her French father dark eyes and hair and a

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somewhat swarthy complexion, but no doubt it is from her English ancestry that she has derived a somewhat masculine frame and a very great fondness for all outdoor pursuits. She is very athletic, knows how to fence and to box, rides to hounds, and is a remarkably good shot.

From all accounts, the first hint of trouble in that gorgeous home was coincident with the arrival at Fordwych of a young, very pretty girl visitor, who was attended by her maid, a half-caste woman, dark-complexioned and surly of temper, but obviously of doglike devotion towards her young mistress. This visit seems to have come as a surprise to the entire household at Fordwych Castle, her ladyship having said nothing about it until the very morning that the guests were expected. She then briefly ordered one of the housemaids to get a bedroom ready for a young lady, and to put up a small camp bedstead in an adjoining dressing room. Even Miss Henriette seems to have been taken by surprise at the announcement of this visit, for, according to Jane Taylor, the housemaid in question, there was a violent word-passage between the old lady and her niece, the latter winding up an excited speech with the words:

"At any rate, aunt, there won't be room for both of us in this house!" After which she flounced out of the room, banging the door behind her.

Very soon the household was made to understand that the newcomer was none other than Miss Joan Duplessis, Miss Henriette's younger sister. It appears that Captain Duplessis had recently died in Pondicherry, and that the young girl then wrote to her aunt, Lady d'Alboukirk, claiming her help and protection, which the old lady naturally considered it her duty to extend to her.

It appears that Miss Joan was very unlike her sister, as she was petite and fair, more English-looking than foreign, and had pretty, dainty ways which soon endeared her to the household. The devotion existing between her and the half-caste woman she had brought from India was, moreover, unique.

It seems, however, that from the moment these newcomers came into the house, dissensions, often degenerating into violent quarrels, became the order of the day. Henriette seemed to have taken a strong dislike to her younger sister, and most particularly to the latter's dark attendant, who was vaguely known in the house as Roonah.

That some events of serious import were looming ahead, the servants at Fordwych were pretty sure. The butler and footmen at dinner heard scraps of conversation which sounded very ominous. There was talk of "lawyers," of "proofs," of "marriage and-birth certificates," quickly suppressed when the servants happened to be about. Her ladyship looked terribly anxious and worried, and she and Miss Henriette spent long hours closeted together in a small boudoir, whence proceeded ominous sounds of heart-rending weeping on her ladyship's part, and angry and violent words from Miss Henriette.

Mr. McKinley, the eminent lawyer from London, came down two or three times to Fordwych, and held long conversations with her ladyship, after which the latter's eyes were very swollen and red. The household thought it more than strange that Roonah, the Indian servant, was almost invariably present at these interviews between Mr. McKinley, her ladyship, and Miss Joan. Otherwise the woman kept herself very much aloof; she spoke very little, hardly took any notice of anyone save of her ladyship and of her young mistress, and the outbursts of Miss Henriette's temper seemed to leave her quite unmoved. A strange fact was that she had taken a sudden and great fancy for frequenting a small Roman Catholic convent chapel which was distant about half a mile from the Castle, and presently it was understood that Roonah, who had been a Parsee, had been converted by the attendant priest to the Roman Catholic faith.

All this happened, mind you, within the last two or three months; in fact, Miss Joan had been in the Castle exactly twelve weeks when Captain Jack d'Alboukirk came to pay his cousin one of his periodical visits. From the first he seems to have taken a great fancy to his cousin Joan, and soon everyone noticed that this fancy was rapidly ripening into love. It was equally certain that from that moment dissensions between the two sisters became more

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frequent and more violent; the generally accepted opinion being that Miss Henriette was jealous of Joan, whilst Lady d'Alboukirk herself, for some unexplainable reason, seems to have regarded this love-making with marked disfavour.

Then came the tragedy.

One morning Joan ran downstairs, pale, and trembling from head o foot, moaning and sobbing as she ran:

"Roonah!—my poor old Roonah!—I knew it—I knew it!"

Captain Jack happened to meet her at the foot of the stairs. He pressed her with questions, but the girl was unable to speak. She merely pointed mutely to the floor above. The young man, genuinely alarmed, ran quickly upstairs; he threw open the door leading to Roonah's room, and there, to his horror, he saw the unfortunate woman lying across the small camp bedstead, with a handkerchief over her nose and mouth, and her throat cut.

The sight was horrible.

Poor Roonah was obviously dead.

Without losing his presence of mind, Captain Jack quietly shut the door again, after urgently begging Joan to compose herself, and to try to keep up, at any rate until the local doctor could be sent for and the terrible news gently broken to Lady d'Alboukirk.

The doctor, hastily summoned, arrived some twenty minutes later. He could but confirm Joan's and Captain Jack's fears. Roonah was indeed dead—in fact, she had been dead some hours.

2

FROM the very first, mind you, the public took a more than usually keen interest in this mysterious occurrence. The evening papers on the very day of the murder were ablaze with flaming headlines such as:

### ***THE TRAGEDY AT FORDWYCH CASTLE***

MYSTERIOUS MURDER OF AN IMPORTANT WITNESS  
GRAVE CHARGES AGAINST PERSONS IN HIGH LIFE

and so forth.

As time went on, the mystery deepened more and more, and I suppose Lady Molly must have had an inkling that sooner or later the chief would have to rely on her help and advice, for she sent me down to attend the inquest, and gave me strict orders to keep eyes and ears open for every detail in connection with the crime—however trivial it might seem. She herself remained in town, awaiting a summons from the chief.

The inquest was held in the dining room of Fordwyich Castle, and the noble hall was crowded to its utmost when the coroner and jury finally took their seats, after having viewed the body of the poor murdered woman upstairs.

The scene was dramatic enough to please any novelist, and an awed hush descended over the crowd when, just before the proceedings began, a door was thrown open, and in walked—stiff and erect—the Baroness d'Alboukirk, escorted by her niece, Miss Henriette, and closely followed by her cousin, Captain Jack, of the Guards.



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The old lady's face was as indifferent and haughty as usual, and so was that of her athletic niece. Captain Jack, on the other hand, looked troubled and flushed. Everyone noted that, directly he entered the room, his eyes sought a small, dark figure that sat silent and immovable beside the portly figure of the great lawyer, Mr. Hubert McKinley. This was Miss Joan Duplessis, in a plain black stuff gown, her young face pale and tear-stained.

Dr. Walker, the local practitioner, was, of course, the first witness called. His evidence was purely medical. He deposed to having made an examination of the body, and stated that he found that a handkerchief saturated with chloroform had been pressed to the woman's nostrils, probably while she was asleep, her throat having subsequently been cut with a sharp knife; death must have been instantaneous, as the poor thing did not appear to have struggled at all.

In answer to a question from the coroner, the doctor said that no great force or violence would be required for the gruesome deed, since the victim was undeniably unconscious when it was done. At the same time it argued unusual coolness and determination.

The handkerchief was produced, also the knife. The former was a bright-coloured one, stated to be the property of the deceased. The latter was a foreign, old-fashioned hunting knife, one of a panoply of small arms and other weapons which adorned a corner of the hall. It had been found by Detective Elliott in a clump of gorse on the adjoining golf links. There could be no question that it had been used by the murderer for his fell purpose, since at the time it was found it still bore traces of blood.

Captain Jack was the next witness called. He had very little to say, as he merely saw the body from across the room, and immediately closed the door again and, having begged his cousin to compose herself, called his own valet and sent him off for the doctor.

Some of the staff of Fordwych Castle were called, all of whom testified to the Indian woman's curious taciturnity, which left her quite isolated among her fellow servants. Miss Henriette's maid, how\*ever, Jane Partlett, had one or two more interesting facts to record. She seems to have been more intimate with the deceased woman than anyone else, and on one occasion, at least, had quite a confidential talk with her.

"She talked chiefly about her mistress," said Jane, in answer to a question from the coroner, "to whom she was most devoted. She told me that she loved her so, she would readily die for her. Of course, I thought that silly-like, and just mad, foreign talk, but Roonah was very angry when I laughed at her, and then she undid her dress in front, and showed me some papers which were sewn in the lining of her dress. 'All these papers my little missee's fortune,' she said to me. 'Roonah guard these with her life. Someone must kill Roonah before taking them from her!'

"This was about six weeks ago," continued Jane, whilst a strange feeling of awe seemed to descend upon all those present whilst the girl spoke. "Lately she became much more silent, and, on my once referring to the papers, she turned on me savage-like and told me to hold my tongue."

Asked if she had mentioned the incident of the papers to anyone, Jane replied in the negative.

"Except to Miss Henriette, of course," she added, after a slight moment of hesitation.

Throughout all these preliminary examinations Lady d'Alboukirk, sitting between her cousin Captain Jack and her niece Henriette, had remained quite silent in an erect attitude expressive of haughty indifference. Henriette, on the other hand, looked distinctly bored. Once or twice she had yawned audibly, which caused quite a feeling of anger against her among the spectators. Such callousness in the midst of so mysterious a tragedy, and when her own sister was obviously in such deep sorrow, impressed everyone very unfavourably. It was well known that the young lady had had a fencing lesson just before the inquest in the room immediately below that where Roonah lay

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dead, and that within an hour of the discovery of the tragedy she was calmly playing golf.

Then Miss Joan Duplessis was called.

When the young girl stepped forward there was that awed hush in the room which usually falls upon an attentive audience when the curtain is about to rise on the crucial act of a dramatic play. But she was calm and self-possessed, and wonderfully pathetic-looking in her deep black and with the obvious lines of sorrow which the sad death of a faithful friend had traced on her young face.

In answer to the coroner, she gave her name as Joan Clarissa Duplessis, and briefly stated that until the day of her servant's death she had been a resident at Fordwych Castle, but that since then she had left that temporary home, and had taken up her abode at the d'Alboukirk Arms, a quiet little hostelry on the outskirts of the town.

There was a distinct feeling of astonishment on the part of those who were not aware of this fact, and then the coroner said kindly: "You were born, I think, in Pondicherry, in India, and are the younger daughter of Captain and Mrs. Duplessis, who was own sister to her ladyship?"

"I was born in Pondicherry," replied the young girl, quietly, "and I am the only legitimate child of the late Captain and Mrs. Duplessis, own sister to her ladyship."

A wave of sensation, quickly suppressed by the coroner, went through the crowd at these words. The emphasis which the witness had put on the word "legitimate" could not be mistaken, and everyone felt that here must lie the clue to the so far impenetrable mystery of the Indian woman's death.

All eyes were now turned on old Lady d'Alboukirk and on her niece Henriette, but the two ladies were carrying on a whispered conversation together, and had apparently ceased to take any further interest in the proceedings.

"The deceased was your confidential maid, was she not?" asked the coroner, after a slight pause.

"Yes."

"She came over to England with you recently?"

"Yes; she had to accompany me in order to help me to make good my claim to being my late mother's only legitimate child, and therefore the heir to the barony of d'Alboukirk."

Her voice had trembled a little as she said this, but now, as breathless silence reigned in the room, she seemed to make a visible effort to control herself, and, replying to the coroner's question, she gave a clear and satisfactory account of her terrible discovery of her faithful servant's death. Her evidence had lasted about a quarter of an hour or so, when suddenly the coroner put the momentous question to her:

"Do you know anything about the papers which the deceased woman carried about her person, and reference to which has already been made?"

"Yes," she replied quietly; "they were the proofs relating to my claim. My father, Captain Duplessis, had in early youth, and before he met my mother, contracted a secret union with a half-caste woman, who was Roonah's own sister. Being tired of her, he chose to repudiate her—she had no children—but the legality of the marriage was never for a moment in question. After that, he married my mother, and his first wife subsequently died, chiefly of a broken heart; but her death only occurred two months after the birth of my sister Henriette. My father, I think, had been led to believe that his first wife had died some two years previously, and he was no doubt very much shocked when he realised what a grievous wrong he had done our mother. In order to mend matters somewhat, he

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and she went through a new form of marriage—a legal one this time—and my father paid a lot of money to Roonah's relatives to have the matter hushed up. Less than a year after this second—and only legal—marriage, I was born and my mother died."

"Then these papers of which so much has been said—what did they consist of?"

"There were the marriage certificates of my father's first wife—and two sworn statements as to her death, two months after the birth of my sister Henriette; one by Dr. Rénaud, who was at the time a well-known medical man in Pondicherry, and the other by Roonah herself, who had held her dying sister in her arms. Dr. Rénaud is dead, and now Roonah has been murdered, and all the proofs have gone with her——"

Her voice broke in a passion of sobs, which, with manifest self-control, she quickly suppressed. In that crowded court you could have heard a pin drop, so great was the tension of intense excitement and attention.

"Then those papers remained in your maid's possession? Why was that?" asked the coroner.

"I did not dare to carry the papers about with me," said the witness, while a curious look of terror crept into her young face as she looked across at her aunt and sister. "Roonah would not part with them. She carried them in the lining of her dress, and at night they were all under her pillow. After her—her death, and when Dr. Walker had left, I thought it my duty to take possession of the papers which meant my whole future to me, and which I desired then to place in Mr. McKinley's charge. But, though I carefully searched the bed and all the clothing by my poor Roonah's side, I did not find the papers. They were gone."

I won't attempt to describe to you the sensation caused by the deposition of this witness. All eyes wandered from her pale young face to that of her sister, who sat almost opposite to her, shrugging her athletic shoulders and gazing at the pathetic young figure before her with callous and haughty indifference.

"Now, putting aside the question of the papers for the moment," said the coroner, after a pause, "do you happen to know anything of your late servant's private life? Had she an enemy, or perhaps a lover?"

"No," replied the girl; "Roonah's whole life was centred in me and in my claim. I had often begged her to place our papers in Mr. McKinley's charge, but she would trust no one. I wish she had obeyed me," here moaned the poor girl involuntarily, "and I should not have lost what means my whole future to me, and the being who loved me best in all the world would not have been so foully murdered."

Of course, it was terrible to see this young girl thus instinctively, and surely unintentionally, proffering so awful an accusation against those who stood so near to her. That the whole case had become hopelessly involved and mysterious, nobody could deny. Can you imagine the mental picture formed in the mind of all present by the story, so pathetically told, of this girl who had come over to England in order to make good her claim which she felt to be just, and who, in one fell swoop, saw that claim rendered very difficult to prove through the dastardly murder of her principal witness?

That the claim was seriously jeopardised by the death of Roonah and the disappearance of the papers, was made very clear, mind you, through the statements of Mr. McKinley, the lawyer. He could not say very much, of course, and his statements could never have been taken as actual proof, because Roonah and Joan had never fully trusted him and had never actually placed the proofs of the claim in his hands. He certainly had seen the marriage certificate of Captain Duplessis's first wife, and a copy of this, as he very properly stated, could easily be obtained. The woman seems to have died during the great cholera epidemic of 1881, when, owing to the great number of deaths which occurred, the deceit and concealment practised by the natives at Pondicherry, and the supineness of the French Government, death certificates were very casually and often incorrectly made out.

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Roonah had come over to England ready to swear that her sister had died in her arms two months after the birth of Captain Duplessis's eldest child, and there was the sworn testimony of Dr. Rénaud, since dead. These affidavits Mr. McKinley had seen and read.

Against that, the only proof which now remained of the justice of Joan Duplessis's claim was the fact that her mother and father went through a second form of marriage some time after the birth of their first child, Henriette. This fact was not denied, and, of course, it could be easily proved, if necessary, but even then it would in no way be conclusive. It implied the presence of a doubt in Captain Duplessis's mind, a doubt which the second marriage ceremony may have served to set at rest; but it in no way established the illegitimacy of his eldest daughter.

In fact, the more Mr. McKinley spoke, the more convinced did everyone become that the theft of the papers had everything to do with the murder of the unfortunate Roonah. She would not part with the proofs which meant her mistress's fortune, and she paid for her devotion with her life.

Several more witnesses were called after that. The servants were closely questioned, the doctor was recalled, but, in spite of long and arduous efforts, the coroner and jury could not bring a single real fact to light beyond those already stated.

The Indian woman had been murdered!

The papers which she always carried about her body had disappeared.

Beyond that, nothing! An impenetrable wall of silence and mystery!

The butler at Fordwych Castle had certainly missed the knife with which Roonah had been killed from its accustomed place on the morning after the murder had been committed, but not before, and the mystery further gained in intensity from the fact that the only purchase of chloroform in the district had been traced to the murdered woman herself.

She had gone down to the local chemist one day some two or three weeks previously, and shown him a prescription for cleansing the hair which required some chloroform in it. He gave her a very small quantity in a tiny bottle, which was subsequently found empty on her own dressing table. No one at Fordwych Castle could swear to having heard any unaccustomed noise during that memorable night. Even Joan, who slept in the room adjoining that where the unfortunate Roonah lay, said she had heard nothing unusual. But then, the door of communication between the two rooms was shut, and the murderer had been quick and silent.

Thus this extraordinary inquest drew to a close, leaving in its train an air of dark suspicion and of unexplainable horror.

The jury returned a verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," and the next moment Lady d'Alboukirk rose, and, leaning on her niece's arm, quietly walked out of the room.

3

TWO of our best men from the Yard, Pegram and Elliott, were left in charge of the case. They remained at Fordwych (the little town close by), as did Miss Joan, who had taken up her permanent abode at the d'Alboukirk Arms, whilst I returned to town immediately after the inquest. Captain Jack had rejoined his regiment, and apparently the ladies of the Castle had resumed their quiet, luxurious life just the same as heretofore. The old lady led her own somewhat isolated, semi-regal life; Miss Henriette fenced and boxed, played hockey and golf, and over the fine Castle and its haughty inmates there hovered like an ugly bird of prey the threatening presence of a nameless suspicion.

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The two ladies might choose to flout public opinion, but public opinion was dead against them. No one dared formulate a charge, but everyone remembered that Miss Henriette had, on the very morning of the murder, been playing golf in the field where the knife was discovered, and that if Miss Joan Duplessis ever failed to make good her claim to the barony of d'Alboukirk, Miss Henriette would remain in undisputed possession. So now, when the ladies drove past in the village street, no one doffed a cap to salute them, and when at church the parson read out the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder," all eyes gazed with fearsome awe at the old Baroness and her niece.

Splendid isolation reigned at Fordwych Castle. The daily papers grew more and more sarcastic at the expense of the Scotland Yard authorities, and the public more and more impatient.

Then it was that the chief grew desperate and sent for Lady Molly, the result of the interview being that I once more made the journey down to Fordwych, but this time in the company of my dear lady, who had received *carte blanche* from headquarters to do whatever she thought right in the investigation of the mysterious crime.

She and I arrived at Fordwych at 8 p.m., after the usual long wait at Newcastle. We put up at the d'Alboukirk Arms, and, over a hasty and very bad supper, Lady Molly allowed me a brief insight into her plans.

"I can see every detail of that murder, Mary," she said earnestly, "just as if I had lived at the Castle all the time. I know exactly where our fellows are wrong, and why they cannot get on. But, although the chief has given me a free hand, what I am going to do is so irregular that if I fail I shall probably get my immediate *cong *, whilst some of the disgrace is bound to stick to you. It is not too late—you may yet draw back, and leave me to act alone."

I looked her straight in the face. Her dark eyes were gleaming; there was the power of second sight in them, or of marvellous intuition of "men and things."

"I'll follow your lead, my Lady Molly," I said quietly.

"Then go to bed now," she replied, with that strange transition of manner which to me was so attractive and to everyone else so unaccountable.

In spite of my protest, she refused to listen to any more talk or to answer any more questions, and, perforce, I had to go to my room. The next morning I saw her graceful figure, immaculately dressed in a perfect tailor-made gown, standing beside my bed at a very early hour.

"Why, what is the time?" I ejaculated, suddenly wide awake.

"Too early for you to get up," she replied quietly. "I am going to early Mass at the Roman Catholic convent close by."

"To Mass at the Roman Catholic convent?"

"Yes. Don't repeat all my words, Mary; it is silly, and wastes time. I have introduced myself in the neighbourhood as the American, Mrs. Silas A. Ogdan, whose motor has broken down and is being repaired at Newcastle, while I, its owner, amuse myself by viewing the beauties of the neighbourhood. Being a Roman Catholic, I go to Mass first, and, having met Lady d'Alboukirk once in London, I go to pay her a respectful visit afterwards. When I come back we will have breakfast together. You might try in the meantime to scrape up an acquaintance with Miss Joan Duplessis, who is still staying here, and ask her to join us at breakfast."

She was gone before I could make another remark, and I could but obey her instantly to the letter.

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An hour later I saw Miss Joan Duplessis strolling in the hotel garden. It was not difficult to pass the time of day with the young girl, who seemed quite to brighten up at having someone to talk to. We spoke of the weather and so forth, and I steadily avoided the topic of the Fordwych Castle tragedy until the return of Lady Molly at about ten o'clock. She came back looking just as smart, just as self-possessed, as when she had started three hours earlier. Only I, who knew her so well, noted the glitter of triumph in her eyes, and knew that she had not failed. She was accompanied by Pegram, who, however, immediately left her side and went straight into the hotel, whilst she joined us in the garden and, after a few graceful words, introduced herself to Miss Joan Duplessis and asked her to join us in the coffee room upstairs.

The room was empty and we sat down to table, I quivering with excitement and awaiting events. Through the open window I saw Elliott walking rapidly down the village street. Presently the waitress went off, and I being too excited to eat or to speak, Lady Molly carried on a running conversation with Miss Joan, asking her about her life in India and her father, Captain Duplessis. Joan admitted that she had always been her father's favourite.

"He never liked Henriette, somehow," she explained.

Lady Molly asked her when she had first known Roonah.

"She came to the house when my mother died," replied Joan, "and she had charge of me as a baby." At Pondicherry no one had thought it strange that she came as a servant into an officers house where her own sister had reigned as mistress. Pondicherry is a French settlement, and manners and customs there are often very peculiar.

I ventured to ask her what were her future plans.

"Well," she said, with a great touch of sadness, "I can, of course, do nothing whilst my aunt is alive. I cannot force her to let me live at Fordwych or to acknowledge me as her heir. After her death, if my sister does assume the title and fortune of d'Alboukirk," she added, whilst suddenly a strange look of vengefulness—almost of hatred and cruelty—marred the childlike expression of her face, "then I shall revive the story of the tragedy of Roonah's death, and I hope that public opinion——"

She paused here in her speech, and I, who had been gazing out of the window, turned my eyes on her. She was ashy-pale, staring straight before her; her hands dropped the knife and fork which she had held. Then I saw that Pegram had come into the room, that he had come up to the table and placed a packet of papers in Lady Molly's hand.

I saw it all as in a flash!

There was a loud cry of despair like an animal at bay, a shrill cry, followed by a deep one from Pegram of "No, you don't," and before anyone could prevent her, Joan's graceful young figure stood outlined for a short moment at the open window.

The next moment she had disappeared into the depth below, and we heard a dull thud which nearly froze the blood in my veins.

Pegram ran out of the room, but Lady Molly sat quite still.

"I have succeeded in clearing the innocent," she said quietly; "but the guilty has meted out to herself her own punishment."

"Then it was she?" I murmured, horror-struck.

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"Yes. I suspected it from the first," replied Lady Molly calmly. "It was this conversion of Roonah to Roman Catholicism and her consequent change of manner which gave me the first clue."

"But why—why?" I muttered.

"A simple reason, Mary," she rejoined, tapping the packet of papers with her delicate hand; and, breaking open the string that held the letters, she laid them out upon the table. "The whole thing was a fraud from beginning to end. The woman's marriage certificate was all right, of course, but I mistrusted the genuineness of the other papers from the moment that I heard that Roonah would not part with them and would not allow Mr. McKinley to have charge of them. I am sure that the idea at first was merely one of blackmail. The papers were only to be the means of extorting money from the old lady, and there was no thought of taking them into court."

"Roonah's part was, of course, the important thing in the whole case, since she was here prepared to swear to the actual date of the first Madame Duplessis's death. The initiative, of course, may have come either from Joan or from Captain Duplessis himself, out of hatred for the family who would have nothing to do with him and his favourite younger daughter. That, of course, we shall never know. At first Roonah was a Parsee, with a doglike devotion to the girl whom she had nursed as a baby, and who no doubt had drilled her well into the part she was to play. But presently she became a Roman Catholic—an ardent convert, remember, with all a Roman Catholic's fear of hell—fire. I went to the convent this morning. I heard the priest's sermon there, and I realised what an influence his eloquence must have had over poor, ignorant, superstitious Roonah. She was still ready to die—for her young mistress, but she was no longer prepared to swear to a lie for her sake. After Mass I called at Fordwych Castle. I explained my position to old Lady d'Alboukirk, who took me into the room where Roonah had slept and died. There I found two things," continued Lady Molly, as she opened the elegant reticule which still hung upon her arm, and placed a big key and a prayer book before me.

"The key I found in a drawer of an old cupboard in the dressing room where Roonah slept, with all sorts of odds and ends belonging to the unfortunate woman, and going to the door which led into what had been Joan's bedroom, I found that it was locked, and that this key fitted into the lock. Roonah had locked that door herself on her own side—she was afraid of her mistress. I knew now that I was right in my surmise. The prayer-book is a Roman Catholic one. It is heavily thumbmarked there, where false oaths and lying are denounced as being deadly sins for which hell—fire would be the punishment. Roonah, terrorised by fear of the supernatural, a new convert to the faith, was afraid of committing a deadly sin."

"Who knows what passed between the two women, both of whom have come to so violent and terrible an end? Who can tell what prayers, tears, persuasions Joan Duplessis employed from the time she realised that Roonah did not mean to swear to the lie which would have brought her mistress wealth and glamour until the awful day when she finally understood that Roonah would no longer even hold her tongue, and devised a terrible means of silencing her for ever?"

"With this certainty before me, I ventured on my big coup. I was so sure, you see. I kept Joan talking in here whilst I sent Pegram to her room with orders to break open the locks of her handbag and dressing case. There!—I told you that if I was wrong I would probably be dismissed the force for irregularity, as of course I had no right to do that; but if Pegram found the papers there where I felt sure they would be, we could bring the murderer to justice. I know my own sex pretty well, don't I, Mary? I knew that Joan Duplessis had not destroyed—never would destroy—those papers."

Even as Lady Molly spoke we could hear heavy tramping outside the passage. I ran to the door, and there was met by Pegram.

"She is quite dead, miss," he said. "It was a drop of forty feet, and a stone pavement down below."

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The guilty had indeed meted out her own punishment to herself!

Lady d'Alboukirk sent Lady Molly a cheque for £5,000 the day the whole affair was made known to the public.

I think you will say that it had been well earned. With her own dainty hands my dear lady had lifted the veil which hung over the tragedy of Fordwych Castle, and with the finding of the papers in Joan Duplessis's dressing bag, and the unfortunate girl's suicide, the murder of the Indian woman was no longer a mystery.

(End.)

(Prepared by Mike Keating)

[Back to Lady Molly menu](#)

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The following is a Gaslight etext...

Lady Molly of Scotland Yard (1910, 1926 ed.)

by Baroness Orczy

[BACK to Lady Molly Menu](#)

A Christmas Tragedy

1

IT was a fairly merry Christmas party, although the surliness of our host somewhat marred the festivities. But imagine two such beautiful young women as my own dear lady and Margaret Ceely, and a Christmas Eve Cinderella in the beautiful ball-room at Clevere Hall, and you will understand that even Major Ceely's well-known cantankerous temper could not altogether spoil the merriment of a good, old-fashioned, festive gathering.

It is a far cry from a Christmas Eve party to a series of cattle-maiming outrages, yet I am forced to mention these now, for although they were ultimately proved to have no connexion with the murder of the unfortunate Major, yet they were undoubtedly the means whereby the miscreant was enabled to accomplish the horrible deed with surety, swiftness, and—as it turned out afterwards—a very grave chance of immunity.

Everyone in the neighbourhood had been taking the keenest possible interest in those dastardly outrages against innocent animals. They were either the work of desperate ruffians who stick at nothing in order to obtain a few shillings, or else of madmen with weird propensities for purposeless crimes.

Once or twice suspicious characters had been seen lurking about in the fields, and on more than one occasion a cart was heard in the middle of the night driving away at furious speed. Whenever this occurred the discovery of a fresh outrage was sure to follow, but, so far, the miscreants had succeeded in baffling not only the police, but also the many farm hands who had formed themselves into a band of volunteer watchmen, determined to bring the cattle maimers to justice.

We had all been talking about these mysterious events during the dinner which preceded the dance at Clevere Hall; but later on, when the young people had assembled, and when the first strains of "The Merry Widow" waltz had set us aglow with prospective enjoyment, the unpleasant topic was wholly forgotten.



## THE NINESCORE MYSTERY AND OTHER STORIES

The guests went away early, Major Ceely, as usual, doing nothing to detain them; and by midnight all of us who were staying in the house had gone up to bed.

My dear lady and I shared a bedroom and dressingroom together, our windows giving on the front. Clevere Hall is, as you know, not very far from York, on the other side of Bishopthorpe, and is one of the finest old mansions in the neighbourhood, its only disadvantage being that, in spite of the gardens being very extensive in the rear, the front of the house lies very near the road.

It was about two hours after I had switched off the electric light and called out "Good-night" to my dear lady, that something roused me out of my first sleep. Suddenly I felt very wide-awake, and sat up in bed. Most unmistakably—though still from some considerable distance along the road—came the sound of a cart being driven at unusual speed.

Evidently my dear lady was also awake. She jumped out of bed and, drawing aside the curtains, looked out of the window. The same idea had, of course, flashed upon us both, at the very moment of waking: all the conversations anent the cattle-maimers and their cart, which we had heard since our arrival at Clevere, recurring to our minds simultaneously.

I had joined Lady Molly beside the window, and I don't know how many minutes we remained there in observation, not more than two probably, for anon the sound of the cart died away in the distance along a side road. Suddenly we were startled with a terrible cry of "Murder! Help! Help!" issuing from the other side of the house, followed by an awful, deadly silence. I stood there near the window shivering with terror, while my dear lady, having already turned on the light, was hastily slipping into some clothes.

The cry had, of course, aroused the entire household, but my dear lady was even then the first to get downstairs, and to reach the garden door at the back of the house, whence the weird and despairing cry had undoubtedly proceeded.

That door was wide open. Two steps lead from it to the terraced walk which borders the house on that side, and along these steps Major Ceely was lying, face downwards, with arms outstretched, and a terrible wound between his shoulder-blades.

A gun was lying close by—his own. It was easy to conjecture that he, too, hearing the rumble of the wheels, had run out, gun in hand, meaning, no doubt, to effect, or at least to help, in the capture of the escaping criminals. Someone had been lying in wait for him; that was obvious—someone who had perhaps waited and watched for this special opportunity for days, or even weeks, in order to catch the unfortunate man unawares.

Well, it were useless to recapitulate all the various little incidents which occurred from the moment when Lady Molly and the butler first lifted the Major's lifeless body from the terrace steps until that instant when Miss Ceely, with remarkable coolness and presence of mind, gave what details she could of the terrible event to the local police inspector and to the doctor, both hastily summoned.

These little incidents, with but slight variations, occur in every instance when a crime has been committed. The broad facts alone are of weird and paramount interest.

Major Ceely was dead. He had been stabbed with amazing sureness and terrible violence in the back. The weapon used must have been some sort of heavy clasp knife. The murdered man was now lying in his own bedroom upstairs, even as the Christmas bells on that cold, crisp morning sent cheering echoes through the stillness of the air.

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We had, of course, left the house, as had all the other guests. Everyone felt the deepest possible sympathy for the beautiful young girl who had been so full of the joy of living but a few hours ago, and was now the pivot round which revolved the weird shadow of tragedy, of curious suspicions and of an ever-growing mystery. But at such times all strangers, acquaintances, and even friends in a house, are only an additional burden to an already overwhelming load of sorrow and of trouble.

We took up our quarters at the "Black Swan," in York. The local superintendent, hearing that Lady Molly had been actually a guest at Clevere on the night of the murder, had asked her to remain in the neighbourhood.

There was no doubt that she could easily obtain the chief's consent to assist the local police in the elucidation of this extraordinary crime. At this time both her reputation and her remarkable powers were at their zenith, and there was not a single member of the entire police force in the kingdom who would not have availed himself gladly of her help when confronted with a seemingly impenetrable mystery.

That the murder of Major Ceely threatened to become such no one could deny. In cases of this sort, when no robbery of any kind has accompanied the graver crime, it is the duty of the police and also of the coroner to try to find out, first and foremost, what possible motive there could be behind so cowardly an assault; and among motives, of course, deadly hatred, revenge, and animosity stand paramount.

But here the police were at once confronted with the terrible difficulty, not of discovering whether Major Ceely had an enemy at all, but rather which, of all those people who owed him a grudge, hated him sufficiently to risk hanging for the sake of getting him out of the way.

As a matter of fact, the unfortunate Major was one of those miserable people who seem to live in a state of perpetual enmity with everything and everybody. Morning, noon and night he grumbled, and when he did not grumble he quarrelled either with his own daughter or with the people of his household, or with his neighbours.

I had often heard about him and his eccentric, disagreeable way from Lady Molly, who had known him for many years. She—like everybody in the county who otherwise would have shunned the old man—kept up a semblance of friendship with him for the sake of the daughter.

Margaret Ceely was a singularly beautiful girl, and as the Major was reputed to be very wealthy, these two facts perhaps combined to prevent the irascible gentleman from living in quite so complete an isolation as he would have wished.

Mammas of marriageable young men vied with one another in their welcome to Miss Ceely at garden parties, dances and bazaars. Indeed, Margaret had been surrounded with admirers ever since she had come out of the schoolroom. Needless to say, the cantankerous Major received these pretenders to his daughter's hand not only with insolent disdain, but at times even with violent opposition.

In spite of this the moths fluttered round the candle, and amongst this venturesome tribe none stood out more prominently than Mr. Laurence Smethick, son of the M.P. for the Pakethorpe division. Some folk there were who vowed that the young people were secretly engaged, in spite of the fact that Margaret was an outrageous flirt and openly encouraged more than one of her crowd of adorers.

Be that as it may, one thing was very certain—namely, that Major Ceely did not approve of Mr. Smethick any more than he did of the others, and there had been more than one quarrel between the young man and his prospective father-in-law.

On that memorable Christmas Eve at Clevere none of us could fail to notice his absence; whilst Margaret, on the other hand, had shown marked predilection for the society of Captain Glynne, who, since the sudden death of his

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cousin, Viscount Heslington, Lord Ullesthorpe's only son (who was killed in the hunting field last October, if you remember), had become heir to the earldom and its £40,000 a year.

Personally, I strongly disapproved of Margaret's behaviour the night of the dance; her attitude with regard to Mr. Smethick—whose constant attendance on her had justified the rumour that they were engaged—being more than callous.

On that morning of December 24th—Christmas Eve, in fact—the young man had called at Clevere. I remember seeing him just as he was being shown into the boudoir downstairs. A few moments later the sound of angry voices rose with appalling distinctness from that room. We all tried not to listen, yet could not fail to hear Major Ceely's overbearing words of rudeness to the visitor, who, it seems, had merely asked to see Miss Ceely, and had been most unexpectedly confronted by the irascible and extremely disagreeable Major. Of course, the young man speedily lost his temper, too, and the whole incident ended with a very unpleasant quarrel between the two men in the hall, and with the Major peremptorily forbidding Mr. Smethick ever to darken his doors again.

On that night Major Ceely was murdered.

2

OF course, at first, no one attached any importance to this weird coincidence. The very thought of connecting the idea of murder with that of the personality of a bright, good-looking young Yorkshireman like Mr. Smethick seemed, indeed, preposterous, and with one accord all of us who were practically witnesses to the quarrel between the two men, tacitly agreed to say nothing at all about it at the inquest, unless we were absolutely obliged to do so on oath.

In view of the Major's terrible temper, this quarrel, mind you, had not the importance which it otherwise would have had; and we all flattered ourselves that we had well succeeded in parrying the coroner's questions.

The verdict at the inquest was against some person or persons unknown; and I, for one, was very glad that young Smethick's name had not been mentioned in connexion with this terrible crime.

Two days later the superintendent at Bishopthorpe sent an urgent telephonic message to Lady Molly, begging her to come to the police-station immediately. We had the use of a motor all the while that we stayed at the "Black Swan," and in less than ten minutes we were bowling along at express speed towards Bishopthorpe.

On arrival we were immediately shown into Superintendent Ety's private room behind the office. He was there talking with Danvers—who had recently come down from London. In a corner of the room, sitting very straight on a high-backed chair, was a youngish woman of the servant class, who, as we entered, cast a quick, and I thought suspicious, glance at us both.

She was dressed in a coat and skirt of shabby-looking black, and although her face might have been called good-looking—for she had fine, dark eyes—her entire appearance was distinctly repellent. It suggested slatternliness in an unusual degree; there were holes in her shoes and in her stockings, the sleeve of her coat was half unsewn, and the braid on her skirt hung in loops all round the bottom. She had very red and very coarse-looking hands, and undoubtedly there was a furtive expression in her eyes, which, when she began speaking, changed to one of defiance.

Ety came forward with great alacrity when my dear lady entered. He looked perturbed, and seemed greatly relieved at sight of her.

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"She is the wife of one of the outdoor men at Clevere," he explained rapidly to Lady Molly, nodding in the direction of the young woman, "and she has come here with such a queer tale that I thought you would like to hear it."

"She knows something about the murder?" asked Lady Molly.

"Noa! I didn't say that!" here interposed the woman, roughly, "doan't you go and tell no lies, Master Inspector. I thought as how you might wish to know what my husband saw on the night when the Major was murdered, that's all; and I've come to tell you."

"Why didn't your husband come himself?" asked Lady Molly.

"Oh, Haggett ain't well enough—he-----" she began explaining, with a careless shrug of the shoulders, "so to speak-----"

"The fact of the matter is, my lady," interposed Etty, "this woman's husband is half-witted. I believe he is only kept on in the garden because he is very strong and can help with the digging. It is because his testimony is so little to be relied on that I wished to consult you as to how we should act in the matter."

"What is his testimony, then?"

"Tell this lady what you have just told us, Mrs. Haggett, will you?" said Etty, curtly.

Again that quick, suspicious glance shot into the woman's eyes. Lady Molly took the chair which Danvers had brought forward for her, and sat down opposite Mrs. Haggett, fixing her earnest, calm gaze upon her.

"There's not much to tell," said the woman, sullenly. "Haggett is certainly queer in his head sometimes—and when he is queer he goes wandering about the place of nights."

"Yes?" said my lady, for Mrs. Haggett had paused awhile and now seemed unwilling to proceed.

"Well!" she resumed with sudden determination, "he had got one of his queer fits on Christmas Eve, and didn't come in till long after midnight. He told me as how he'd seen a young gentleman prowling about the garden on the terrace side. He heard the cry of 'Murder' and 'Help' soon after that, and ran in home because he was frightened." "Home?" asked Lady Molly, quietly, "where is home?" "The cottage where we live. Just back of the kitchen garden."

"Why didn't you tell all this to the superintendent before?"

"Because Haggett only told me last night, when he seemed less queer-like. He is mighty silent when the fits are on him."

"Did he know who the gentleman was whom he saw?"

"No, ma'am—I don't suppose he did—leastways he wouldn't say—but-----"

"Yes? But?"

"He found this in the garden yesterday," said the woman, holding out a screw of paper which apparently she had held tightly clutched up to now, "and maybe that's what brought Christmas Eve and the murder back to his mind."

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Lady Molly took the thing from her, and undid the soiled bit of paper with her dainty fingers. The next moment she held up for ETTY'S inspection a beautiful ring composed of an exquisitely carved moonstone surrounded with diamonds of unusual brilliance.

At the moment the setting and the stones themselves were marred by scraps of sticky mud which clung to them; the ring obviously having lain on the ground, and perhaps been trampled on for some days, and then been only very partially washed.

"At any rate you can find out the ownership of the ring," commented my dear lady after awhile, in answer to ETTY'S silent attitude of expectancy. "There would be no harm in that."

Then she turned once more to the woman.

"I'll walk with you to your cottage, if I may," she said decisively, "and have a chat with your husband. Is he at home?"

I thought Mrs. Haggett took this suggestion with marked reluctance. I could well imagine, from her own personal appearance, that her home was most unlikely to be in a fit state for a lady's visit. However, she could, of course, do nothing but obey, and, after a few muttered words of grudging acquiescence, she rose from her chair and stalked towards the door, leaving my lady to follow as she chose.

Before going, however, she turned and shot an angry glance at ETTY.

"You'll give me back the ring, Master Inspector," she said with her usual tone of sullen defiance. "'Findings is keepings' you know."

"I am afraid not," replied ETTY, curtly; "but there's always the reward offered by Miss Ceely for information which would lead to the apprehension of her father's murderer. You may get that, you know. It is a hundred pounds."

"Yes! I knew that," she remarked dryly, as, without further comment, she finally went out of the room.

3

MY dear lady came back very disappointed from her interview with Haggett.

It seems that he was indeed half-witted—almost an imbecile, in fact, with but a few lucid intervals, of which this present day was one. But, of course, his testimony was practically valueless.

He reiterated the story already told by his wife, adding no details. He had seen a young gentleman roaming on the terraced walk on the night of the murder. He did not know who the young gentleman was. He was going homewards when he heard the cry of "Murder," and ran to his cottage because he was frightened. He picked up the ring yesterday in the perennial border below the terrace and gave it to his wife.

Two of these brief statements made by the imbecile were easily proved to be true, and my dear lady had ascertained this before she returned to me. One of the Clevere under-gardeners said he had seen Haggett running home in the small hours of that fateful Christmas morning. He himself had been on the watch for the cattle-maimers that night, and remembered the little circumstance quite plainly. He added that Haggett certainly looked to be in a panic.

Then Newby, another outdoor man at the Hall, saw Haggett pick up the ring in the perennial border and advised him to take it to the police.

## THE NINESCORE MYSTERY AND OTHER STORIES

Somehow, all of us who were so interested in that terrible Christmas tragedy felt strangely perturbed at all this. No names had been mentioned as yet, but whenever my dear lady and I looked at one another, or whenever we talked to Etty or Danvers, we all felt that a certain name, one particular personality, was lurking at the back of all our minds.

The two men, of course, had no sentimental scruples to worry them. Taking the Haggett story merely as a clue, they worked diligently on that, with the result that twenty-four hours later Etty appeared in our private room at the "Black Swan" and calmly informed us that he had just got a warrant out against Mr. Laurence Smethick on a charge of murder, and was on his way even now to effect the arrest.

"Mr. Smethick did not murder Major Ceely," was Lady Molly's firm and only comment when she heard the news.

"Well, my lady, that's as it may be!" rejoined Etty, speaking with that deference with which the entire force invariably addressed my dear lady; "but we have collected a sufficiency of evidence, at any rate, to justify the arrest, and, in my opinion, enough of it to hang any man. Mr. Smethick purchased the moonstone and diamond ring at Nicholson's in Coney Street about a week ago. He was seen abroad on Christmas Eve by several persons, loitering round the gates at Clevere Hall, somewhere about the time when the guests were leaving after the dance, and, again, some few moments after the first cry of 'Murder' had been heard. His own valet admits that his master did not get home that night until long after 2.0 a.m., whilst even Miss Granard here won't deny that there was a terrible quarrel between Mr. Smethick and Major Ceely less than twenty-four hours before the latter was murdered."

Lady Molly offered no remark to this array of facts which Etty thus pitilessly marshalled before us, but I could not refrain from exclaiming: "Mr. Smethick is innocent, I am sure."

"I hope, for his sake, he may be," retorted Etty, gravely, "but somehow 'tis a pity that he don't seem able to give a good account of himself between midnight and two o'clock that Christmas morning."

"Oh!" I ejaculated, "what does he say about that?"

"Nothing," said the man dryly; "that's just the trouble."

Well, of course, as you who read the papers will doubtless remember, Mr. Laurence Smethick, son of Colonel Smethick, M.P., of Pakethorpe Hall, Yorks, was arrested on the charge of having murdered Major Ceely on the night of December 24th-25th, and, after the usual magisterial inquiry, was duly committed to stand his trial at the next York assizes.

I remember well that, throughout his preliminary ordeal, young Smethick bore himself like one who had given up all hope of refuting the terrible charges brought against him, and, I must say, the formidable number of witnesses which the police brought up against him more than explained that attitude.

Of course, Haggett was not called, but, as it happened, there were plenty of people to swear that Mr. Laurence Smethick was seen loitering round the gates of Clevere Hall after the guests had departed on Christmas Eve. The head gardener, who lives at the lodge actually spoke to him, and Captain Glynne, leaning out of his brougham, was heard to exclaim: "Hello, Smethick, what are you doing here at this time of night?"

And there were others, too.

To Captain Glynne's credit, be it here recorded, he tried his best to deny having recognized his unfortunate friend in the dark. Pressed by the magistrate, he said obstinately: "I thought at the time that it was Mr. Smethick standing by the lodge gates, but on thinking the matter over I feel sure that I was mistaken."

## THE NINESCORE MYSTERY AND OTHER STORIES

On the other hand, what stood dead against young Smethick was, firstly, the question of the ring, and then the fact that he was seen in the immediate neighbourhood of Clevere, both at midnight and again at about two, when some men, who had been on the watch for the cattle-maimers, saw him walking away rapidly in the direction of Pakethorpe.

What was, of course, unexplainable and very terrible to witness was Mr. Smethick's obstinate silence with regard to his own movements during those fatal hours on that night. He did not contradict those who said that they had seen him at about midnight near the gates of Clevere, nor his own valet's statements as to the hour when he returned home. All he said was that he could not account for what he did between the time when the guests left the Hall and he himself went back to Pakethorpe. He realized the danger in which he stood, and what caused him to be silent about a matter which might mean life or death to him could not easily be conjectured.

The ownership of the ring he could not and did not dispute. He had lost it in the grounds of Clevere, he said. But the jeweller in Coney Street swore that he had sold the ring to Mr. Smethick on the 8th of December, whilst it was a well-known and an admitted fact that the young man had not openly been inside the gates of Clevere for over a fortnight before that.

On this evidence Laurence Smethick was committed for trial. Though the actual weapon with which the unfortunate Major had been stabbed had not been found, nor its ownership traced, there was such a vast array of circumstantial evidence against the young man that bail was refused.

He had, on the advice of his solicitor, Mr. Grayson—one of the ablest lawyers in York—reserved his defence, and on that miserable afternoon at the close of the year, we all filed out of the crowded court, feeling terribly depressed and anxious.

### 4

MY dear lady and I walked back to our hotel in silence. Our hearts seemed to weigh heavily within us. We felt mortally sorry for that good-looking young Yorkshireman, who, we were convinced, was innocent, yet at the same time seemed involved in a tangled web of deadly circumstances from which he seemed quite unable to extricate himself.

We did not feel like discussing the matter in the open streets, neither did we make any comment when presently, in a block in the traffic in Coney Street, we saw Margaret Ceely driving her smart dog-cart, whilst sitting beside her, and talking with great earnestness close to her ear, sat Captain Glynne.

She was in deep mourning, and had obviously been doing some shopping, for she was surrounded with parcels; so perhaps it was hypercritical to blame her. Yet somehow it struck me that just at the moment when there hung in the balance the life and honour of a man with whose name her own had oft been linked by popular rumour, it showed more than callous contempt for his welfare to be seen driving about with another man who, since his sudden access to fortune, had undoubtedly become a rival in her favours.

When we arrived at the "Black Swan," we were surprised to hear that Mr. Grayson had called to see my dear lady, and was upstairs waiting.

Lady Molly ran up to our sitting-room and greeted him with marked cordiality. Mr. Grayson is an elderly dry-looking man, but he looked visibly affected, and it was some time before he seemed able to plunge into the subject which had brought him hither. He fidgeted in his chair, and started talking about the weather.

"I am not here in a strictly professional capacity, you know," said Lady Molly presently, with a kindly smile and with a view to helping him out of his embarrassment. "Our police, I fear me, have an exaggerated view of my

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capacities, and the men here asked me unofficially to remain in the neighbourhood and to give them my advice if they should require it. Our chief is very lenient to me and has allowed me to stay. Therefore, if there is anything I can do-----"

"Indeed, indeed there is!" ejaculated Mr. Grayson with sudden energy. "From all I hear, there is not another soul in the kingdom but you who can save this innocent man from the gallows."

My dear lady heaved a little sigh of satisfaction. She had all along wanted to have a more important finger in that Yorkshire pie.

"Mr. Smethick?" she said.

"Yes; my unfortunate young client," replied the lawyer. "I may as well tell you," he resumed after a slight pause, during which he seemed to pull himself together, "as briefly as possible what occurred on December 24th last and on the following Christmas morning. You will then understand the terrible plight in which my client finds himself, and how impossible it is for him to explain his actions on that eventful night. You will understand, also, why I have come to ask your help and your advice. Mr. Smethick considered himself engaged to Miss Ceely. The engagement had not been made public because of Major Ceely's anticipated opposition, but the young people had been very intimate, and many letters had passed between them. On the morning of the 24th Mr. Smethick called at the Hall, his intention then being merely to present his fiancée with the ring you know of. You remember the unfortunate contretemps that occurred: I mean the unprovoked quarrel sought by Major Ceely with my poor client, ending with the irascible old man forbidding Mr. Smethick the house.

"My client walked out of Clevere feeling, as you may well imagine, very wrathful; on the doorstep, just as he was leaving, he met Miss Margaret, and told her very briefly what had occurred. She took the matter very lightly at first, but finally became more serious, and ended the brief interview with the request that, since he could not come to the dance after what had occurred, he should come and see her afterwards, meeting her in the gardens soon after midnight. She would not take the ring from him then, but talked a good deal of sentiment about Christmas morning, asking him to bring the ring to her at night, and also the letters which she had written him. Well—you can guess the rest."

Lady Molly nodded thoughtfully.

"Miss Ceely was playing a double game," continued Mr. Grayson, earnestly. "She was determined to break off all relationship with Mr. Smethick, for she had transferred her volatile affections to Captain Glynne, who had lately become heir to an earldom and £40,000 a year. Under the guise of sentimental twaddle she got my unfortunate client to meet her at night in the grounds of Clevere and to give up to her the letters which might have compromised her in the eyes of her new lover. At two o'clock a.m. Major Ceely was murdered by one of his numerous enemies; as to which I do not know, nor does Mr. Smethick. He had just parted from Miss Ceely at the very moment when the first cry of 'Murder' roused Clevere from its slumbers. This she could confirm if she only would, for the two were still in sight of each other, she inside the gates, he just a little way down the road. Mr. Smethick saw Margaret Ceely run rapidly back towards the house. He waited about a little while, half hesitating what to do; then he reflected that his presence might be embarrassing, or even compromising to her whom, in spite of all, he still loved dearly; and knowing that there were plenty of men in and about the house to render what assistance was necessary, he finally turned his steps and went home a broken-hearted man, since she had given him the go-by, taken her letters away, and flung contemptuously into the mud the ring he had bought for her."

The lawyer paused, mopping his forehead and gazing with whole-souled earnestness at my lady's beautiful, thoughtful face.

"Has Mr. Smethick spoken to Miss Ceely since?" asked Lady Molly, after a while.



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"No; but I did," replied the lawyer.

"What was her attitude?"

"One of bitter and callous contempt. She denies my unfortunate client's story from beginning to end; declares that she never saw him after she bade him 'good-morning' on the doorstep of Clevere Hall, when she heard of his unfortunate quarrel with her father. Nay, more; she scornfully calls the whole tale a cowardly attempt to shield a dastardly crime behind a still more dastardly libel on a defenceless girl."

We were all silent now, buried in thought which none of us would have cared to translate into words. That the impasse seemed indeed hopeless no one could deny.

The tower of damning evidence against the unfortunate young man had indeed been built by remorseless circumstances with no faltering hand.

Margaret Ceely alone could have saved him, but with brutal indifference she preferred the sacrifice of an innocent man's life and honour to that of her own chances of a brilliant marriage. There are such women in the world; thank God I have never met any but that one!

Yet am I wrong when I say that she alone could save the unfortunate young man, who throughout was behaving with such consummate gallantry, refusing to give his own explanation of the events that occurred on that Christmas morning, unless she chose first to tell the tale. There was one present now in the dingy little room at the "Black Swan" who could disentangle that weird skein of coincidences, if any human being not gifted with miraculous powers could indeed do it at this eleventh hour.

She now said, gently:

"What would you like me to do in this matter, Mr. Grayson? And why have you come to me rather than to the police?"

"How can I go with this tale to the police?" he ejaculated in obvious despair. "Would they not also look upon it as a dastardly libel on a woman's reputation? We have no proofs, remember, and Miss Ceely denies the whole story from first to last. No, no!" he exclaimed with wonderful fervour. "I came to you because I have heard of your marvellous gifts, your extraordinary intuition. Someone murdered Major Ceely! It was not my old friend Colonel Smethick's son. Find out who it was, then! I beg of you, find out who it was!"

He fell back in his chair broken down with grief. With inexpressible gentleness Lady Molly went up to him and placed her beautiful white hand on his shoulder.

"I will do my best, Mr. Grayson," she said simply.

5

WE remained alone and singularly quiet the whole of that evening. That my dear lady's active brain was hard at work I could guess by the brilliance of her eyes, and that sort of absolute stillness in her person through which one could almost feel the delicate nerves vibrating.

The story told her by the lawyer had moved her singularly. Mind you, she had always been morally convinced of young Smethick's innocence, but in her the professional woman always fought hard battles against the sentimentalist, and in this instance the overwhelming circumstantial evidence and the conviction of her superiors had forced her to accept the young man's guilt as something out of her ken.

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By his silence, too, the young man had tacitly confessed; and if a man is perceived on the very scene of a crime, both before it has been committed and directly afterwards; if something admittedly belonging to him is found within three yards of where the murderer must have stood; if, added to this, he had had a bitter quarrel with the victim, and can give no account of his actions or whereabouts during the fatal time, it were vain to cling to optimistic beliefs in that same man's innocence.

But now matters had assumed an altogether different aspect. The story told by Mr. Smethick's lawyer had all the appearance of truth. Margaret Ceely's character, her callousness on the very day when her late fiancé stood in the dock, her quick transference of her affections to the richer man, all made the account of the events on Christmas night as told by Mr. Grayson extremely plausible.

No wonder my dear lady was buried in thought.

"I shall have to take the threads up from the beginning, Mary," she said to me the following morning, when after breakfast she appeared in her neat coat and skirt, with hat and gloves, ready to go out, "so, on the whole, I think I will begin with a visit to the Haggetts."

"I may come with you, I suppose?" I suggested meekly.

"Oh, yes!" she rejoined carelessly.

Somehow I had an inkling that the carelessness of her mood was only on the surface. It was not likely that she—my sweet, womanly, ultra-feminine, beautiful lady—should feel callously on this absorbing subject.

We motored down to Bishopthorpe. It was bitterly cold, raw, damp and foggy. The chauffeur had some difficulty in finding the cottage, the "home" of the imbecile gardener and his wife.

There was certainly not much look of home about the place. When, after much knocking at the door, Mrs. Haggett finally opened it, we saw before us one of the most miserable, slatternly places I think I ever saw.

In reply to Lady Molly's somewhat curt inquiry, the woman said that Haggett was in bed, suffering from one of his "fits."

"That is a great pity," said my dear lady, rather unsympathetically, I thought, "for I must speak with him at once."

"What is it about?" asked the woman sullenly. "I can take a message."

"I am afraid not," rejoined my lady. "I was asked to see Haggett personally."

"By whom, I'd like to know," she retorted, now almost insolently.

"I dare say you would. But you are wasting precious time. Hadn't you better help your husband on with his clothes? This lady and I will wait in the parlour."

After some hesitation the woman finally complied, looking very sulky the while.

We went into the miserable little room wherein not only grinding poverty but also untidiness and dirt were visible all round. We sat down on two of the cleanest-looking chairs, and waited whilst a colloquy in subdued voices went on in the room over our heads.

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The colloquy, I may say, seemed to consist of agitated whispers on one part, and wailing complaints on the other. This was followed presently by some thuds and much shuffling, and presently Haggett, looking uncared for, dirty, and unkempt, entered the parlour, followed by his wife.

He came forward, dragging his ill-shod feet and pulling nervously at his forelock.

"Ah!" said my lady, kindly; "I am glad to see you down, Haggett, though I am afraid I haven't very good news for you."

"Yes, miss!" murmured the man, obviously not quite comprehending what was said to him.

"I represent the workhouse authorities," continued Lady Molly, "and I thought we could arrange for you and your wife to come into the Union to-night, perhaps."

"The Union?" here interposed the woman, roughly. "What do you mean? We ain't going to the Union?"

"Well! but since you are not staying here," rejoined my lady, blandly, "you will find it impossible to get another situation for your husband in his present mental condition."

"Miss Ceely won't give us the go-by," she retorted defiantly.

"She might wish to carry out her late father's intentions," said Lady Molly with seeming carelessness.

"The Major was a cruel, cantankerous brute," shouted the woman with unpremeditated violence. "Haggett had served him faithfully for twelve years, and-----"

She checked herself abruptly, and cast one of her quick, furtive glances at Lady Molly.

Her silence now had become as significant as her outburst of rage, and it was Lady Molly who concluded the phrase for her.

"And yet he dismissed him without warning," she said calmly.

"Who told you that?" retorted the woman.

"The same people, no doubt, who declare that you and Haggett had a grudge against the Major for this dismissal."

"That's a lie," asserted Mrs. Haggett, doggedly; "we gave information about Mr. Smethick having killed the Major because-----"

"Ah," interrupted Lady Molly, quickly, "but then Mr. Smethick did not murder Major Ceely, and your information therefore was useless!"

"Then who killed the Major, I should like to know?"

Her manner was arrogant, coarse, and extremely unpleasant. I marvelled why my dear lady put up with it, and what was going on in that busy brain of hers. She looked quite urbane and smiling, whilst I wondered what in the world she meant by this story of the workhouse and the dismissal of Haggett.

"Ah, that's what none of us know!" she now said lightly; "some folks say it was your husband."

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"They lie!" she retorted quickly, whilst the imbecile, evidently not understanding the drift of the conversation, was mechanically stroking his red mop of hair and looking helplessly all round him.

"He was home before the cries of 'Murder' were heard in the house," continued Mrs. Haggett.

"How do you know?" asked Lady Molly, quickly.

"How do I know?"

"Yes; you couldn't have heard the cries all the way to this cottage—why, it's over half a mile from the Hall!"

"He was home, I say," she repeated with dogged obstinacy.

"You sent him?"

"He didn't do it——"

"No one will believe you, especially when the knife is found."

"What knife?"

"His clasp knife, with which he killed Major Ceely," said Lady Molly quietly; "see, he has it in his hand now."

And with a sudden, wholly unexpected gesture she pointed to the imbecile, who in an aimless way had prowled round the room whilst this rapid colloquy was going on.

The purport of it all must in some sort of way have found an echo in his enfeebled brain. He wandered up to the dresser whereon lay the remnants of that morning's breakfast, together with some crockery and utensils.

In that same half-witted and irresponsible way he had picked up one of the knives and now was holding it out towards his wife whilst a look of fear spread over his countenance.

"I can't do it, Annie, I can't—you'd better do it," he said.

There was dead silence in the little room. The woman Haggett stood as if turned to stone. Ignorant and superstitious as she was, I suppose that the situation had laid hold of her nerves, and that she felt that the finger of a relentless Fate was even now being pointed at her.

The imbecile was shuffling forward, closer and closer to his wife, still holding out the knife towards her and murmuring brokenly: "I can't do it. You'd better, Annie—you'd better——"

He was close to her now, and all at once her rigidity and nerve-strain gave way; she gave a hoarse cry, and snatching the knife from the poor wretch, she rushed at him ready to strike.

Lady Molly and I were both young, active and strong; and there was nothing of the squeamish grande dame about my dear lady when quick action was needed. But even then we had some difficulty in dragging Annie Haggett away from her miserable husband. Blinded with fury, she was ready to kill the man who had betrayed her. Finally, we succeeded in wresting the knife from her.

You may be sure that it required some pluck after that to sit down again quietly and to remain in the same room with this woman, who already had one crime upon her conscience, and with this weird, half-witted creature who

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kept on murmuring pitiably: "You'd better do it, Annie——"

Well, you've read the account of the case, so you know what followed. Lady Molly did not move from that room until she had obtained the woman's full confession. All she did for her own protection was to order me to open the window and to blow the police whistle which she handed to me. The police-station fortunately was not very far, and sound carried in the frosty air.

She admitted to me afterwards that it had been foolish, perhaps, not to have brought Etty or Danvers with her, but she was supremely anxious not to put the woman on the alert from the very start, hence her circumlocutory speeches anent the workhouse, and Haggett's probable dismissal.

That the woman had had some connexion with the crime, Lady Molly, with her keen intuition, had always felt; but as there was no witness to the murder itself, and all circumstantial evidence was dead against young Smethick, there was only one chance of successful discovery, and that was the murderer's own confession.

If you think over the interview between my dear lady and the Haggetts on that memorable morning, you will realize how admirably Lady Molly had led up to the weird finish. She would not speak to the woman unless Haggett was present, and she felt sure that as soon as the subject of the murder cropped up, the imbecile would either do or say something that would reveal the truth.

Mechanically, when Major Ceely's name was mentioned, he had taken up the knife. The whole scene recurred to his tottering mind. That the Major had summarily dismissed him recently was one of those bold guesses which Lady Molly was wont to make.

That Haggett had been merely egged on by his wife, and had been too terrified at the last to do the deed himself was no surprise to her, and hardly one to me, whilst the fact that the woman ultimately wreaked her own passionate revenge upon the unfortunate Major was hardly to be wondered at, in the face of her own coarse and elemental personality.

Cowed by the quickness of events, and by the appearance of Danvers and Etty on the scene, she finally made full confession.

She was maddened by the Major's brutality, when with rough, cruel words he suddenly turned her husband adrift, refusing to give him further employment. She herself had great ascendancy over the imbecile, and had drilled him into a part of hate and of revenge. At first he had seemed ready and willing to obey. It was arranged that he was to watch on the terrace every night until such time as an alarm of the recurrence of the cattle-maiming outrages should lure the Major out alone.

This effectually occurred on Christmas morning, but not before Haggett, frightened and pusillanimous, was ready to flee rather than to accomplish the villainous deed. But Annie Haggett, guessing perhaps that he would shrink from the crime at the last, had also kept watch every night. Picture the prospective murderer watching and being watched!

When Haggett came across his wife he deputed her to do the deed herself.

I suppose that either terror of discovery or merely desire for the promised reward had caused the woman to fasten the crime on another.

The finding of the ring by Haggett was the beginning of that cruel thought which, but for my dear lady's marvellous powers, would indeed have sent a brave young man to the gallows.

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Ah, you wish to know if Margaret Ceely is married? No! Captain Glynne cried off. What suspicions crossed his mind I cannot say; but he never proposed to Margaret, and now she is in Australia—staying with an aunt, I think—and she has sold Clevere Hall.

### *The Woman in the Big Hat*

1

LADY MOLLY always had the idea that if the finger of Fate had pointed to Mathis' in Regent Street, rather than to Lyons', as the most advisable place for us to have a cup of tea that afternoon, Mr. Culedon would be alive at the present moment.

My dear lady is quite sure—and needless to say that I share her belief in herself—that she would have anticipated the murderer's intentions, and thus prevented one of the most cruel and callous of crimes which were ever perpetrated in the heart of London.

She and I had been to a *matinée* of Trilby, and were having tea at Lyons', which is exactly opposite Mathis' Vienna café in Regent Street. From where we sat we commanded a view of the street and of the café, which had been very crowded during the last hour.

We had lingered over our toasted muffin until past six, when our attention was drawn to the unusual commotion which had arisen both outside and in the brilliantly lighted place over the road.

We saw two men run out of the doorway, and return a minute or two later in company with a policeman. You know what is the inevitable result of such a proceeding in London. Within three minutes a crowd had collected outside Mathis'. Two or three more constables had already assembled, and had some difficulty in keeping the entrance clear of intruders.

But already my dear lady, keen as a pointer on the scent, had hastily paid her bill, and, without waiting to see if I followed her or not, had quickly crossed the road, and the next moment her graceful form was lost in the crowd.

I went after her, impelled by curiosity, and presently caught sight of her in close conversation with one of our own men. I have always thought that Lady Molly must have eyes at the back of her head, otherwise how could she have known that I stood behind her now? Anyway, she beckoned to me, and together we entered Mathis', much to the astonishment and anger of the less fortunate crowd.

The usually gay little place was indeed sadly transformed. In one corner the waitresses, in dainty caps and aprons, had put their heads together, and were eagerly whispering to one another whilst casting furtive looks at the small group assembled in front of one of those pretty alcoves, which, as you know, line the walls all round the big tea-room at Mathis'.

Here two of our men were busy with pencil and notebook, whilst one fair-haired waitress, dissolved in tears, was apparently giving them a great deal of irrelevant and confused information.

Chief Inspector Saunders had, I understood, been already sent for; the constables, confronted with this extraordinary tragedy, were casting anxious glances towards the main entrance, whilst putting the conventional questions to the young waitress.

And in the alcove itself, raised from the floor of the room by a couple of carpeted steps, the cause of all this commotion, all this anxiety, and all these tears, sat huddled up on a chair, with arms lying straight across the marble-topped table, on which the usual paraphernalia of afternoon tea still lay scattered about. The upper part of

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the body, limp, backboneless, and awry, half propped up against the wall, half falling back upon the outstretched arms, told quite plainly its weird tale of death.

Before my dear lady and I had time to ask any questions, Saunders arrived in a taxicab. He was accompanied by the medical officer, Dr. Townson, who at once busied himself with the dead man, whilst Saunders went up quickly to Lady Molly.

"The chief suggested sending for you," he said quickly; "he was phoning you when I left. There's a woman in this case, and we shall rely on you a good deal."

"What has happened?" asked my dear lady, whose fine eyes were glowing with excitement at the mere suggestion of work.

"I have only a few stray particulars," replied Saunders, "but the chief witness is that yellow-haired girl over there. We'll find out what we can from her directly Dr. Townson has given us his opinion."

The medical officer, who had been kneeling beside the dead man, now rose and turned to Saunders. His face was very grave.

"The whole matter is simple enough, so far as I am concerned," he said. "The man has been killed by a terrific dose of morphia—administered, no doubt, in this cup of chocolate," he added, pointing to a cup in which there still lingered the cold dregs of the thick beverage.

"But when did this occur?" asked Saunders, turning to the waitress.

"I can't say," she replied, speaking with obvious nervousness. "The gentleman came in very early with a lady, somewhere about four. They made straight for this alcove. The place was just beginning to fill, and the music had begun."

"And where is the lady now?"

"She went off almost directly. She had ordered tea for herself and a cup of chocolate for the gentleman, also muffins and cakes. About five minutes afterwards, as I went past their table, I heard her say to him, 'I am afraid I must go now, or Jay's will be closed, but I'll be back in less than half an hour. You'll wait for me, won't you?'"

"Did the gentleman seem all right then?"

"Oh, yes," said the waitress. "He had just begun to sip his chocolate, and merely said 'S'long' as she gathered up her gloves and muff and then went out of the shop."

"And she has not returned since?"

"No."

"When did you first notice there was anything wrong with this gentleman?" asked Lady Molly.

"Well," said the girl with some hesitation, "I looked at him once or twice as I went up and down, for he certainly seemed to have fallen all of a heap. Of course, I thought that he had gone to sleep, and I spoke to the manageress about him, but she thought that I ought to leave him alone for a bit. Then we got very busy, and I paid no more attention to him, until about six o'clock, when most afternoon tea customers had gone, and we were beginning to get the tables ready for dinners. Then I certainly did think there was something wrong with the man. I called to the

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manageress, and we sent for the police."

"And the lady who was with him at first, what was she like? Would you know her again?" queried Saunders.

"I don't know," replied the girl; "you see, I have to attend to such crowds of people of an afternoon, I can't notice each one. And she had on one of those enormous mushroom hats; no one could have seen her face—not more than her chin—unless they looked right under the hat."

"Would you know the hat again?" asked Lady Molly.

"Yes—I think I should," said the waitress. "It was black velvet and had a lot of plumes. It was enormous," she added, with a sigh of admiration and of longing for the monumental headgear.

During the girl's narrative one of the constables had searched the dead man's pockets. Among other items, he had found several letters addressed to Mark Cullodon, Esq., some with an address in Lombard Street, others with one in Fitzjohn's Avenue, Hampstead. The initials M.C., which appeared both in the hat and on the silver mount of a letter-case belonging to the unfortunate gentleman, proved his identity beyond a doubt.

A house in Fitzjohn's Avenue does not, somehow suggest a bachelor establishment. Even whilst Saunders and the other men were looking through the belongings of the deceased, Lady Molly had already thought of his family—children, perhaps a wife, a mother—who could tell?

What awful news to bring to an unsuspecting, happy family, who might even now be expecting the return of father, husband, or son, at the very moment when he lay murdered in a public place, the victim of some hideous plot or feminine revenge!

As our amiable friends in Paris would say, it jumped to the eyes that there was a woman in the case—a woman who had worn a gargantuan hat for the obvious purpose of remaining unidentifiable when the question of the unfortunate victim's companion that afternoon came up for solution. And all these facts to put before an expectant wife or an anxious mother!

As, no doubt, you have already foreseen, Lady Molly took the difficult task on her own kind shoulders. She and I drove together to Lorbury House, Fitzjohn's Avenue, and on asking of the manservant who opened the door if his mistress were at home, we were told that Lady Irene Cullodon was in the drawing-room.

Mine is not a story of sentiment, so I am not going to dwell on that interview, which was one of the most painful moments I recollect having lived through.

Lady Irene was young—not five-and-twenty, I should say—petite and frail-looking, but with a quiet dignity of manner which was most impressive. She was Irish, as you know, the daughter of the Earl of Athyville, and, it seems, had married Mr. Mark Cullodon in the teeth of strenuous opposition on the part of her family, which was as penniless as it was aristocratic, whilst Mr. Cullodon had great prospects and a splendid business, but possessed neither ancestors nor high connections. She had only been married six months, poor little soul, and from all accounts must have idolized her husband.

Lady Molly broke the news to her with infinite tact, but there it was! It was a terrific blow—wasn't it?—to deal to a young wife,\* now a widow; and there was so little that a stranger could say in these circumstances. Even my dear lady's gentle voice, her persuasive eloquence, her kindly words, sounded empty and conventional in the face of such appalling grief.



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OF course, everyone expected that the inquest would reveal something of the murdered man's inner life—would, in fact, allow the over-eager public to get a peep into Mr. Mark Culledon's secret orchard, wherein walked a lady who wore abnormally large velvet hats, and who nourished in her heart one of those terrible grudges against a man which can only find satisfaction in crime.

Equally, of course, the inquest revealed nothing that the public did not already know. The young widow was extremely reticent on the subject of her late husband's life, and the servants had all been fresh arrivals when the young couple, just home from their honeymoon, organized their new household at Lorbury House.

There was an old aunt of the deceased—a Mrs. Steinberg—who lived with the Culledons, but who at the present moment was very ill. Someone in the house—one of the younger servants, probably—very foolishly had told her every detail of the awful tragedy. With positively amazing strength, the invalid thereupon insisted on making a sworn statement, which she desired should be placed before the coroner's jury. She wished to bear solemn testimony to the integrity of her late nephew, Mark Culledon, in case the personality of the mysterious woman in the big hat suggested to evilly disposed minds any thoughts of scandal.

"Mark Culledon was the one nephew whom I loved," she stated with solemn emphasis. "I have shown my love for him by bequeathing to him the large fortune which I inherited from the late Mr. Steinberg. Mark was the soul of honour, or I should have cut him out of my will as I did my other nephews and nieces. I was brought up in a Scotch home, and I hate all this modern fastness and smartness, which are only other words for what I call profligacy."

Needless to say, the old lady's statement, solemn though it was, was of no use whatever for the elucidation of the mystery which surrounded the death of Mr. Mark Culledon. But as Mrs. Steinberg had talked of "other nephews", whom she had cut out of her will in favour of the murdered man, the police directed inquiries in those various quarters.

Mr. Mark Culledon certainly had several brothers and sisters, also cousins, who at different times—usually for some peccadillo or other—seemed to have incurred the wrath of the strait-laced old lady. But there did not appear to have been any ill-feeling in the family owing to this. Mrs. Steinberg was sole mistress of her fortune. She might just as well have bequeathed it in toto to some hospital as to one particular nephew whom she favoured, and the various relations were glad, on the whole, that the money was going to remain in the family rather than be cast abroad.

The mystery surrounding the woman in the big hat deepened as the days went by. As you know, the longer the period of time which elapses between a crime and the identification of the criminal, the greater chance the latter has of remaining at large.

In spite of strenuous efforts and close questionings of every one of the employees at Mathis', no one could give a very accurate description of the lady who had tea with the deceased on that fateful afternoon.

The first glimmer of light on the mysterious occurrence was thrown, about three weeks later, by a young woman named Katherine Harris, who had been parlour-maid at Lorbury House when first Mr. and Lady Irene Culledon returned from their honeymoon.

I must tell you that Mrs. Steinberg had died a few days after the inquest. The excitement had been too much for her enfeebled heart. Just before her death she had deposited £250 with her banker, which sum was to be paid over to any person giving information which would lead to the apprehension and conviction of the murderer of Mr. Mark Culledon.

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This offer had stimulated everyone's zeal, and, I presume, had aroused Katherine Harris to a realization of what had all the while been her obvious duty.

Lady Molly saw her in the chief's private office, and had much ado to disentangle the threads of the girl's confused narrative. But the main point of Harris's story was that a foreign lady had once called at Lorbury House, about a week after the master and mistress had returned from their honeymoon. Lady Irene was out at the time, and Mr. Culedon saw the lady in his smoking-room.

"She was a very handsome lady," explained Harris, "and was beautifully dressed."

"Did she wear a large hat?" asked the chief.

"I don't remember if it was particularly large," replied the girl.

"But you remember what the lady was like?" suggested Lady Molly.

"Yes, pretty well. She was very, very tall, and very good-looking."

"Would you know her again if you saw her?" rejoined my dear lady.

"Oh, yes; I think so," was Katherine Harris's reply.

Unfortunately, beyond this assurance the girl could say nothing very definite. The foreign lady seems to have been closeted with Mr. Culedon for about an hour, at the end of which time Lady Irene came home.

The butler being out that afternoon it was Harris who let her mistress in, and as the latter asked no questions, the girl did not volunteer the information that her master had a visitor. She went back to the servants' hall, but five minutes later the smoking-room bell rang, and she had to run up again. The foreign lady was then in the hall alone, and obviously waiting to be shown out. This Harris did, after which Mr. Culedon came out of his room, and, in the girl's own graphic words, "he went on dreadful".

"I didn't know I 'ad done anything so very wrong," she explained, "but the master seemed quite furious, and said I wasn't a proper parlour-maid, or I'd have known that visitors must not be shown in straight away like that. I ought to have said that I didn't know if Mr. Culedon was in; that I would go and see. Oh, he did go on at me!" continued Katherine Harris, volubly. "And I suppose he complained to the mistress, for she give me notice the next day."

"And you have never seen the foreign lady since?" concluded Lady Molly.

"No; she never come while I was there."

"By the way, how did you know she was foreign? Did she speak like a foreigner?"

"Oh, no," replied the girl. "She did not say much—only asked for Mr. Culedon—but she looked French like."

This unanswerable bit of logic concluded Katherine's statement. She was very anxious to know whether, if the foreign lady was hanged for murder, she herself would get the £250.

On Molly's assurance that she certainly would, she departed in apparent content.

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WELL! we are no nearer than we were before," said the chief, with an impatient sigh, when the door had closed behind Katherine Harris.

"Don't you think so?" rejoined Lady Molly, blandly.

"Do you consider that what we have heard just now has helped us to discover who was the woman in the big hat?" retorted the chief, somewhat testily.

"Perhaps not," replied my dear lady, with her sweet smile; "but it may help us to discover who murdered Mr. Culledon."

With which enigmatical statement she effectually silenced the chief, and finally walked out of his office, followed by her faithful Mary.

Following Katherine Harris's indications, a description of the lady who was wanted in connection with the murder of Mr. Culledon was very widely circulated, and within two days of the interview with the ex-parlour-maid another very momentous one took place in the same office.

Lady Molly was at work with the chief over some reports, whilst I was taking shorthand notes at a side desk, when a card was brought in by one of the men, and the next moment, without waiting either for permission to enter or to be more formally announced, a magnificent apparition literally sailed into the dust-covered little back office, filling it with an atmosphere of Parma violets and Russia leather.

I don't think that I had ever seen a more beautiful woman in my life. Tall, with a splendid figure and perfect carriage, she vaguely reminded me of the portraits one sees of the late Empress of Austria. This lady was, moreover, dressed to perfection, and wore a large hat adorned with a quantity of plumes.

The chief had instinctively risen to greet her, whilst Lady Molly, still and placid was eyeing her with a quizzical smile.

"You know who I am, sir," began the visitor as soon as she had sunk gracefully into a chair; "my name is on that card. My appearance, I understand, tallies exactly with that of a woman who is supposed to have murdered Mark Culledon."

She said this so calmly, with such perfect self-possession, that I literally gasped. The chief, too, seemed to have been metaphorically lifted off his feet. He tried to mutter a reply.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself, sir!" she interrupted him, with a smile. "My landlady, my servant, my friends have all read the description of the woman who murdered Mr. Culledon. For the past twenty-four hours I have been watched by your police, therefore I come to you of my own accord, before they came to arrest me in my flat. I am not too soon, am I?" she asked, with that same cool indifference which was so startling, considering the subject of her conversation.

She spoke English with a scarcely perceptible foreign accent, but I quite understood what Katherine Harris had meant when she said that the lady looked "French like". She certainly did not look English, and when I caught sight of her name on the card, which the chief had handed to Lady Molly, I put her down at once as Viennese. Miss Elizabeth Löwenthal had all the charm, the grace, the elegance, which one associates with Austrian women more than with those of any other nation.

No wonder the chief found it difficult to tell her that, as a matter of fact, the police were about to apply for a warrant that very morning for her arrest on a charge of wilful murder.

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"I know—I know," she said, seeming to divine his thoughts; "but let me tell you at once, sir, that I did not murder Mark Culledon. He treated me shamefully, and I would willingly have made a scandal just to spite him; he had become so respectable and strait-laced. But between scandal and murder there is a wide gulf. Don't you think so, madam?" she added, turning for the first time towards Lady Molly.

"Undoubtedly," replied my dear lady, with the same quizzical smile.

"A wide gulf which, no doubt, Miss Elizabeth Löwenthal will best be able to demonstrate to the magistrate to-morrow," rejoined the chief, with official sternness of manner.

I thought that, for the space of a few seconds, the lady lost her self-assurance at this obvious suggestion—the bloom on her cheeks seemed to vanish, and two hard lines appeared between her fine eyes. But, frightened or not, she quickly recovered herself, and said quietly:

"Now, my dear sir, let us understand one another. I came here for that express purpose. I take it that you don't want your police to look ridiculous any more than I want a scandal. I don't want detectives to hang about round my flat, questioning my neighbours and my servants. They would soon find out that I did not murder Mark Culledon, of course; but the atmosphere of the police would hang round me, and I—I prefer Parma violets," she added, raising a daintily perfumed handkerchief to her nose.

"Then you have come to make a statement?" asked the chief.

"Yes," she replied; "I'll tell you all I know. Mr. Culledon was engaged to marry me; then he met the daughter of an earl, and thought he would like her better as a wife than a simple Miss Löwenthal. I suppose I should be considered an undesirable match for a young man who has a highly respectable and snobbish aunt, who would leave him all her money only on the condition that he made a suitable marriage. I have a voice, and I came over to England two years ago to study English, so that I might sing in oratorio at the Albert Hall. I met Mark on the Calais-Dover boat, when he was returning from a holiday abroad. He fell in love with me, and presently he asked me to be his wife. After some demur, I accepted him; we became engaged, but he told me that our engagement must remain a secret, for he had an old aunt from whom he had great expectations, and who might not approve of his marrying a foreign girl, who was without connections and a professional singer. From that moment I mistrusted him, nor was I very astonished when gradually his affection for me seemed to cool. Soon after he informed me quite callously that he had changed his mind, and was going to marry some swell English lady. I didn't care much, but I wanted to punish him by making a scandal, you understand. I went to his house just to worry him, and finally I decided to bring an action for breach of promise against him. It would have upset him, I know; no doubt his aunt would have cut him out of her will. That is all I wanted, but I did not care enough about him to murder him."

Somehow her tale carried conviction. We were all of us obviously impressed. The chief alone looked visibly disturbed, and I could read what was going on in his mind.

"As you say, Miss Löwenthal," he rejoined, "the police would have found all this out within the next few hours. Once your connection with the murdered man was known to us, the record of your past and his becomes an easy one to peruse. No doubt, too," he added insinuatingly, "our men would soon have been placed in possession of the one undisputable proof of your complete innocence with regard to that fateful afternoon spent at Mathis' café."

"What is that?" she queried blandly.

"An alibi."

"You mean, where I was during the time that Mark was being murdered in a tea shop?"

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"Yes," said the chief.

"I was out for a walk," she replied quietly.

"Shopping, perhaps?"

"No."

"You met someone who would remember the circumstance—or your servants could say at what time you came in?"

"No," she repeated dryly; "I met no one, for I took a brisk walk on Primrose Hill. My two servants could only say that I went out at three o'clock that afternoon and returned after five."

There was silence in the little office for a moment or two. I could hear the scraping of the pen with which the chief was idly scribbling geometrical figures on his blotting pad.

Lady Molly was quite still. Her large, luminous eyes were fixed on the beautiful woman who had just told us her strange story, with its unaccountable sequel, its mystery which had deepened with the last phrase which she had uttered. Miss Löwenthal, I felt sure, was conscious of her peril. I am not sufficiently a psychologist to know whether it was guilt or merely fear which was distorting the handsome features now, hardening the face and causing the lips to tremble.

Lady Molly scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper, which she then passed over to the chief. Miss Löwenthal was making visible efforts to steady her nerves.

"That is all I have to tell you," she said, in a voice which sounded dry and harsh. "I think I will go home now."

But she did not rise from her chair, and seemed to hesitate as if fearful lest permission to go were not granted her.

To her obvious astonishment—and, I must add, to my own—the chief immediately rose and said, quite urbanely:

"I thank you very much for the helpful information which you have given me. Of course, we may rely on your presence in town for the next few days, may we not?"

She seemed greatly relieved, and all at once resumed her former charm of manner and elegance of attitude. The beautiful face was lit up by a smile.

The chief was bowing to her in quite a foreign fashion, and in spite of her visible reassurance she eyed him very intently. Then she went up to Lady Molly and held out her hand.

My dear lady took it without an instant's hesitation. I, who knew that it was the few words hastily scribbled by Lady Molly which had dictated the chief's conduct with regard to Miss Löwenthal, was left wondering whether the woman I loved best in all the world had been shaking hands with a murderess.

### 4

NO doubt you will remember the sensation which was caused by the arrest of Miss Löwenthal, on a charge of having murdered Mr. Mark Cullodon, by administering morphia to him in a cup of chocolate at Mathis' café in Regent Street.

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The beauty of the accused, her undeniable charm of manner, the hitherto blameless character of her life, all tended to make the public take violent sides either for or against her, and the usual budget of amateur correspondence, suggestions, recriminations and advice poured into the chief's office in titanic proportions.

I must say that, personally, all my sympathies went out to Miss Löwenthal. As I have said before, I am no psychologist, but I had seen her in the original interview at the office, and I could not get rid of an absolutely unreasoning certitude that the beautiful Viennese singer was innocent.

The magistrate's court was packed, as you may well imagine, on that first day of the inquiry; and, of course, sympathy with the accused went up to fever pitch when she staggered into the dock, beautiful still, despite the ravages caused by horror, anxiety, fear, in face of the deadly peril in which she stood.

The magistrate was most kind to her; her solicitor was unimpeachably assiduous; even our fellows, who had to give evidence against her, did no more than their duty, and were as lenient in their statements as possible.

Miss Löwenthal had been arrested in her flat by Danvers, accompanied by two constables. She had loudly protested her innocence all along, and did so still, pleading "Not guilty" in a firm voice.

The great points in favour of the arrest were, firstly, the undoubted motive of disappointment and revenge against a faithless sweetheart, then the total inability to prove any kind of alibi, which, under the circumstances, certainly added to the appearance of guilt.

The question of where the fatal drug was obtained was more difficult to prove. It was stated that Mr. Mark Culedon was director of several important companies, one of which carried on business as wholesale druggists.

Therefore it was argued that the accused, at different times and under some pretext or other, had obtained drugs from Mr. Culedon himself. She had admitted to having visited the deceased at his office in the City, both before and after his marriage.

Miss Löwenthal listened to all this evidence against her with a hard, set face, as she did also to Katherine Harris's statement about her calling on Mr. Culedon at Lorbury House, but she brightened up visibly when the various attendants at Mathis' \*caf, were placed in the box.

A very large hat belonging to the accused was shown to the witnesses, but, though the police upheld the theory that this was the headgear worn by the mysterious lady at the café on that fatal afternoon, the waitresses made distinctly contradictory statements with regard to it.

Whilst one girl swore that she recognized the very hat, another was equally positive that it was distinctly smaller than the one she recollected, and when the hat was placed on the head of Miss Löwenthal, three out of the four witnesses positively refused to identify her.

Most of these young women declared that though the accused, when wearing the big hat, looked as if she might have been the lady in question, yet there was a certain something about her which was different.

With that vagueness which is a usual and highly irritating characteristic of their class, the girls finally parried every question by refusing to swear positively either for or against the identity of Miss Löwenthal.

"There's something that's different about her somehow," one of the waitresses asserted positively.

"What is it that's different?" asked the solicitor for the accused, pressing his point.

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"I can't say," was the perpetual, maddening reply.

Of course the poor young widow had to be dragged into the case, and here, I think, opinions and even expressions of sympathy were quite unanimous.

The whole tragedy had been inexpressibly painful to her, of course, and now it must have seemed doubly so. The scandal which had accumulated round her late husband's name must have added the poignancy of shame to that of grief. Mark Culledon had behaved as callously to the girl whom clearly he had married from interested, family motives, as he had to the one whom he had heartlessly cast aside.

Lady Irene, however, was most moderate in her statements. There was no doubt that she had known of her husband's previous entanglement with Miss Löwenthal, but apparently had—not thought fit to make him accountable for the past. She did not know that Miss Löwenthal had threatened a breach of promise action against her husband.

Throughout her evidence she spoke with absolute calm and dignity, and looked indeed a strange contrast, in her closely fitting tailor-made costume of black serge and tiny black toque, to the more brilliant woman who stood in the dock.

The two great points in favour of the accused were, firstly, the vagueness of the witnesses who were called to identify her, and, secondly, the fact that she had undoubtedly begun proceedings for breach of promise against the deceased. Judging by the latter's letters to her, she would have had a splendid case against him, which fact naturally dealt a severe blow to the theory as to motive for the murder.

On the whole, the magistrate felt that there was not a sufficiency of evidence against the accused to warrant his committing her for trial; he therefore discharged her, and, amid loud applause from the public, Miss Löwenthal left the court a free woman.

Now, I know that the public did loudly, and, to my mind, very justly, blame the police for that arrest, which was denounced as being as cruel as it was unjustifiable. I felt as strongly as anybody on the subject, for I knew that the prosecution had been instituted in defiance of Lady Molly's express advice, and in distinct contradiction to the evidence which she had collected. When, therefore, the chief again asked my dear lady to renew her efforts in that mysterious case, it was small wonder that her enthusiasm did not respond to his anxiety. That she would do her duty was beyond a doubt, but she had very naturally lost her more fervent interest in the case.

The mysterious woman in the big hat was still the chief subject of leading articles in the papers, coupled with that of the ineptitude of the police who could not discover her. There were caricatures and picture post-cards in all the shop windows of a gigantic hat covering the whole figure of its wearer, only the feet and a very long and pointed chin, protruding from beneath the enormous brim. Below was the device, "Who is she? Ask the police?"

One day—it was the second since the discharge of Miss Löwenthal—my dear lady came into my room beaming. It was the first time I had seen her smile for more than a week, and already I had guessed what it was that had cheered her.

"Good news, Mary," she said gaily. "At last I've got the chief to let me have a free hand. Oh, dear! what a lot of argument it takes to extricate that man from the tangled meshes of red tape!"

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Prove that my theory is right as to who murdered Mark Culledon," she replied seriously; "and as a preliminary we'll go and ask his servants at Lorbury House a few questions."

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It was then three o'clock in the afternoon. At Lady Molly's bidding, I dressed somewhat smartly, and together we went off in a taxi to Fitzjohn's Avenue.

Lady Molly had written a few words on one of her cards, urgently requesting an interview with Lady Irene Culledon. This she handed over to the man-servant who opened the door at Lorbury House. A few moments later we were sitting in the cosy boudoir. The young widow, high-bred and dignified in her tight-fitting black gown, sat opposite to us, her white hands folded demurely before her, her small head, with its very close coiffure, bent in closest attention towards Lady Molly.

"I most sincerely hope, Lady Irene," began my dear lady, in her most gentle and persuasive voice, "that you will look with all possible indulgence on my growing desire—shared, I may say, by all my superiors at Scotland Yard—to elucidate the mystery which still surrounds your late husband's death."

Lady Molly paused, as if waiting for encouragement to proceed. The subject must have been extremely painful to the young widow; nevertheless she responded quite gently:

"I can understand that the police wish to do their duty in the matter; as for me, I have done all, I think, that could be expected of me. I am not made of iron, and after that day in the police court——"

She checked herself, as if afraid of having betrayed more emotion than was consistent with good breeding, and concluded more calmly:

"I cannot do any more."

"I fully appreciate your feelings in the matter," said Lady Molly, "but you would not mind helping me—would you—in a passive way, if you could, by some simple means, further the cause of justice?"

"What is it you want me to do?" asked Lady Irene.

"Only to allow me to ring for two of your maids and to ask them a few questions. I promise you that they shall not be of such a nature as to cause you the slightest pain."

For a moment I thought that the young widow hesitated, then, without a word, she rose and rang the bell.

"Which of my servants did you wish to see?" she asked, turning to my dear lady as soon as the butler entered in answer to the bell.

"Your own maid and your parlour-maid, if I may," replied Lady Molly.

Lady Irene gave the necessary orders, and we all sat expectant and silent until, a minute or two later, two girls entered the room. One wore a cap and apron, the other, in neat black dress and dainty lace collar, was obviously the lady's maid.

"This lady," said their mistress, addressing the two girls, "wishes to ask you a few questions. She is a representative of the police, so you had better do your best to satisfy her with your answers."

"Oh!" rejoined Lady Molly pleasantly—choosing not to notice the tone of acerbity with which the young widow had spoken, nor the unmistakable barrier of hostility and reserve which her words had immediately raised between the young servants and the "representative of the police"—"what I am going to ask these two young ladies is neither very difficult nor very unpleasant. I merely want their kind help in a little comedy which will have to be played this evening, in order to test the accuracy of certain statements made by one of the waitresses at



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Mathis' tea shop with regard to the terrible tragedy which has darkened this house. You will do that much, will you not?" she added, speaking directly to the maids.

No one can be so winning or so persuasive as my dear lady. In a moment I saw the girls' hostility melting before the sunshine of Lady Molly's smile.

"We'll do what we can, ma'am," said the maid.

"That's a brave, good girl!" replied my lady. "You must know that the chief waitress at Mathis' has, this very morning, identified the woman in the big hat who, we all believe, murdered your late master. Yes!" she continued, in response to a gasp of astonishment which seemed to go round the room like a wave, "the girl seems quite positive, both as regards the hat and the woman who wore it. But, of course, one cannot allow a human life to be sworn away without bringing every possible proof to bear on such a statement, and I am sure that everyone in this house will understand that we don't want to introduce strangers more than we can help into this sad affair, which already has been bruited abroad too much."

She paused a moment; then, as neither Lady Irene nor the maids made any comment, she continued:

"My superiors at Scotland Yard think it their duty to try and confuse the witness as much as possible in her act of identification. They desire that a certain number of ladies wearing abnormally large hats should parade before the waitress. Among them will be, of course, the one whom the girl has already identified as being the mysterious person who had tea with Mr. Culledon at Mathis' that afternoon.

"My superiors can then satisfy themselves whether the waitress is or is not so sure of her statement that she invariably picks out again and again one particular individual amongst a number of others or not."

"Surely," interrupted Lady Irene, dryly, "you and your superiors do not expect my servants to help in such a farce?"

"We don't look upon such a proceeding as a farce, Lady Irene," rejoined Lady Molly, gently. "It is often resorted to in the interests of an accused person, and we certainly would ask the co-operation of your household."

"I don't see what they can do."

But the two girls did not seem unwilling. The idea appealed to them, I felt sure; it suggested an exciting episode, and gave promise of variety in their monotonous lives.

"I am sure both these young ladies possess fine big hats," continued Lady Molly with an encouraging smile.

"I should not allow them to wear ridiculous headgear," retorted Lady Irene, sternly.

"I have the one your ladyship wouldn't wear and threw away," interposed the young parlour-maid. "I put it together again with the scraps I found in the dusthole."

There was just one instant of absolute silence, one of those magnetic moments when Fate seems to have dropped the spool on which she was spinning the threads of a life, and is just stooping in order to pick it up.

Lady Irene raised a black-bordered handkerchief to her lips, then said quietly:

"I don't know what you mean, Mary. I never wear big hats."

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"No, my lady," here interposed—the lady's maid; "but Mary means the one you ordered at Sanchia's and only wore the once—the day you went to that concert."

"Which day was that?" asked Lady Molly, blandly.

"Oh! I couldn't forget that day," ejaculated the maid; "her ladyship came home from the concert—I had undressed her, and she told me that she would never wear her big hat again—it was too heavy. That same day Mr. Culledon was murdered."

"That hat would answer our purpose very well," said Lady Molly, quite calmly. "Perhaps Mary will go and fetch it, and you had better go and help her put it on."

The two girls went out of the room without another word, and there were we three women left facing one another, with that awful secret, only half-revealed, hovering in the air like an intangible spectre.

"What are you going to do, Lady Irene?" asked Lady Molly, after a moment's pause, during which I literally could hear my own heart beating, whilst I watched the rigid figure of the widow in deep black crepe, her face set and white, her eyes fixed steadily on Lady Molly.

"You can't prove it!" she said defiantly.

"I think we can," rejoined Lady Molly, simply; "at any rate, I mean to try. I have two of the waitresses from Mathis' outside in a cab, and I have already spoken to the attendant who served you at Sanchia's, an obscure milliner in a back street near Portland Road. We know that you were at great pains there to order a hat of certain dimensions and to your own minute description; it was a copy of one you had once seen Miss Löwenthal wear when you met her at your late husband's office. We can prove that meeting, too. Then we have your maid's testimony that you wore that same hat once, and once only, the day, presumably, that you went out to a concert—a statement which you will find it difficult to substantiate—and also the day on which your husband was murdered."

"Bah! the public will laugh at you!" retorted Lady Irene, still defiantly. "You would not dare to formulate so monstrous a charge!"

"It will not seem monstrous when justice has weighed in the balance the facts which we can prove. Let me tell you a few of these, the result of careful investigation. There is the fact that you knew of Mr. Culledon's entanglement with Miss Elizabeth Löwenthal, and did your best to keep it from old Mrs. Steinberg's knowledge, realizing that any scandal round her favourite nephew would result in the old lady cutting him—and therefore you—out of her will. You dismissed a parlour-maid for the sole reason that she had been present when Miss Löwenthal was shown into Mr. Culledon's study. There is the fact that Mrs. Steinberg had so worded her will that, in the event of her nephew dying before her, her fortune would devolve on you; the fact that, with Miss Löwenthal's action for breach of promise against your husband, your last hope of keeping the scandal from the old lady's ears had effectually vanished. You saw the fortune eluding your grasp; you feared Mrs. Steinberg would alter her will. Had you found the means, and had you dared, would you not rather have killed the old lady? But discovery would have been certain. The other crime was bolder and surer. You have inherited the old lady's millions, for she never knew of her nephew's earlier peccadilloes.

"All this we can state and prove, and the history of the hat, bought, and worn one day only, that same memorable day, and then thrown away."

A loud laugh interrupted her—a laugh that froze my very marrow.

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"There is one fact you have forgotten, my lady of Scotland Yard," came in sharp, strident accents from the black-robed figure, which seemed to have become strangely spectral in the fast gathering gloom which had been enveloping the luxurious little boudoir. "Don't omit to mention the fact that the accused took the law into her own hands."

And before my dear lady and I could rush to prevent her, Lady Irene Culedon had conveyed something—we dared not think what—to her mouth.

"Find Danvers quickly, Mary!" said Lady Molly, calmly. "You'll find him outside. Bring a doctor back with you."

Even as she spoke Lady Irene, with a cry of agony, fell senseless in my dear lady's arms.

The doctor, I may tell you, came too late. The unfortunate woman evidently had a good knowledge of poisons. She had been determined not to fail; in case of discovery, she was ready and able to mete out justice to herself.

I don't think the public ever knew the real truth about the woman in the big hat. Interest in her went the way of all things. Yet my dear lady had been right from beginning to end. With unerring precision she had placed her dainty finger on the real motive and the real perpetrator of the crime the ambitious woman who had married solely for money, and meant to have that money even at the cost of one of the most dastardly murders that have ever darkened the criminal annals of this country.

I asked Lady Molly what it was that first made her think of Lady Irene as the possible murderess. No one else for a moment had thought her guilty.

"The big hat," replied my dear lady with a smile. "Had the mysterious woman at Mathis' been tall, the waitresses would not, one and all, have been struck by the abnormal size of the hat. The wearer must have been petite, hence the reason that under a wide brim only the chin would be visible. I at once sought for a small woman. Our fellows did not think of that, because they are men."

You see how simple it all was!

### ***SIR JEREMIAH'S WILL***

1

MANY people have asked me whether I knew when, and in what circumstances, Lady Molly joined the detective staff at Scotland Yard, who she was, and how she managed to keep her position in Society—as she undoubtedly did—whilst exercising a profession which usually does not make for high social standing.

Well, of course, there is much that I have known all along about my dear lady—just as much, in fact, as her aristocratic friends and relations did—but I had promised her not to let the general public know anything of her private life until she gave me leave to do so.

Now things have taken a different turn, and I can tell you all I know. But I must go back some years for that, and recall to your mind that extraordinary crime known in those days as the Baddock Will Case, which sent one of the most prominent and popular young men in Society to penal servitude—a life sentence, mind you, which was considered to be remarkably lenient by a number of people who thought that Captain de Mazareen ought to have been hanged.

He was such a good-looking young soldier in those days. I specially remember him at the late Queen's funeral—one of the tallest men in the British Army, and with that peculiar charm of manner which, alas! one has

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ceased to associate with young Englishmen nowadays. If to these two undeniable advantages you add the one that Hubert de Mazareen was the dearly loved grandson of Sir Jeremiah Baddock, the multi-millionaire shipowner of Liverpool, you will realize how easy it was for that young Guardsman to ingratiate himself with every woman in Society, and more particularly with every mamma who had a marriageable daughter.

But Fate and Love have a proverbial knack of making a muddle of things. Captain de Mazareen, with a bevy of pretty and eligible girls from whom to select a wife, chose to fall in love with the one woman in the whole of England who, in his grandfather's opinion, should have remained a stranger, even an enemy, to him.

You remember the sad story—more than a quarter of a century old now—of Sir Jeremiah's unhappy second marriage with the pretty French actress, Mlle. Adele Desty, who was then over thirty years younger than himself. He married her abroad, and never brought her to England. She made him supremely wretched for about three years, and finally ran away with the Earl of Flintshire, whom she had met at Monte Carlo.

Well! it was with a daughter of that same Earl of Flintshire, Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk, that Captain Hubert de Mazareen fell desperately in love. Imagine Sir Jeremiah's feelings when he heard of it.

Captain Hubert, you must know, had resigned his commission in 1902 at his grandfather's request, when the latter's health first began to fail. He had taken up his permanent abode at Appledore Castle, Sir Jeremiah's magnificent home in Cumberland, and, of course, it was generally understood that ultimately he would become possessed of the wealthy shipowner's millions as well as of the fine property, seeing that his mother had been Sir Jeremiah's only child by the latter's first marriage.

Lord Flintshire's property was quite close to Appledore; but, needless to say, old Sir Jeremiah never forgave his noble neighbour the cruel wrong he had suffered at his hands.

The second Lady Baddock, afterwards Countess of Flintshire, has been dead twenty years. Neither the county nor the more exclusive sets of London ever received her, but her daughter Molly, who inherited all her beauty and none of her faults, was the idol of her father, and the acknowledged queen of county and town Society.

You see, it was the ancient, yet ever new, story of Cappelletti and Montecchi over again, and one day Captain Hubert de Mazareen had to tell Sir Jeremiah that he desired to marry the daughter of his grandfather's most cruel enemy.

What the immediate result of that announcement was no one could say. Neither Sir Jeremiah nor Captain Hubert de Mazareen would have allowed servants or dependents to hear a word of disagreement that might have passed between them, much less to suspect that an unpleasant scene had occurred.

Outwardly everything went on as usual at Appledore Castle for about a fortnight or so, after which Captain Hubert went away one day, ostensibly for a brief stay in London; but he never re-entered the doors of the Castle until after the dark veil of an appalling tragedy had begun to descend on the stately old Cumberland home.

Sir Jeremiah bore up pretty well for a time, then he had a slight paralytic stroke and became a confirmed invalid. The postmaster at Appledore declared that after that many letters came, addressed to Sir Jeremiah in Captain Hubert's well-known handwriting and bearing the London postmark; but presumably the old gentleman felt bitterly irreconcilable towards his grandson, for Captain de Mazareen was never seen at the Castle.

Soon the invalid grew more and more eccentric and morose. He ordered all the reception rooms of his magnificent home to be closed and shuttered, and he dismissed all his indoor servants, with the exception of his own male attendant and an old married couple named Bradley, who had been in his service for years, and who now did the little work that was required in what had once been one of the most richly appointed country mansions in

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England.

Bitter resentment against his once dearly loved grandson, and against the man who had robbed him of his young wife twenty-five years ago, seemed to have cut off the old man from contact with the outside world.

Thus matters stood until the spring of 1903, when Sir Jeremiah announced one morning to the three members Of his household that Mr. Philip Baddock was coming to stay at the Castle, and that a room must be got ready immediately.

Mr. Philip Baddock came that same evening. He was a young man of quite ordinary appearance: short, rather dark, with the somewhat uncouth manners suggestive of an upbringing in a country parsonage.

His arrival created no little excitement in the neighbourhood. Who was Mr. Philip Baddock, and where did he come from? No one had ever heard of him before, and now--after a very brief time spent at the Castle--he seemed to be gradually taking up the position which originally had belonged to Captain Hubert. He took over the command of the small household, dismissing Sir Jeremiah's personal attendant after a while and engaging another. He supervised the outdoor men, reducing the staff both in the gardens and the stables. He sold most of the horses and carriages, and presently bought a motor-car, which he at once took to driving all over the country. But he spoke to no one in the village, and soon, in answer to inquiries by one or two of Sir Jeremiah's faithful friends and cronies, the reply came regularly from Mr. Philip Baddock that the invalid was disinclined for company. Only Doctor Thorne, the local practitioner, saw the patient. Sir Jeremiah, it was understood, was slowly sinking toward the grave; but his mind was quite clear, even if his temper was abnormal. One day Mr. Philip Baddock made inquiries in the village for a good chauffeur. George Taylor presented himself, and was at once told off to drive the car as quickly as possible to Carlisle, to the office of Mr. Steadman, solicitor, and to bring that gentleman back to the Castle as soon as he could come. The distance from Appledore to Carlisle is over fifty miles. It was seven o'clock in the evening before George Taylor was back, bringing Mr. Steadman with him.

The solicitor was received at the Castle door by old Bradley, and at Sir Jeremiah's door by Felkin, the new attendant, who showed him in. The interview between the invalid and Mr. Steadman lasted half an hour, after which the latter was driven back to Carlisle by George Taylor.

That same evening a telegram was sent off by Mr. Philip Baddock to Captain de Mazareen in London, containing the few words:

"Sir Jeremiah very ill. Come at once."

Twenty-four hours later Captain Hubert arrived at Appledore Castle--too late, however, to see his grandfather alive.

Sir Jeremiah Baddock had died an hour before the arrival of his once so tenderly cherished grandson, and all hopes of a reconciliation had now been mercilessly annihilated by death.

The end had come much more suddenly than Doctor Thorne had anticipated. He had seen the patient in the morning and thought that he might last some days. But when Sir Jeremiah had heard that Captain de Mazareen had been sent for he had worked himself into a state of such terrible agitation that the poor, overtaxed brain and heart finally gave way.

2

THE of those memorable days--in the early spring of 1904--are so graven on my memory that I can recount them as if they happened yesterday.

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I was maid to Lady Molly Robertson–Kirk at the time. Since then she has honoured me with her friendship.

Directly after Captain Hubert's first estrangement from his grandfather she and I came down to Cumberland and lived very quietly at Kirk Hall, which, as you know, is but a stone's throw from Appledore.

Here Captain Hubert paid my dear lady several visits. She had irrevocably made up her mind that their engagement was to be indefinitely prolonged, for she had a vague hope that, sooner or later, Sir Jeremiah would relent towards the grandson whom he had loved so dearly. At any rate there was a chance of it whilst the marriage had not actually taken place.

Captain de Mazareen, mind you, was in no sense of the word badly off. His father had left him some £25,000, and Lady Molly had a small private fortune of her own. Therefore I assure you that there was not a single mercenary thought behind this protracted engagement or Captain Hubert's desire for a reconciliation with his grandfather.

The evening that he arrived at Appledore in response to Mr. Philip Baddock's telegram Lady Molly met him at the station. He sent his luggage on to Kirk Hall, and the two young people walked together as far as the Elkhorn Woods, which divide the Earl of Flintshire's property from Appledore itself.

Here they met Mr. Steadman, the solicitor, who had motored over from Carlisle in response to an urgent summons from Sir Jeremiah Baddock, but whose car had broken down about two hundred yards up the road.

It seems that the chauffeur had suggested his walking on through the woods, it being an exceptionally fine and mild spring evening, with a glorious full moon overhead, which lit up almost every turn of the path that cuts through the pretty coppice.

Lady Molly had given me rendezvous at the edge of the wood, so that I might accompany her home after she had taken leave of Captain Hubert. It seems that the latter knew Mr. Steadman slightly, as we saw the two men shake hands with one another, then, after a few words of conversation, turn off to walk together through the wood. We then made our way back silently to Kirk Hall.

My dear lady was inexpressibly sad. She appreciated very deeply the love which Captain Hubert bore for his grandfather, and was loath to see the final annihilation of all her hopes of an ultimate reconciliation between the two men.

I had dressed Lady Molly for dinner, and she was just going downstairs when Captain de Mazareen arrived at the Hall.

He announced the sad news of his grandfather's death and looked extremely dejected and upset.

Of course, he stayed at the Hall, for Mr. Philip Baddock seemed quite to have taken command at Appledore Castle, and Captain Hubert did not care to be beholden to him for hospitality.

My dear lady asked him what had become of Mr. Steadman.

"I don't know," he replied. "He started to walk with me through the wood, then he seemed to think that the tramp would be too much for him, and that the car could be put right very quickly. He preferred to drive round, and was quite sure that he would meet me at the Castle in less than half an hour. However, he never turned up."

Lady Molly asked several more questions about Sir Jeremiah, which Captain Hubert answered in a listless way. He had been met at the door of the Castle by Mr. Philip Baddock, who told him that the old gentleman had breathed his last half an hour before. I

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I remember that we all went to bed that night feeling quite unaccountably depressed. It seemed that something more tragic than the natural death of a septuagenarian hovered in the air of these remote Cumberland villages.

The next morning our strange premonitions were confirmed. Lord Flintshire, my dear lady, and Captain Hubert were sitting at breakfast when the news was brought to the Hall that Mr. Steadman, the Carlisle solicitor, had been found murdered in the Elkhorn Woods earlier in the morning. Evidently he had been stunned, and then done to death by a heavily-loaded stick or some similar weapon. When he was discovered in the early hours of the morning, he had, apparently, been dead some time. The local police were at once apprised of the terrible event, which created as much excitement as the death of the eccentric old millionaire at Appledore Castle.

Everyone at Kirk Hall, of course, was keenly interested, and Captain de Mazareen went over to Appledore as soon as he could in order to place his information at the service of the police.

It is a strange fact, but nevertheless a true one, that when a deadly peril arises such as now threatened Captain de Mazareen, the person most in danger is the last to be conscious of it.

I am quite sure that Lady Molly, the moment she heard that Mr. Steadman had been murdered in the Elkhorn Woods, realized that the man she loved would be implicated in that tragedy in some sinister manner. But that is the intuition of a woman—of a woman who loves.

As for Captain Hubert, he went about during the whole of that day quite unconscious of the abyss which already was yawning at his feet. He even discussed quite equably the several valuable bits of information which the local police had already collected, and which eventually formed a portion of that damning fabric of circumstantial evidence which was to bring him within sight of the gallows.

Earlier in the day, Mr. Philip Baddock sent him a stiff little note, saying that, as Captain de Mazareen was now the owner of Appledore Castle, he (Philip Baddock) did not desire to trespass a moment longer than was necessary on his relative's hospitality, and had arranged to stay at the village inn until after the funeral, when he would leave Cumberland.

To this Captain Hubert sent an equally curt note saying that, as far as he knew, he had no say in the matter of anyone coming or going from the Castle, and that Mr. Philip Baddock must, of course, please himself as to whether he stayed there or not.

So far, of course, the old gentleman's testamentary dispositions were not known. He had made a will in 1902 bequeathing Appledore and everything he possessed unconditionally to his beloved grandson, Hubert de Mazareen, whom he also appointed his sole executor. That will was lodged with Mr. Truscott, who had been solicitor to the deceased practically until the last moment, when Mr. Steadman, a new arrival at Carlisle, had been sent for.

Whether that will had been revoked or not Mr. Truscott did not know; but, in the course of the afternoon, Lord Flintshire, whilst out driving, met the local superintendent of police, who told him that Mr. Steadman's senior partner—a Mr. Fuelling—had made a statement to the effect that Sir Jeremiah had sent for Mr. Steadman the day before his death and given instructions for the drafting of a new will whereby the old gentleman bequeathed Appledore and everything he possessed to his beloved grandson, Hubert de Mazareen, but only on the condition that the latter did not marry the daughter or any other relative of the Earl of Flintshire. In the event of Hubert de Mazareen disregarding this condition at any future time of his life, Sir Jeremiah's entire fortune was to devolve on Philip Baddock, so~ issue of testator's second marriage, with Adele Desty. The draft of this will, added Mr. Fuelling, was in Mr. Steadman's pocket ready for Sir Jeremiah's signature on that fateful night when the unfortunate young solicitor was murdered.

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The draft had not been found in the murdered man's pocket. A copy of it, however, was in Mr. Fuelling's safe. But as this will had never been signed by the deceased the one of 1902 remained valid, and Captain Hubert de Mazareen remained unconditionally his grandfather's sole heir.

### 3

EVENTS crowded thick and fast on that day—one of the most miserable I have ever lived through.

After an early tea, which my dear lady had alone in her little boudoir, she sent me down to ask Captain Hubert to come up and speak to her. He did so at once, and I went into the next room—which was Lady Molly's bedroom—to prepare her dress for the evening.

I had, of course, discreetly closed the door of communication between the two rooms, but after the first five minutes, Lady Molly deliberately reopened it, from which I gathered that she actually wished me to know what was going on.

It was then a little after four o'clock. I could hear Captain de Mazareen's voice, low-toned and infinitely tender. He adored my dear lady, but he was a very quiet man, and it was only by the passionate intensity of his attitude when he was near her that a shrewdly observant person could guess how deeply he cared. Now, through the open door, I could see his handsome head bowed very low, so that he could better look into her upturned eyes. His arms were round her, as if he were fighting the world for the possession of her, and would never let her go again. But there were tears in her eyes.

"Hubert," she said after a while, "I want you to marry me. Will you?"

"Will I?" he whispered, with an intensity of passionate longing which seemed to me then so unutterably pathetic that I could have sat down and had a good cry.

"But," rejoined Lady Molly earnestly, "I mean as soon as possible—to-morrow, by special licence. You can wire to Mr. Hurford to-night, and he will see about it the first thing in the morning. We can travel up to town by the night train. Father and Mary will come with me. Father has promised, you know, and we can be married to-morrow . . . I think that would be the quickest way."

There was a pause. I could well imagine how astonished and perturbed Captain Hubert must be feeling. It was such a strange request for a woman to make at such a time. I could see by the expression of his eyes that he was trying to read her thoughts. But she looked up quite serenely at him, and, frankly, I do not think that he had the slightest inkling of the sublime motive at the back of her strange insistence.

"You prefer to be married in London rather than here?" he asked quite simply.

"Yes," she replied; "I desire to be married in London to-morrow."

A few moments later my dear lady quietly shut the door again, and I heard and saw no more; but half an hour later she called me. She was alone in her boudoir, bravely trying to smile through a veil of tears. Captain Hubert's footsteps could still be heard going along the hall below.

Lady Molly listened until the final echo of that tread died away in the distance; then she buried her sweet face on my shoulder and sobbed her very heart out.

"Get ready as quickly as you can, Mary," she said to me when the paroxysm had somewhat subsided. "We go up to town by the 9.10."



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"Is his lordship coming with us, my lady?" I asked. P> "Oh, yes!" she said, whilst a bright smile lit up her face. "Father is simply grand . . . and yet he knows."

"Knows what, my lady?" I queried instinctively, for Lady Molly had paused, and I saw a look of acute pain once more darken her soft, grey eyes.

"My father knows," she said, slowly and almost tonelessly, "that half an hour ago the police found a weighted stick in the Elkhorn Woods not far from the spot where Mr. Steadman was murdered. The stick has the appearance of having been very vigorously cleaned and scraped recently in spite of which fact tiny traces of blood are still visible on the leaden knob. The inspector showed my father that stick. I saw it too. It is the property of Captain Hubert de Mazareen, and by to-morrow, at the latest, it will be identified as such."

There was silence in the little boudoir now: a silence broken only by the sound of dull sobs which rose from my dear lady's overburdened heart. Lady Molly at this moment had looked into the future, and with that unerring intuition which has since been of such immense service to her she had already perceived the grim web which Fate was weaving round the destiny of the man she loved.

I said nothing. What could I say? I waited for her to speak again.

The first words she uttered after the terrible pronouncement which she had just made were:

"I'll wear my white cloth gown to-morrow, Mary. It is the most becoming frock I have, and I want to look my best on my wedding day."

### 4

CAPTAIN HUBERT DE MAZAREEN was married to Lady Molly Robertson Kirk by special licence on April 22nd, 1904, at the Church of St. Margaret, Westminster. No one was present to witness the ceremony except the Earl of Flintshire and myself. No one was apprised of the event at the time, nor, until recently, did anyone know that Lady Molly of Scotland Yard was the wife of De Mazareen the convict.

As you know, he was arrested at Appledore railway station the following morning and charged with the wilful murder of Alexander Steadman, solicitor, of Carlisle.

Everything was against him from the first. The draft of the will which Mr. Steadman was taking up to Sir Jeremiah for signature supplied the motive for the alleged crime, and he was the last person seen in company with the murdered man.

The chauffeur, George Taylor, who had driven to Carlisle to fetch Mr. Steadman, and brought him back that evening, explained how two of his tyres burst almost simultaneously after going over a bit of broken road close to the coppice. He had suggested to Mr. Steadman the idea of walking through the wood, and, as he had not two fresh tyres with him, he started pushing his car along, as the village was not more than half a mile away. He never saw Mr. Steadman again.

The stick with which the terrible deed had been committed was the most damning piece of evidence against the accused. It had been identified as his property by more than one witness, and was found within twenty yards of the victim, obviously cleaned and scraped, but still bearing minute traces of blood. Moreover, it had actually been seen in Captain Hubert's hand by one or two of the porters when he arrived at Appledore Station on that fatal night, was met there by Lady Molly, and subsequently walked away with her previous to meeting Mr. Steadman on the edge of the wood.

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Captain de Mazareen, late of His Majesty's Household Brigade, was indicted for the wilful murder of Alexander Steadman, tried at the next assizes, found guilty, and condemned to be hanged. The jury, however, had strongly recommended him to mercy owing to his hitherto spotless reputation, and to the many services he had rendered his country during the last Boer War. A monster petition was sent up to the Home Office, and the sentence was commuted to twenty years' penal servitude.

That same year, Lady Molly applied for, and obtained, a small post on the detective staff of the police. From that small post she has worked her way upwards analysing and studying, exercising her powers of intuition and of deduction, until at the present moment she is considered, by chiefs and men alike, the greatest authority among them on criminal investigation.

The Earl of Flintshire died some three years ago. Kirk Hall devolved on a distant cousin, but Lady Molly has kept a small home at Kirk ready for her husband when he comes back from Dartmoor.

The task of her life is to apply her gifts, and the obvious advantages at her disposal as a prominent member of the detective force, to prove the innocence of Captain Hubert de Mazareen, which she never doubted for a moment.

But it was sublime, and at the same time deeply pathetic, to see the frantic efforts at self-sacrifice which these two noble-hearted young people made for one another's sakes.

Directly Captain Hubert realized that, so far as proving his innocence was concerned, he was a lost man, he used every effort to release Lady Molly from the bonds of matrimony. The marriage had been, and was still, kept a profound secret. He determined to plead guilty to murder at his trial, and then to make a declaration that he had entrapped Lady Molly into a marriage, knowing at the time that a warrant was out for his arrest, and hoping, by his connexion with the Earl of Flintshire, to obtain a certain amount of leniency. When he was sufficiently convinced that such a course was out of the question, he begged Lady Molly to bring a nullity suit against him. He would not defend it. He only wished to set her free.

But the love she bore him triumphed over all. They did keep their marriage a secret, but she remained faithful to him in every thought and feeling within her, and loyal to him with her whole soul. Only I—once her maid, now her devoted friend—knew what she suffered, even whilst she threw herself heart and mind into her work.

We lived mostly in our little flat in Maida Vale, but spent some delightful days of freedom and peace in the little house at Kirk. Hither—in spite of the terrible memories the place evoked—Lady Molly loved to spend her time in wandering over the ground where that mysterious crime had been committed which had doomed an innocent man to the life of a convict.

"That mystery has got to be cleared up, Mary," she would repeat to me with unswerving loyalty, "and cleared up soon, before Captain de Mazareen loses all joy in life and all belief in me."

5

I SUSPECT YOU will be interested to hear something about Appledore Castle and about Mr. Philip Baddock, who had been so near getting an immense fortune, yet had it snatched from him before his very eyes.

As Sir Jeremiah Baddock never signed the will of 1904, Captain de Mazareen's solicitors, on his behalf, sought to obtain probate of the former one, dated 1902. In view of the terrible circumstances connected with the proposed last testamentary dispositions of the deceased, Mr. Philip Baddock was advised to fight that suit.

It seems that he really was the son of Sir Jeremiah by the latter's second marriage with Mlle. Desty, but the old gentleman with heartless vengefulness had practically repudiated the boy from the first, and absolutely refused to

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have anything to do with him beyond paying for his maintenance and education, and afterwards making him a goodly allowance on the express condition that Philip—soon to become a young man—never set his foot on English soil.

The condition was strictly complied with. Philip Baddock was born abroad, and lived abroad until 1903 when he suddenly appeared at Appledore Castle. Whether Sir Jeremiah, in a fit of tardy repentance had sent for him, or whether he risked coming of his own accord, no one ever knew

Captain de Mazareen was not, until that same year 1903, aware of the existence of Philip Baddock any more than was anybody else, and he spent his last days of freedom in stating positively that he would not accept the terms of the will of 1902, but would agree to Sir Jeremiah's fortune being divided up as it would have been if the old gentleman had died intestate. Thus Philip Baddock, the son, and Hubert de Mazareen, the grandson, received an equal share of Sir Jeremiah's immense wealth estimated at close upon £2,000,000 sterling.

Appledore was put up for sale and bought in by Mr. Philip Baddock, who took up his residence there and gradually gained for himself a position in the county as one of the most wealthy magnates in the north of England. Thus he became acquainted with the present Lord Flintshire, and, later on, met my dear lady. She neither sought nor avoided his acquaintance, and even went once to a dinner party at Appledore Castle.

That was lately, on the occasion of our last stay at Kirk. I had gone up to the Castle in the brougham so that I might accompany Lady Molly home, and had been shown into the library, whither my dear lady came in order to put on her cloak.

While she was doing so Mr. Philip Baddock came in. He had a newspaper in his hand and seemed greatly agitated.

"Such extraordinary news, Lady Molly," he said, pointing to a head-line in the paper. "You know, of course, that the other day a convict succeeded in effecting his escape from Dartmoor?"

"Yes, I know that," said my dear lady quietly.

"Well, I have reason to—to suppose," continued Mr. Baddock, "that that convict was none other than my unfortunate nephew, De Mazareen."

"Yes?" rejoined Lady Molly, whose perfect calm and serene expression of face contrasted strangely with the obvious agitation of Philip Baddock.

"Heaven knows that he tried to do me an evil turn," rejoined the latter after a while; "but of course I bear him no grudge, now that the law has given me that which he tried to wrench from me—a just share of my father's possessions. Since he has thrown himself on my mercy——"

"Thrown himself on your mercy!" ejaculated my dear lady, whose face had become almost grey with a sudden fear. "What do you mean?"

"De Mazareen is in my house at the present moment," replied Mr. Baddock quietly.

"Here?"

"Yes. It seems that he tramped here. I am afraid that his object was to try and see you. He wants money, of course. I happened to be out in the woods this afternoon, and saw him.

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"No, no!" added Philip Baddock quickly, in response to an instinctive gasp of pain from Lady Molly; "you need not have the slightest fear. My nephew is as safe with me as he would be in your own house. I brought him here, for he was exhausted with fatigue and want of food. None of my servants know of his presence in the house except Felkin, whom I can trust. By to-morrow he will have rested.... We'll make a start in the very early morning in my car; we'll get to Liverpool before midday. De Mazareen shall wear Felkin's clothes—no one will know him. One of the Baddock steamers is leaving for Buenos Ayres the same afternoon, and I can arrange with the captain. You need not have the slightest fear," he repeated, with simple yet earnest emphasis; "I pledge you my word that De Mazareen will be safe."

"I should like to thank you," she murmured.

"Please don't," he rejoined with a sad smile. "It is a great happiness to me to be able to do this.... I know that you—you cared for him at one time. . . I wish you had known and trusted me in those days—but I am glad of this opportunity which enables me to tell you that, even had my father signed his last will and testament, I should have shared his fortune with De Mazareen. The man whom you honoured with your love need never have resorted to crime in order to gain a fortune."

Philip Baddock paused. His eyes were fixed on Lady Molly with unmistakable love and an appeal for sympathy. I had no idea that he cared for her—nor had she, I am quite sure. Her heart belonged solely to the poor, fugitive convict, but she could not fail, I thought, to be touched by the other man's obvious sincerity and earnestness.

There was silence in the room for a few moments. Only the old clock in its Sheraton case ticked on in solemn imperturbability.

Lady Molly turned her luminous eyes on the man who had just made so simple, so touching a profession of love. Was she about to tell him that she was no longer free, that she bore the name of the man whom the law had ostracized and pronounced a criminal—who had even now, by his daring attempt at escape, added a few years to his already long term of punishment and another load to his burden of shame?

"Do you think," she asked quietly, "that I might speak to Captain de Mazareen for a few moments without endangering his safety?"

Mr. Baddock did not reply immediately. He seemed to be pondering over the request. Then he said:

"I will see that everything is safe. I don't think there need be any danger."

He went out of the room, and my dear lady and I were left alone for a minute or two. She was so calm and serene that I marvelled at her self-control, and wondered what was going on in her mind.

"Mary," she said to me, speaking very quickly, for already we could hear two men's footsteps approaching the library door, "you must station yourself just outside the front door; you understand? If you see or hear anything suspicious come and warn me at once."

I made ready to obey, and the next moment the door opened and Mr. Philip Baddock entered, accompanied by Captain Hubert.

I smothered the involuntary sob which rose to my throat at sight of the man who had once been the most gallant, the handsomest soldier I had ever seen. I had only just time to notice that Mr. Baddock prepared to leave the room again immediately. At the door he turned back and said to Lady Molly:

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"Felkin has gone down to the lodge. If he hears or sees anything that seems suspicious he will ring up on the telephone," and he pointed to the apparatus which stood on the table in the centre of the room.

After that he closed the door, and I was left to imagine the moments of joy, mingled with acute anguish, which my dear lady would be living through.

I walked up and down restlessly on the terrace which fronts the Castle. The house itself appeared silent and dark: I presume all the servants had gone to bed. Far away on my right I caught the glimmer of a light. It came from the lodge where Felkin was watching. From the church in Appledore village came the sound of the clock striking the hour of midnight.

How long I had been on the watch I cannot say, when suddenly I was aware of a man's figure running rapidly along the drive towards the house. The next moment the figure had skirted the Castle, apparently making for one of the back doors.

I did not hesitate a moment. Having left the big front door on the latch, I ran straight in and made for the library door.

Already Mr. Philip Baddock had forestalled me. His hand was on the latch. Without more ado he pushed open the door and I followed him in.

Lady Molly was sitting on the sofa, with Captain Hubert by her side. They both rose at our entrance.

"The police!" said Mr. Baddock, speaking very rapidly. "Felkin has just rung up from the lodge. He is getting our car ready. Pray God we may yet be able to get away."

Even as he spoke the front door bell sounded with a loud clang, which had the sound of a death knell.

"It is too late, you see," said my dear lady quietly.

"No, not too late," ejaculated Philip Baddock in a rapid whisper. "Quick! De Mazareen, follow me through the hall. Felkin is at the stables getting the car ready. It will be some time before the servants are aroused."

"Mary, I am sure, has failed to fasten the front door," interrupted Lady Molly, with the same strange calm. "I think the police are already in the hall."

There was no mistaking the muffled sound of feet treading the thick Turkey carpet in the hall. The library had but one exit. Captain Hubert was literally in a trap. But Mr. Baddock had not lost his presence of mind.

"The police would never dream of searching my house," he said; "they would take my word that he is not here. Here!" he added, pointing to a tall Jacobean wardrobe which stood in an angle of the room. "In there man, and leave the rest to me!"

"I am afraid that such a proceeding would bring useless trouble upon you, Mr. Baddock," once more interposed Lady Molly; "the police, if they do not at once find Captain de Mazareen, will search the house."

"Impossible! They would not dare!"

"Indeed they would. The police know that Captain de Mazareen is here."

"I swear they do not," rejoined Mr. Baddock "Felkin is no traitor, and no one else——"

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"It was I who gave information to the police," said Lady Molly. "I called up the superintendent on the telephone just now, and told him that his men would find the escaped convict hiding at Appledore Castle."

"You!" ejaculated Mr. Baddock in a tone of surprise, not unmixed with a note of triumph. "You?"

"Yes!" she replied calmly. "I am of the police, you know. I had to do my duty. Open the door, Mary," she added, turning to me.

Captain Hubert had not spoken a word so far. Now, when the men, led by Detective–Inspector Etty, entered the room, he walked with a firm step towards them, held out his hands for the irons, and with a final look at Lady Molly, in which love, trust, and hope were clearly expressed, he passed out of the room and was soon lost to sight.

My dear lady waited until the heavy footfalls had died away; then she turned with a pleasant smile to Mr. Philip Baddock:

"I thank you for your kind thoughts of me," she said, "and for your noble efforts on behalf of your nephew. My position is a difficult one. I hope you will forgive the pain I have been obliged to bring upon you."

"I will do more than forgive, Lady Molly," he said earnestly, "I will venture to hope."

He took her hand and kissed it. Then she beckoned to me and I followed her into the hall.

Our brougham—a hired one—had been waiting in the stable–yard. We drove home in silence; but half an hour later she whispered in my ear:

"And now, Mary, we'll prove him innocent."

### *THE END I*

ONE or two people knew that at one time Lady Molly Robertson–Kirk had been engaged to Captain Hubert de Mazareen, who was now convict No. 97, undergoing a life sentence for the murder of Mr. Steadman, a solicitor of Carlisle, in the Elkhorn Woods in April, 1904. Few, on the other hand, knew of the secret marriage solemnized on that never–to–be–forgotten afternoon, when all of us present in the church, with the exception of the bridegroom himself, were fully aware that proofs of guilt—deadly and irrefutable—were even then being heaped up against the man to whom Lady Molly was plighting her troth, for better or for worse, with her mental eyes wide open, her unerring intuition keen to the fact that nothing but a miracle could save the man she loved from an ignoble condemnation, perhaps from the gallows.

The husband of my dear lady, the man whom she loved with all the strength of her romantic and passionate nature, was duly tried and convicted of murder. Condemned to be hanged, he was reprieved, and his sentence commuted to penal servitude for life.

The question of Sir Jeremiah's estate became a complicated one, for his last will and testament was never signed, and the former one, dated 1902, bequeathed everything he possessed unconditionally to his beloved grandson Hubert.

After much legal argument, which it is useless to recapitulate here, it was agreed between the parties, and ratified in court, that the deceased gentleman's vast wealth should be disposed of as if he had died intestate. One–half of it, therefore, went to Captain Hubert de Mazareen, grandson, and the other half to Philip Baddock, the son. The latter bought Appledore Castle and resided there, whilst his nephew became No. 97 in Dartmoor Prison.

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Captain Hubert had served two years of his sentence when he made that daring and successful escape which caused so much sensation at the time. He managed to reach Appledore, where he was discovered by Mr. Philip Baddock, who gave him food and shelter and got everything ready for the safe conveyance of his unfortunate nephew to Liverpool and thence to a port of safety in South America.

You remember how he was thwarted in this laudable attempt by Lady Molly herself, who communicated with the police and gave up convict No. 97 into the hands of the authorities once more.

Of course, public outcry was loud against my dear lady's action. Sense of duty was all very well, so people argued, but no one could forget that at one time Captain Hubert de Mazareen and Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk had actually been engaged to be married, and it seemed positively monstrous for a woman to be so pitiless towards the man whom she must at one time have loved.

You see how little people understood my dear lady's motives. Some went so far as to say that she had only contemplated marriage with Captain Hubert de Mazareen because he was then, presumably, the heir to Sir Jeremiah's fortune; now—continued the gossips—she was equally ready to marry Mr. Philip Baddock, who at any rate was the happy possessor of one-half of the deceased gentleman's wealth.

Certainly Lady Molly's conduct at this time helped to foster this idea. Finding that even the chief was inclined to give her the cold shoulder, she shut up our flat in Maida Vale and took up her residence at the little house which she owned in Kirk, and from the windows of which she had a splendid view of stately Appledore Castle nestling among the trees on the hillside.

I was with her, of course, and Mr. Philip Baddock was a frequent visitor at the house. There could be no doubt that he admired her greatly, and that she accepted his attentions with a fair amount of graciousness. The county fought shy of her. Her former engagement to Captain de Mazareen was well known, and her treachery to him was severely censured.

Living almost in isolation in the village, her whole soul seemed wrapped in thoughts of how to unravel the mystery of the death of Mr. Steadman. Captain de Mazareen had sworn in his defence that the solicitor, after starting to walk through the Elkhorn woods with him, had feared that the tramp over rough ground would be too much for him, and had almost immediately turned back in order to regain the road. But the chauffeur, George Taylor, who was busy with the broken-down car some two hundred yards up the road, never saw Mr. Steadman again, whilst Captain de Mazareen arrived at the gates of Appledore Castle alone. Here he was met by Mr. Philip Baddock, who informed him that Sir Jeremiah had breathed his last an hour before.

No one at the Castle recollected seeing a stick in Captain Hubert's hand when he arrived, whilst there were several witnesses who swore that he carried one at Appledore Station when he started to walk with her ladyship. The stick was found close to the body of the solicitor; and the solicitor, when he met with his terrible death, had in his pocket the draft of a will which meant disinheritance to Captain de Mazareen.

Here was the awful problem which Lady Molly had to face and to solve it she persisted in believing that the man whom she loved, and whom she had married at the moment when she knew that proofs of guilt were dead against him, was indeed innocent

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WE had spent all the morning shopping in Carlisle, and in the afternoon we called on Mr. Fuelling, of the firm of Fuelling, Steadman & Co., solicitors.

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Lady Molly had some business to arrange in connexion with the purchase of an additional bit of land to round off her little garden at Kirk.

Mr. Fuelling was courteous, but distinctly stiff, in his manner towards the lady who was "connected with the police," more especially when—her business being transacted—she seemed inclined to tarry in the busy solicitor's office, and to lead conversation round to the subject of the murder of Mr. Steadman.

"Five years have gone by since then," said Mr. Fuelling curtly in response to a remark from Lady Molly. "I prefer not to revive unpleasant memories."

"You, of course, believed Captain de Mazareen guilty?" retorted my dear lady imperturbably.

"There were circumstances———" rejoined the solicitor, "and—and, of course, I hardly knew the unfortunate young man. Messrs. Truscott & Truscott used to be the family solicitors."

"Yes. It seemed curious that when Sir Jeremiah wished to make his will he sent for you, rather than for his accustomed lawyer," mused Lady Molly.

"Sir Jeremiah did not send for me," replied Mr. Fuelling with some acerbity, "he sent for my junior, Mr. Steadman."

"Perhaps Mr. Steadman was a great friend of his."

"Not at all. Not at all. Mr. Steadman was a new arrival in Carlisle, and had never seen Sir Jeremiah before the day when he was sent for and, in a brief interview, drafted the will which, alas! proved to be the primary cause of my unfortunate partner's death."

"You cannot draft a will in a brief interview, Mr. Fuelling," remarked Lady Molly lightly.

"Mr. Steadman did so," retorted Mr. Fuelling curtly. "Though Sir Jeremiah's mind was as clear as a crystal, he was very feeble, and the interview had to take place in a darkened room. That was the only time my young partner saw Sir Jeremiah. Twenty-four hours later they were both dead."

"Oh!" commented my dear lady with sudden indifference. "Well, I won't detain you, Mr. Fuelling. Good afternoon."

A few moments later, having parted from the worthy old solicitor, we were out in the street once more.

"The darkened room is my first ray of light," quoth Lady Molly with a smile at her own paradoxical remark.

When we reached home later that afternoon we were met at the garden gate by Mr. Felkin, Mr. Philip Baddock's friend and agent, who lived with him at Appledore Castle.

Mr. Felkin was a curious personality; very taciturn in manner but a man of considerable education. He was the son of a country parson, and at the time of his father's death he had been studying for the medical profession. Finding himself unable to pursue his studies for lack of means, and being left entirely destitute, he had been forced to earn his living by taking up the less exalted calling of male nurse. It seems that he had met Mr. Philip Baddock on the Continent some years ago, and the two young men had somehow drifted into close acquaintanceship. When the late Sir Jeremiah required a personal nurse-attendant Mr. Philip Baddock sent for his friend and installed him at Appledore Castle.



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Here Mr. Felkin remained, even after the old gentleman's death. He was nominally called Mr. Baddock's agent, but really did very little work. He was very fond of shooting and of riding, and spent his life in the pursuit of these sports, and he always had plenty of money to spend.

But everyone voted him a disagreeable bear, and the only one who ever succeeded in making him smile was Lady Molly, who always showed an unaccountable liking for the uncouth creature. Even now, when he extended a somewhat grimy hand and murmured a clumsy apology at his intrusion, she greeted him with effusiveness and insisted on his coming into the house.

We all turned to walk along the little drive when Mr. Baddock's car came whizzing round the corner of the road from the village. He pulled up at our gate, and the next moment had joined us in the drive.

There was a very black look in his eyes as they wandered restlessly from my dear lady's face to that of his friend. Lady Molly's hand was even then resting on Mr. Felkin's coat sleeve; she had been in the act of leading him herself towards the house, and did not withdraw her hand when Mr. Baddock appeared.

"Burton has just called about those estimates, Felkin," said the latter somewhat roughly; "he is waiting at the Castle. You had better take the car—I can walk home later on."

"Oh! how disappointing!" exclaimed Lady Molly, with what looked uncommonly like a pout. "I was going to have such a cosy chat with Mr. Felkin—all about horses and dogs. Couldn't you see that tiresome Burton, Mr. Baddock?" she added ingenuously.

I don't think that Mr. Baddock actually swore, but I am sure he was very near doing so.

"Burton can wait," said Mr. Felkin curtly.

"No, he cannot," retorted Philip Baddock, whose face was a frowning mirror of uncontrolled jealousy; "take the car, Felkin, and go at once."

For a moment it seemed as if Felkin would refuse to obey. The two men stood looking at each other, measuring one another's power of will and strength of passion. Hate and jealousy were clearly written in each pair of glowering eyes. Philip Baddock looked defiant, and Felkin taciturn and sulky.

Close to them stood my dear lady. Her beautiful eyes literally glowed with triumph. That these two men loved her, each in his own curious, uncontrolled way, I, her friend and confidante, knew very well I had seen, and often puzzled over, the feminine attacks which she had made on the susceptibilities of that morose lout Felkin. It had taken her nearly two years to bring him to her feet. During that time she had alternately rendered him happy with her smiles and half mad with her coquetries, whilst Philip Baddock's love for her was fanned by his ever-growing jealousy.

I remember that I often thought her game a cruel one. She was one of those women whom few men could resist; if she really desired to conquer she invariably succeeded, and her victory over Felkin seemed to me as purposeless as it was unkind. After all, she was the lawful wife of Captain de Mazareen, and to rouse hatred between two friends for the sake of her love, when that love was not hers to give, seemed unworthy of her. At this moment, when I could read deadly hatred in the faces of these two men, her cooing laugh grated unpleasantly on my ear.

"Never mind, Mr. Felkin," she said, turning her luminous eyes on him. "Since you have so hard a taskmaster, you must do your duty now. But," she added, throwing a strange, defiant look at Mr. Baddock, "I shall be at home this evening; come and have our cosy chat after dinner."

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She gave him her hand, and he took it with a certain clumsy gallantry and raised it to his lips. I thought that Philip Baddock would strike his friend with his open hand. The veins on his temples were swollen like dark cords, and I don't think that I ever saw such an evil look in anyone's eyes before.

Strangely enough, the moment Mr. Felkin's back was turned my dear lady seemed to set herself the task of soothing the violent passions which she had wilfully aroused in the other man. She invited him to come into the house, and, some ten minutes later, I heard her singing to him. When, later on, I went into the boudoir to join them at tea, she was sitting on the music stool whilst he half bent over her, half knelt at her feet; her hands were clasped in her lap, and his fingers were closed over hers.

He did not attempt to leave her side when he saw me entering the room. In fact, he wore a triumphant air of possession, and paid her those attentions which only an accepted lover would dare to offer.

He left soon after tea, and she accompanied him to the door. She gave him her hand to kiss, and I, who stood at some little distance in the shadow, thought that he would take her in his arms, so yielding and gracious did she seem. But some look or gesture on her part must have checked him, for he turned and walked quickly down the drive.

Lady Molly stood in the doorway gazing out towards the sunset. I, in my humble mind, wondered once again what was the purport of this cruel game.

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HALF an hour later she called to me, asked for her hat, told me to put on mine and to come out for a stroll.

As so often happened, she led the way towards the Elkhorn woods, which, in spite, or perhaps because, of the painful memories they evoked, was a very favourite walk of hers.

As a rule the wood, especially that portion of it where the unfortunate solicitor had been murdered, was deserted after sunset. The villagers declared that Mr. Steadman's ghost haunted the clearing, and that the cry of the murdered man, as he was being foully struck from behind, could be distinctly heard echoing through the trees.

Needless to say these superstitious fancies never disturbed Lady Molly. She liked to wander over the ground where was committed that mysterious crime which had sent to ignominy worse than death the man she loved so passionately. It seemed as if she meant to wrench its secret from the silent ground, from the leafy undergrowth, from the furtive inhabitants of the glades.

The sun had gone down behind the hills; the wood was dark and still. We strolled up as far as the first clearing, where a plain granite stone, put up by Mr. Philip Baddock, marked the spot where Mr. Steadman had been murdered.

We sat down on it to rest. My dear lady's mood was a silent one; I did not dare to disturb it, and, for a while, only the gentle "hush—sh—sh" of the leaves, stirred by the evening breeze, broke the peaceful stillness of the glade.

Then we heard a murmur of voices, deep-toned and low. We could not hear the words spoken, though we both strained our ears, and presently Lady Molly arose and cautiously made her way among the trees in the direction whence the voices came, I following as closely as I could.

We had not gone far when we recognized the voices and heard the words that were said. I paused, distinctly frightened, whilst my dear lady whispered a warning "Hush!"

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Never in all my life had I heard so much hatred, such vengeful malignity expressed in the intonation of the human voice as I did in the half-dozen words which now struck my ear.

"You will give her up, or----"

It was Mr. Felkin who spoke. I recognized his raucous delivery, but I could not distinguish either of the two men in the gloom.

"Or what?" queried the other, in a voice which trembled with either rage or fear--perhaps with both.

"You will give her up," repeated Felkin sullenly. "I tell you that it is an impossibility--do you understand?--an impossibility for me to stand by and see her wedded to you, or to any other man for the matter of that. But that is neither here nor there," he added after a slight pause. "It is with you I have to deal now. You shan't have her--you shan't--I won't allow it, even if I have to----"

He paused again. I cannot describe the extraordinary effect this rough voice coming out of the darkness had upon my nerves. I had edged up to Lady Molly, and had succeeded in getting hold of her hand. It was like ice, and she herself was as rigid as that piece of granite on which we had been sitting.

"You seem bubbling over with covert threats," interposed Philip Baddock, with what was obviously a sneer; "what are the extreme measures to which you will resort if I do not give up the lady whom I love with my whole heart, and who has honoured me to-day by accepting my hand in marriage?"

"That is a lie!" ejaculated Felkin.

"What is a lie?" queried the other quietly.

"She has not accepted you--and you know it. You are trying to keep me away from her--arrogating rights which you do not possess. Give her up, man, give her up. It will be best for you. She will listen to me--I can win her all right--but you must stand aside for me this time. Take the word of a desperate man for it, Baddock. It will be best for you to give her up."

Silence reigned in the wood for a few moments, and then we heard Philip Baddock's voice again, but he seemed to speak more calmly, almost indifferently, as I thought.

"Are you going now?" he asked. "Won't you come in to dinner?"

"No," replied Felkin, "I don't want any dinner, and I have an appointment for afterwards."

"Don't let us part ill friends, Felkin," continued Philip Baddock in conciliatory tones. "Do you know that, personally, my feeling is that no woman on earth is worth a serious quarrel between two old friends, such as we have been."

"I'm glad you think so," rejoined the other dryly. "S'long."

The cracking of twigs on the moss-covered ground indicated that the two men had parted and were going their several ways.

With infinite caution~ and holding my hand tightly in hers, my dear lady made her way along the narrow path which led us out of the wood.

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Once in the road we walked rapidly, and soon reached our garden gate. Lady Molly had not spoken a word during all that time, and no one knew better than I did how to respect her silence.

During dinner she tried to talk of indifferent subjects, and never once alluded to the two men whom she had thus wilfully pitted one against the other. That her calm was only on the surface, however, I realized from the fact that every sound on the gravel path outside caused her to start. She was, of course, expecting the visit of Mr. Felkin.

At eight o'clock he came. It was obvious that he had spent the past hour in wandering about in the woods. He looked untidy and unkempt. My dear lady greeted him very coldly, and when he tried to kiss her hand she withdrew it abruptly.

Our drawing-room was a double one, divided by portiere curtains. Lady Molly led the way into the front room, followed by Mr. Felkin. Then she drew the curtains together, leaving me standing behind them. I concluded that she wished me to stay there and to listen, conscious of the fact that Felkin, in his agitated mood, would be quite oblivious of my presence.

I almost pitied the poor man, for to me—the listener—it was at once apparent that my dear lady had only bidden him come to-night in order to torture him. For about a year she had been playing with him as a cat does with a mouse; encouraging him at times with sweet words and smiles, repelling him at others with coldness not unmingled with coquetry. But to-night her coldness was unalloyed; her voice was trenchant, her attitude almost one of contempt.

I missed the beginning of their conversation, for the curtains were thick and I did not like to go too near, but soon Mr. Felkin's voice was raised. It was harsh and uncompromising.

"I suppose that I am only good enough for a summer's flirtation?" he said sullenly, "but not to marry, eh? The owner of Appledore Castle, the millionaire, Mr. Baddock, is more in your line——"

"It certainly would be a more suitable match for me," rejoined Lady Molly coolly.

"He told me that you had formally accepted him," said the man with enforced calm; "is that true?"

"Partly," she replied.

"But you won't marry him!"

The exclamation seemed to come straight from a heart brimful of passion, of love, of hate, and of revenge. The voice had the same intonation in it which had rung an hour ago in the dark Elkhorn woods.

"I may do," came in quiet accents from my dear lady.

"You won't marry him," repeated Felkin roughly.

"Who shall prevent me?" retorted Lady Molly with a low, sarcastic laugh.

"I will."

"You?" she said contemptuously.

"I told him an hour ago that he must give you up I tell you now that you shall not be Philip Baddock's wife."

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"Oh!" she interposed. And I could almost see the disdainful shrug of her shoulders, the flash of contempt in her expressive eyes.

No doubt it maddened him to see her so cool, so indifferent, when he had thought that he could win her. I do believe that the poor wretch loved her. She was always beautiful, but never more so than to-night, when she had obviously determined finally to dismiss him.

"If you marry Philip Baddock," he now said in a voice which quivered with uncontrolled passion, "then within six months of your wedding-day you will be a widow, for your husband will have ended his life on the gallows."

"You are mad!" she retorted calmly.

"That is as it may be," he replied. "I warned him to-night, and he seems inclined to heed my warning; but he won't stand aside if you beckon to him. Therefore, if you love him, take my warning. I may not be able to get you, but I swear to you that Philip Baddock shan't either. I'll see him hanged first," he added with gruesome significance.

"And do you think that you can force me to do your bidding by such paltry threats?" she retorted.

"Paltry threats? Ask Philip Baddock if my threats are paltry. He knows full well that in my room at Appledore Castle, safe from thievish fingers, lie the proofs that he killed Alexander Steadman in the Elkhorn woods. Oh! I wouldn't help him in his nefarious deeds until he placed himself in my hands. He had to take my terms or leave the thing alone altogether, for he could not work without me. My wants are few, and he has treated and paid me well. Now we are rivals, and I'll destroy him before I'll let him gloat over me.

"Do you know how we worked it? Sir Jeremiah would not disinherit his grandson—he steadily refused to make a will in Philip Baddock's favour. But when he was practically dying we sent for Alexander Steadman—a newcomer, who had never seen Sir Jeremiah before—and I impersonated the old gentleman for the occasion. Yes, I!" he repeated with a coarse laugh, "I was Sir Jeremiah for the space of half an hour, and I think that I played the part splendidly. I dictated the terms of a new will. Young Steadman never suspected the fraud for a single instant. We had darkened the room for the comedy, you see, and Mr. Steadman was destined by Baddock and myself never to set eyes on the real Sir Jeremiah.

"After the interview Baddock sent for Captain de Mazareen; this was all part of his plan and mine. We engineered it all, and we knew that Sir Jeremiah could only last a few hours. We sent for Steadman again, and I myself scattered a few dozen sharp nails among the loose stones in the road where the motor-car was intended to break down, thus forcing the solicitor to walk through the woods. Captain de Mazareen's appearance on the scene at that particular moment was an unrehearsed effect which nearly upset all our plans, for had Mr. Steadman stuck to him that night, instead of turning back, he would probably be alive now, and Baddock and I would be doing time somewhere for attempted fraud. We should have been done, at any rate.

"Well! you know what happened. Mr. Steadman was killed. Baddock killed him, and then ran straight back to the house, just in time to greet Captain de Mazareen, who evidently had loitered on his way. But it was I who thought of the stick, as an additional precaution to avert suspicion from ourselves. Captain de Mazareen was carrying one, and left it in the hall at the Castle. I cut my own hand and stained the stick with it, then polished and cleaned it up, and later, during the night, deposited it in the near neighbourhood of the murdered body. Ingenious, wasn't it? I am a clever beggar, you see. Because I was cleverer than Baddock he could not do without me, and because he could not do without me I made him write and sign a request to me to help him to manufacture a bogus will and then to murder the solicitor who had drawn it up. And I have hidden that precious document in the wing of Appledore Castle which I inhabit; the exact spot is known only to myself. Baddock has often tried to find out, but all he knows is that these things are in that particular wing of the house. I have the document, and the draft of the

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will taken out of Mr. Steadman's pocket, and the short bludgeon with which he was killed—it is still stained with blood—and the rags with which I cleaned the stick. I swear that I will never make use of these things against Philip Baddock unless he drives me to it, and if you make use of what I have just told you I'll swear that I have lied. No one can find the proofs which I hold. But on the day you marry Baddock I'll put them in the hands of the police."

There was silence in the room. I could almost hear the beating of my own heart, so horrified, so appalled was I at the horrible tale which the man had just told to my dear lady.

The villainy of the whole scheme was so terrible, and at the same time so cunning, that it seemed inconceivable that human brain could have engendered it. Vaguely in my dull mind I wondered if Lady Molly would have to commit bigamy before she could wrench from this evildoer's hands the proofs that would set her own husband free from his martyrdom.

What she said I did not hear, what he meant to retort I never knew, for at that moment my attention was attracted by the sound of running footsteps on the gravel, followed by a loud knock at our front door. Instinctively I ran to open it. Our old gardener was standing there hatless and breathless.

"Appledore Castle, miss," he stammered, "it's on fire. I thought you would like to know."

Before I had time to reply I heard a loud oath uttered close behind me, and the next moment Felkin dashed out of the drawing-room into the hall.

"Is there a bicycle here that I can take?" he shouted to the gardener.

"Yes, sir," replied the old man; "my son has one. Just in that shed, sir, on your left."

In fewer seconds than it takes to relate Felkin had rushed to the shed, dragged out the bicycle, mounted it, and I think that within two minutes of hearing the awful news he was bowling along the road, and was soon out of sight.

### 4

ONE wing of the stately mansion was ablaze when, a quarter of an hour later, my dear lady and I arrived upon the scene. We had come on our bicycles not long after Mr. Felkin.

At the very moment that the weird spectacle burst fully upon our gaze a loud cry of horror had just risen from the hundred or so people who stood watching the terrible conflagration, whilst the local fire brigade, assisted by Mr. Baddock's men, were working with the hydrants. That cry found echo in our own throats as we saw a man clambering, with the rapidity of a monkey, up a long ladder which had been propped up against a second floor window of the flaming portion of the building. The red glow illumined the large, shaggy head of Felkin, throwing for a moment into bold relief his hooked nose and straggly beard. For the space of three seconds perhaps he stood thus, out-lined against what looked like a glowing furnace behind him, and the next instant he had disappeared beyond the window embrasure.

"This is madness!" came in loud accents from out the crowd in the foreground, and before one fully realized whence that voice had come, Mr. Philip Baddock was in his turn seen clambering up that awful ladder. A dozen pairs of hands reached him just in time to drag him back from the perilous ascent. He fought to free himself, but the firemen were determined and soon succeeded in bringing him back to level ground, whilst two of them, helmeted and well-equipped, took his place upon the ladder.

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The foremost had hardly reached the level of the first story when Felkin's figure once more appeared in the window embrasure above. He was staggering like a man drunk or fainting, his shaggy hair and beard were blown about his head by the terrible draught caused by the flames, and he waved his arms over his head, giving the impression to those below, who gazed horrified, that he was either possessed or dying. In one hand he held what looked like a great long bundle.

We could see him now put one leg forward, obviously gathering strength to climb the somewhat high window ledge. With a shout of encouragement the two firemen scrambled up with squirrel-like agility, and the cry of "They're coming! they're coming! Hold on, Felkin!" rose from a hundred excited throats.

The unfortunate man made another effort. We could see his face clearly now in the almost blinding glow which surrounded him. It was distorted with fear and also with agony.

He gave one raucous cry, which I do believe will echo in my ears as long as I live, and with a super-human effort he hurled the bundle which he held out of the window.

At that same moment there was a terrific hissing, followed by a loud crash. The floor beneath the feet of the unfortunate man must have given way, for he disappeared suddenly in a sea of flames.

The bundle which he had hurled down had struck the foremost fireman on the head. He lost his hold, and as he fell he dragged his unfortunate comrade down with him. The others ran to the rescue of their comrades. I don't think they were seriously hurt, but what happened directly after among the crowd, the firemen, or the burning building, I cannot tell you. I only know that at the moment when Felkin's figure was, for the second time, seen in the frame of the glowing window, Lady Molly seized my hand and dragged me forward through the crowd.

Her husband's life was hanging in the balance, just as much as that of the miserable wretch who was courting a horrible death for the sake of those proofs which—as it was proved afterwards—Philip Baddock tried to destroy by such drastic means.

The excitement round the ladder, the fall of the two firemen, the crashing in of the floor and the gruesome disappearance of Felkin caused so much excitement in the crowd that the bundle which the unfortunate man had thrown remained unheeded for the moment. But Philip Baddock reached the spot where it fell thirty seconds after Lady Molly did. She had already picked it up, when he said harshly:

"Give me that. It is mine. Felkin risked his life to save it for me."

Inspector Etty, however, stood close by, and before Philip Baddock realized what Lady Molly meant to do, she had turned quickly and placed the bundle in the inspector's hands.

"You know me, Etty, don't you?" she said rapidly.

"Oh, yes, my lady!" he replied.

"Then take the utmost care of this bundle. It contains proofs of one of the most dastardly crimes ever committed in this country."

No other words could have aroused the enthusiasm and caution of Etty in the same manner.

After that Philip Baddock might protest, might rage, storm, or try to bribe, but the proofs of his guilt and Captain de Mazareen's innocence were safe in the hands of the police, and bound to come to light at last.

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But, as a matter of fact, Baddock neither stormed nor pleaded. When Lady Molly turned to him once more he had disappeared.

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You know the rest, of course. It occurred too recently to be recounted. Philip Baddock was found the next morning with a bullet through his head, lying on the granite stone which, with cruel hypocrisy, he himself had erected in memory of Mr. Steadman whom he had so foully murdered.

The unfortunate Felkin had not lied when he said that the proofs which he held of Baddock's guilt were conclusive and deadly.

Captain de Mazareen obtained His Majesty's gracious pardon after five years of martyrdom which he had borne with heroic fortitude.

I was not present when Lady Molly was once more united to the man who so ardently worshipped and trusted her, and to whose love, innocence, and cause she had remained so sublimely loyal throughout the past few years.

She has given up her connexion with the police. The reason for it has gone with the return of her happiness, over which I—her ever faithful Mary Granard—will, with your permission, draw a veil.