

The Crook in Crimson

By
Edgar Wallace

Freeditorial 

THE CROOK IN CRIMSON

CHAPTER I. -- HOPE!

IN the dusk of the evening the waterman brought his skiff under the overhanging hull of the Baltic steamer and rested on his oars, the little boat rising and falling gently in the swell of the river. A grimy, unshaven, second officer looked down from the open porthole and spat thoughtfully into the water. Apparently he did not see the swarthy-faced waterman with the tuft of grey beard, and as apparently the waterman was oblivious of his appearance. Presently the unshaven man with the faded gold band on the wrist of his shabby jacket drew in his head and shoulders and disappeared.

A few seconds later a square wooden case was heaved through the porthole and fell with a splash in the water. For a moment one sharp corner was in sight, then it sank slowly beneath the yellow flood. A small black buoy bobbed up, and the waterman watched it with interest. To the buoy was attached a

stout cord, and the cord was fastened to the case. He waited, moving his oars slowly, until the buoy was on the point of being sucked out of sight; then, with a turn of his wrist, he hooked an oar under the cord—literally hooked, for at the end of the short blade was a little steel crook.

Pushing the boat forward, he reached for the buoy and drew this into the stern sheets, fastened the cord round a wooden pin, and, lifting his oars, allowed the tide to carry him under the steamer's stern. Anchored in midstream was a dingy-looking barge and towards this he guided the skiff.

A heavily-built young man came from the aft deck of the barge, and, reaching down a boathook, drew the skiff alongside. The swarthy man held on to the side of the barge, whilst the boathook was transferred to the taut line astern. The younger man did no more than fasten the soaking cord to a small bight. By this time the occupant of the skiff was on board.

'Nobody about, Ligsey?' he asked gruffly.

'Nobody, cap'n,' said the younger man.

The captain said nothing more, but walked to the deck-house astern and disappeared down the companion-way, pulling the hatch close after him. There he stayed till the estuary was a black void punctured with dim ships' lights.

Ligsey went forward to where his youthful assistant sat on an overturned bucket, softly playing a mouth-organ. He stopped being musical long enough to remark that the tide was turning.

'We going up to-night?' he asked.

Ligsey nodded. He had already heard the chuff-chuff of the motor in the stern of the barge, where the skipper was starting it.

'What we hangin' around here for?' asked the youth curiously. 'We've missed one tide—we could have been up to Greenwich by now. Why don't Captain Attymar—'

'Mind your own business!' growled the mate.

He heard the swarthy man calling him and went aft.

'We'll get that case in and stow it.' he said in a low voice. 'I left a place in the bricks.'

Together they pulled gingerly at the cord and brought the square, soaked packing-case to sight. Ligsey leaned over and gripped it with an instrument like a pair of huge ice-tongs, and the dripping case was brought to the narrow deck and stowed expeditiously in the well of the barge.

The Alloluna invariably carried bricks between a little yard on the Essex coast and Tenny's Wharf. Everybody on the river knew her for an erratic and a dangerous-steering craft. The loud chuffing of her engine was an offence.

Even nippy tug.boats gave her yawing bows a wide berth.

The boy was called aft to take charge of the engine, and Ligsey took the tiller. It was five o'clock on a spring morning when she came to Tenny's Wharf, which is at Rotherhithe.

As a wharfage it had few qualities attractive to the least fastidious of bargees. It consisted of a confined space with room for two builders' lorries to be backed side by side (though it required some manoeuvring to bring them into position), and the shabby little bouse where Joe Attymar lived. Through the weather-beaten gate, which opened at intervals to admit the builders' carts, was Shadwick Lane. It had none of the picturesque character of the slum it used to be, when its houses were of wood and water-butts stood in every back-yard. Nowadays it consists of four walls, two on either side of the street. Bridging each pair is an inverted 'V' of slate, called a roof, and at frequent intervals there are four red chimney-pots set on a small, square, brick tower. These denote roughly where lateral walls divide one hutch from another. Each partition is called a 'house,' for which people pay rent when they can afford it. The walls which face the street have three windows and a doorway to each division.

Joe Attymar's house did not properly stand in the lane at all, and Shadwick Lane was only remotely interested in the barge-master, for the curious reason that he could reach his house and yard by Shadwick Passage, a tortuous alley that threaded a way between innumerable back-yards, and under the shadow of a high warehouse, to Tooley Street. Year after year the swarthy man with the little iron-grey beard and the shaggy eyebrows brought his barge up the river, always with a cargo of bricks. And invariably the barge went down empty and without his presence; for, for some reason, there was neither passenger nor skipper on the down-river trip.

This fact was unknown to the people of Shadwick Lane. They were even unaware that Joe Attymar did not sleep in his house more than one night every month. They knew, of course, from the muddy old motor-car that he drove through the wide gates occasionally, that he went abroad, but guessed that he was engaged in the legitimate business of lighterman.

THERE are certain minor problems, which from time to time cause the chiefs of Scotland Yard to move uneasily and impatiently in their padded chairs and say to their immediate subordinates "Do something." Mr. Attymar, though he was blissfully unaware of the fact, was one of those minor problems.

There are gaming houses which harass the police, strange little clubs and other establishments less easy to write about, but Mr Attymar was not associated with one of these. Such problems are, in one shape or another, perennial! Occasionally they grow acute and just at that moment the question of

systematic smuggling was worrying Scotland Yard considerably.

Chief Constable Mason sent for Inspector Gaylor.

'They've pulled in a fellow who was peddling dope in Lisle Street last night,' he said, 'You might see him after his remand. I have an idea he'll squeak.'

But the man in question was no squeaker, though he had certainly given that impression when he was taken red-handed. He said enough, however, to the patient detective to suggest that he might say more.

'All that I could find out,' said Gaylor, 'is that this selling organization is nearly foolproof. The gang that we rushed last year isn't handling the output, but I'm satisfied that it still has the same governor.'

'Get him,' said the Chief, who was in the habit of asking for miracles in the same tone as he asked for his afternoon tea. And then a thought struck him. 'Go along and see Reeder. The Public Prosecutor was telling me today that Reeder is available for any extra work. He may be able to help, anyway.'

Mr. Reeder heard the request, sighed and shook his head. 'I'm afraid it is rather—um—outside my line of business. Dope? There used to be a man named Moodle. It may not have been his name, but he had associations with these wretched people—'

'Moodle, whose name was Sam Oschkilinski, has been dead nearly a year,' said Gaylor.

'Dear me!' said Mr. Reeder, in a hushed voice appropriate to one who has lost a dear friend. 'Of what did he die?'

'Loss of breath,' said Gaylor vulgarly.

Mr. Reeder knew nothing more that he could recall about dope merchants.

'Haven't you some record on your files?' suggested Gaylor.

'I never keep files, except—um—nail files,' said Mr Reeder.

'Perhaps,' suggested Gaylor, 'one of your peculiar friends—'

'I have no friends,' said Mr. Reeder

But here he did not speak the exact truth.

Mr. Reeder was an authority on poultry and his acquaintance with Johnny Southers began in a fowl-house. Johnny lived three doors from Mr. Reeder. He was rather a nice young man, fair-haired and good-looking. He had in Mr Reeder's eyes the overwhelming advantage of being a very poor conversationalist.

Anna Welford lived in the house opposite, so that it may be said that the scene was set, for the curious tragedy of Joe Attymar, on a very small stage.

It was through the unromantic question of a disease which attacked Johnny

Southers' prize hens that Mr. Reeder met Anna. She happened to be in the Southers' back garden when Mr. Reeder was engaged in his diagnosis. She was a slim girl, rather dark, with amazing brown eyes.

Johnny did not fall in love with her at first sight. He had known her since she was so high: when he was a boy she was endurable to him. As a young man he thought her views on life were sound. He discovered he was in love with her as he discovered he was taller than his father. It was a subject for surprise.

It was brought home to him when Clive Desboyne called in his new car to take Anna to a dinner-dance. He resented Mr. Desboyne's easy assurance, the proprietorial way he handed Anna into the car. Thereafter Johnny found himself opening and examining packing-cases and casks and barrels at the Customs House with a sense of inferiority and the hopelessness of his future.

In such a mood he consulted his authority on poultry, and Mr. Reeder listened with all the interest of one who was hearing a perfectly new and original story which had never been told before by or to any human being.

'I know so very little—um—about love,' said Mr. Reeder awkwardly. 'In fact—er—nothing. I would like to advise you to—um—let matters take their course.'

Very excellent, if vague, advice. But matters took the wrong course, as it happened.

CHAPTER II. — REEDER'S INVESTIGATION

ON the following Saturday night, as Mr. Reeder was returning home, he saw two men fighting in Brockley Road. He had what is called in Portuguese arepugnancio to fighting men. When the hour was midnight and the day was Saturday, there was a considerable weight of supposition in favour of the combat being between two gentlemen who were the worse for intoxicating drink, and it was invariably Mr. Reeder's practice to cross, like the Philistine, to the other side of the road.

But the two young men who were engaged in such a short silent and bitter contest were obviously no hooligans of lower Deptford. Nevertheless, Mr Reeder hardly felt it was the occasion to act either as mediator or timekeeper.

He would have passed them by, and did in fact come level with them, when one walked across the road, leaving his companion—though that hardly seems the term to apply to one who had been so bruised and exhausted that he was hanging on to the railings—to recover as best he could. It was then that Mr. Reeder saw that one of the contestants was John Southers. He was husky and apologetic.

'I'm terribly sorry to have made a fuss like this,' he said. 'I hope my father

didn't hear me. This fellow is intolerable.'

The intolerable man on the other side of the street was moving slowly towards where a car was parked by the pavement. They watched him in silence as he got in and, turning the car violently, went off towards the Lewisham High Road and, from the direction he took, central London.

'I've been to a dance,' said the young man, a little inconsequently.

'I hope,' said Mr. Reeder with the greatest gentleness, 'that you enjoyed yourself.'

Mr. Southers did not seem disposed at the moment to offer a fuller explanation. As they neared Reeder's gate he said:

'Thank God, Anna was inside before it started! He's been insulting to me all the evening. As a matter of fact, she asked me to call and take her home, otherwise I shouldn't have met him.'

There had been a dance somewhere in the City, at a livery hail. Anna had gone with Clive Desboyne, but the circumstances under which Johnny called for her were only vaguely detailed. Nor did Mr. Reeder hear what was the immediate cause of the quarrel which had set two respectable young men at fisticuffs in the reputable suburban thoroughfare.

To say that he was uninterested would not be true. The matter, however, was hardly pressing. He hoped that both parties to the little fracas might have forgotten the cause of their quarrel by the following morning.

He did not see Johnny again for the remainder of the week. Mr. Reeder went about his business, and it is doubtful whether Johnny occupied as much as five minutes of his thoughts, until the case of Joe Attymar came into his purview.

He was again called to Scotland Yard on a consultation. He found Gaylor and the Chief Constable together, and they were examining a very dingy-looking letter which had come to the Yard in the course of the day.

'Sit down, Reeder,' said the chief. 'Do you know a man called Attymar?'

Mr. Reeder shook his head. He had never heard of Joe Attymar.

'This is a thing we could do ourselves without any bother at all,' interrupted the Chief, 'but there are all sorts of complications which I won't bother you with. We believe there's a member of the staff of one of the Legations in this business, and naturally we want this fact to come out accidentally, and not as the result of any direct investigation by the police.'

Mr. Reeder then learned about Joe Attymar, the barge-master, of the little wharf at the end of Shadwick Lane, of the small house nearby, and the barge Allanuna that went up and down the Thames year in and year out and brought bricks. He did not hear at that moment, or subsequently, what part the

Legation played, or which Legation it was, or if there was any Legation at all. In justice to his acumen it must be said that he doubted this part of the story from the first, and the theory at which he eventually arrived, and which was probably correct, was that the part he was called upon to play was to stampede Attymar and his associates into betrayal of their iniquity. For this was at a period when Mr. Reeder's name and appearance were known from one end of the river to the other, when there was hardly a bargee or tug-hand who could not have drawn, and did not draw, a passable caricature of that worthy man who had been instrumental in breaking up one of the best-organized gangs of river thieves that had ever amalgamated for an improper purpose.

Mr. Reeder scratched his nose and his lips drooped dolefully. 'I was hoping—um—that I should not see that interesting stream for a very long time.'

He sat down and listened patiently to a string of uninteresting facts. Joe Attymar brought bricks up the river—had been bringing them for many years—at a price slightly lower than his competitors. He carried for four builders, and apparently did a steady, if not too prosperous, trade. He was believed locally to be rolling in money, but that is a reputation which Shadwick Lane applied to any man or woman who was not forced at frequent intervals to make a call at the local pawn shop. He kept himself to himself, was unmarried, and had no apparent interests outside of his brick lighterage.

'Fascinating,' murmured Mr. Reeder. 'It sounds almost like a novel, doesn't it?'

After he had gone...

'I don't see what's fascinating about it,' said Mason, who did not know Mr. Reeder very well.

'That's his idea of being funny,' said Gaylor.

It was a week later, and the Allannuna lay at anchor off Queensborough, when a small boat towed by a local boatman, carrying a solitary passenger, came slowly out, under the watchful and suspicious eye of Ligsey, the mate. The boat rowed alongside the barge, and Ligsey had a view of a man with a square hat and lopsided glasses, who sat in the stern of the boat, an umbrella between his legs, apparently making a meal of the big handle! And, seeing him, Ligsey, who knew a great deal about the river and its scandals, started up from his seat with an exclamation.

He was blinking stupidly at the occupant of the boat when Mr. Reeder came up to him.

'Good morning,' said Mr. Reeder.

Ligsey said nothing.

'I suppose I should say "afternoon,"' continued the punctilious Mr. Reeder. 'Is the captain aboard?'

Ligsey cleared his throat.

'No, sir, he ain't.'

'I suppose you wouldn't object if I came aboard?'

Mr. Reeder did not wait for the answer, but, with surprising agility, drew himself up on to the narrow deck of the barge. He looked round with mild interest. The hatches were off, and he had a good view of the cargo.

'Bricks are very interesting things,' he said pleasantly. 'Without bricks we should have no houses; without straw we should have no bricks. It seems therefore a very intelligent act to pack bricks in straw, to remind them, as it were, of what they owe to this humble—um—vegetable.'

Ligsey did not speak, but he swallowed.

'What I want to know,' Mr. Reeder went on, and his eyes were never still, 'is this. Would it be possible to hire this barge?'

'You'll have to ask the captain about that,' said Ligsey huskily.

His none too clean face was a shade paler. The stories of Reeder that had come down the river had gained in the telling. He was credited with supernatural powers of divination; his knowledge and perspicuity were unbounded. For the first time in years Ligsey found himself confronted with slowly-moving machinery of the law; it was a little terrifying and his emotions were not at all what he had anticipated. He used to tell Joe Attymar: '... If they ever come to me I'll give 'em a saucy answer.' And here 'they' had come to him, but no saucy answer hovered on his lips. He felt totally inadequate.

'When are you expecting the captain?' asked Mr. Reeder, in his blandest manner.

'Tonight or tomorrow—I don't know,' stammered Ligsey. 'He'll pick us up, I suppose.'

'Gone ashore for dispatches?' asked Mr. Reeder pleasantly. 'Or possibly to wire to the owners? No, no, it couldn't be that: he is the owner. How interesting! He'll be coming off in a few moments with sealed orders under his arm. Will you tell me'—he pointed to the hold—'why you leave that square aperture in the bricks? Is that one of the secrets of packing, or shall I say stowage?'

Ligsey went whiter.

'We always leave it like that,' he said, and did not recognize the sound of his own voice.

Mr. Reeder would have descended to the cabin, but the hatch was padlocked. He did invite himself down to the little cubby hole, in the bow of the boat, where Ligsey and the boy slept; and, strangely enough, Mr. Reeder carried in his pocket, although it was broad daylight, a very powerful torch which

revealed every corner of Ligsey's living place as it had never been revealed before.

'Rather squalid, isn't it?' asked Mr. Reeder, 'A terrible thing to have to live in these circumstances and conditions. But of course one can live in a much worse place.'

He made this little speech after his return to the fresh air of the deck, and he was fanning himself with the brim of his high-crowned hat.

'One can live for example,' he went on, surveying the picturesque shore of Queensborough vacantly, 'in a nice clean prison. I know plenty of men who would rather live in prison than at—um—Buckingham Palace—though, of course, I have no knowledge that they've ever been invited to Buckingham Palace. But not respectable men, men with wives and families.'

Ligsey's face was a blank.

'With girls and mothers.'

Ligsey winced.

'They would prefer to remain outside. And, of course, they can remain outside if they're only sufficiently sensible to make a statement to the police.'

He took from his pocket-book a card and handed it almost timorously to Ligsey.

'I live there,' said Mr. Reeder, 'and I'll be glad to see you any time you're passing—are you interested in poultry?'

Ligsey was interested in nothing.

Mr. Reeder signalled to the boatman, who pulled the skiff alongside, and he stepped down into the boat and was rowed back to the shore.

There was one who had seen him come and who watched him leave by train. When night fell, Joe Attymar rowed out to the barge and found a very perturbed lieutenant.

'Old Reeder's been here,' blurted Ligsey, but Joe stopped him with a gesture.

'Want to tell the world about it?' he snarled. 'Come aft.'

The thickset young man followed his commander.

'I know Reeder's been here: I've seen him. What did he want?'

Briefly Ligsey told him quite a number of unimportant details about the visit. It was not remarkable that he did not make any reference to the card or to Mr. Reeder's invitation.

'That's done it,' said Ligsey when he had finished. 'Old Reeder's got a nose like a hawk. Asked me why we left that hole in the bricks. I've never had to deal

with a detective before—'

'You haven't, eh?' sneered the other. 'Who was that water man who came aboard off Gravesend the other night? And why did I drop half-hundredweight of good stuff overboard, eh? You fool! We've had half a dozen of these fellows on board, all of 'em cleverer than Reeder. Did he ask you to tell him anything?'

'No,' said Ligsey instantly.

Joe Attymar thought for a little time, and then: 'We'll get up the anchor. I'm not waiting for the Dutch boat,' he said.

Ligsey's sigh of relief was audible at the other end of the barge.

CHAPTER III. — DEATH

THIS visit of Reeder was the culmination of a series of inquiries he had conducted in the course of a few days. He turned in a short report to Scotland Yard, and went home to Brockley Road, overtaking Johnny Southers as he turned from Lewisham High Road. Johnny was not alone.

'Anna and I were discussing you,' he said, as they slackened their steps to match the more leisurely pace of Mr. Reeder. 'Is it possible for us to see you for five minutes?'

It was possible. Mr. Reeder ushered them up to his big, old fashioned sitting-room, inwardly hoping that the consultation would have no reference to the mysterious workings of the young and human heart.

They were going to get married.

'Anna's father knows, and he's been awfully decent about it,' said Johnny, 'and I'd like you to know too, Mr. Reeder.'

Mr. Reeder murmured something congratulatory. That matter of love and loving was at any rate shelved.

'And Desboyne has been awfully decent—I told Anna all about that rather unpleasant little scene you witnessed—he never told her a word. He wrote apologizing to Anna, and wrote an apology to me. He has offered me a very good position in Singapore if I care to take it—he's terribly rich, and it sounds very good.'

'It doesn't sound good to me.' Anna's voice was decisive. 'I appreciate Clive's generosity, but I don't think Johnny ought to give up his Civil Service work except for something better in England. I want you to persuade him, Mr. Reeder.'

Mr. Reeder looked from one to the other dismally. The idea of persuading

anybody to do anything in which he himself was not greatly absorbed filled him with dismay. As a mentor to the young he recognized his limitations. He liked Johnny Southers as he liked any decent young fellow. He thought Anna Welford was extraordinarily pretty; but even these two facts in conjunction could not arouse him to enthusiasm.

'I don't want much persuading,' said Johnny, to his relief. 'I've got something else up my sleeve—a pretty big thing. I'm not at liberty to talk about it; in fact, I've been asked not to. If that comes off, the Singapore job will be refused. It isn't so very difficult now. The point is this, Mr. Reeder: if you were offered a partnership in a thriving concern, that could be made into something very big if one put one's heart and soul into it, would you accept?'

Mr. Reeder looked at the ceiling and sighed. 'Hypotheses always worry me, Mr. Southers. Perhaps, when the moment comes, if you could tell me all about the business, I may be able to advise you, although I confess I have never been regarded as a man whose advice was worth two—um—hoots.'

'That's what I wanted to see you about, Mr. Reeder.' Anna nodded slowly. 'I'm so terribly afraid of Johnny leaving the service for an uncertainty, and I do want him to talk the matter over with you. I don't want to know his secrets'—there was the ghost of a smile in her eyes—'I think I know most of the important ones.'

Mr. Reeder looked round miserably. He felt himself caught and entangled in a network of dull domesticity. He was, if the truth be told, immensely bored and, had he been more temperamental, he might have screamed. He wished he had not overtaken these loitering lovers, or that they would apply to one of those periodicals which maintain a department devoted to advising the young and the sentimental in the choice of their careers. It was with the greatest happiness that he closed the door on their small mystery and devoted himself to the serious business of high tea.

Mr. Reeder had many anxieties to occupy his mind in the next few days, and the fact that he had added Joe Attymar to his list of his enemies, even if he were aware of the fact, was not one of these.

In the gaols of a dozen countries were men who actively disliked him. Meister of Hamburg, who used to sell United States bills by the hundredweight, Lefere, the clever wholesale engraver of lire notes, Monsatta, who specialized in English flyers, Madame Pensa of Pisa, who for many years was the chief distributor of forged money in Eastern and Southern Europe, Al Selinski, the paper maker, Don Leishmer, who printed French milles by the thousand, they all knew Mr. Reeder, at least by name, and none of them had a good word for him, except Monsatta, who was large-minded and could detach himself from his personal misfortunes.

Letters came to Mr. Reeder from many peculiar sources. It was a curious fact that a very large number of Mr. Reeder's correspondents were women. A sensible number of the letters which came to him were of a most embarrassing character.

His name had been mentioned in many cases that had been heard at the Old Bailey. He himself had, from time to time, stood up in the witness stand, a lugubrious and unhappy figure, and had given evidence in his hesitant and deferential way against all manner of wrong-doers, but mostly forgers.

He was variously described as 'an expert,' as 'a private detective,' as 'a bank official.' In a sense he was all these, yet none of them entirely. Judges and certain barristers knew that he was at the call of the Public Prosecutor's Department. It was said that privately he enjoyed a status equivalent in rank to a superintendent of police. He certainly had a handsome retaining fee from the Bankers' Association, and probably drew pay from the Government, but nobody knew his business. He banked at Torquay and the manager of the bank was his personal friend.

But the net result of his fugitive appearances in court was that quite intelligent women were seized with the idea that he was the man who should be employed to watch their husbands and to procure the evidence necessary for their divorces. Business men wrote to him asking him to investigate the private lives of their partners; quite a few commissions were offered by important commercial concerns, but none of these appealed to Mr. Reeder, and with his own hand he would write long and carefully punctuated letters explaining that he was not a private detective in the real sense of the word.

He was not surprised, therefore when, some four days after his talk with Johnny Southers, he received a letter addressed from a Park Lane flat, requesting his services. He turned first to the signature and with some difficulty deciphered it as 'Clive Desboyne.' For a moment the name, while it had a certain familiarity, was difficult to attach, and then he remembered the quarrel he had witnessed, and realized that this was the other party to that unhappy conflict.

The letter was typewritten and ran:

'Dear Sir, I happen to know your private address because Miss Welford pointed it out to me one evening when I was visiting her. I am in rather a delicate position, and I am wondering whether I could employ your services professionally to extricate myself? Since the matter affects Southers, whom I think you know (I have learned since that you were a witness of a certain disgraceful episode, for which I was probably more to blame than he), I thought you might be willing to see me. I want you to undertake this task on a professional basis and charge me your usual fees. I shall be away until Friday

night, but there is no immediate urgency. If I could call some time after ten on Friday I should be eternally grateful.

Yours, etc.'

Mr. Reeder's first inclination was to take out a sheet of paper and write a firm but polite refusal to see Mr. Desboyne, how ever stringent might be his predicament. He had written the first three words when one of those curious impulses which came to him at times, and which so often urged him to the right course, stayed his hand. Instead he sent a laconic telegram agreeing to the young man's suggestion.

The day of the appointment was a busy one for Mr. Reeder. Scotland Yard had made two important discoveries—a small garage in the north of London, which contained nearly 400 lbs. of marijuana, had been raided in the early hours of the morning, and this was followed up by a second raid in a West End mansion flat, where large quantities of heroin and cocaine were unearthed by the police.

'It looks as though we've found one of the principal distributing agents,' said Gaylor. 'We've got the barge under observation, and we're taking the chance of arresting Attymar as soon as he steps on board.'

'Where is it?'

'Off Greenwich,' said Gaylor.

Mr. Reeder dived down into his pocket and produced an envelope. The paper was grimy, the address was a scrawl. He took from this as dingy a letter and laid it on the table before Gaylor.

'Dear Sir, I can give you informacion. I will call at your howse on Sundday morning. From a Friend.'

Gaylor inspected the envelope. The date-stamp was 'Greenwich.'

'He had some doubt about sending it at all: the flap has been opened and closed again—I presume this is Ligsey; his real name is William Liggs. He's had no convictions, but he hasn't been above suspicion. You'll see him?'

'If he comes,' said Mr. Reeder. 'So many of these gentlemen who undertake to supply information think better of it at the last moment.'

It may be too late,' said Gaylor.

It was at the end of a very heavy and tiring day that Mr. Reeder went back to his house, forgetting the appointment he had so rashly made. He had hardly got into the house before the bell rang, and it was then that he realized, with bitter regret, that he had robbed himself of an hour's sleep which was badly needed.

Mr. Desboyne explained that he had driven down from his club, where he had

bathed and changed after his long journey from the West of England.

'I feel very ashamed to bother you at this hour of the night, Mr. Reeder,' he said with an apologetic smile, 'but I feel rather like the villain of the piece, and my vanity has made me put matters right.'

Mr. Reeder looked round helplessly for a chair, found one and pointed to it, and Desboyne drew it up to the table where the detective was sitting.

He was a man of thirty-three or thirty-five, good-looking, with a very pleasant, open face and a pair of grey eyes that twinkled good-humouredly.

'You saw the fight?... Lord! that fellow could punch! I thoroughly deserved what I got, which certainly wasn't very much. I was very rude to him. But then, like a fool, I went to the other extreme, and I've got him a job in Singapore—of course he'll take it—and I'm most anxious to get out of my offer.'

Mr. Reeder looked at him in surprise, and the young man laughed ruefully.

'I suppose you think that's odd? Well, I'm rather impetuous and I've got myself into a bit of a hole. And it's a bigger hole than I knew, because I'm terribly fond of Anna Welford, and she's terribly unfond of me! Southers is rather in the position of a successful rival, so that everything I say or do must be suspect. That's the awful thing about it!'

'Why do you wish to cancel the appointment?' asked Mr. Reeder.

He could have added that, so far as he could recall, the appointment had already been cancelled.

Clive Desboyne hesitated.

'Well, it's a difficult story to tell.'

He rose from his seat and p up and down the room, his hands thrust into his pockets, a frown on his face.

'Do you remember the night of the fight? I don't suppose that's graven on your memory. It arose out of something I said to our friend as we left the City hall. Apparently—I only discovered this afterwards—there was a man out there waiting to see Southers, but in the excitement of our little fracas—which began in the City, by the way—Southers didn't see the man, who either followed him to Lewisham or came on ahead of him. He must have been present in the street when the fight took place. When I got home that night the hall-porter asked me if I would see a very seedy-looking individual and, as I wasn't in the mood to see anybody, I refused. A few days later I was stopped in Piccadilly by a man who I thought was a beggar—a healthy-looking beggar, but most beggars are that way. He started by telling me he'd seen the fight, and said he could tell me something about Southers. I wasn't feeling as savage then

as I had been, and I'd have hoofed him off, but he was so insistent, and in the end I told him to call at my flat. He came that night and told me the most extraordinary story. He said his name was'—Clive Desboyne frowned—' the name's slipped me for the moment, but it will come back. He was a mate or assistant on a barge run by a man named Attymar—'

'Ligsey?' suggested Mr. Reeder, and the other nodded.

'That's the name—Ligsey. I'm cutting the story short be cause it took a tremendous long time to tell, and I don't want it to bore you as it bored me. They've been running some kind of contraband up the river on the barge, for apparently Attymar is a smuggler on a large scale. That was a yarn I didn't believe at first, though, from the things he told me, it seemed very likely that he spoke the truth. Certain articles were smuggled up the river on the barge, and others were passed through the Customs by Southers.'

Mr. Reeder opened his mouth very wide.

'Now I'll tell you the truth.' Clive Desboyne's voice was very earnest. 'I wanted to believe that story. In my heart of hearts I dislike John Southers—I'd be inhuman if I didn't. At the same time I wanted to play the game. I told this fellow he was a liar but he swore it was true. He thinks the police are going to arrest Attymar, and when they do, Attymar will spill the beans, to use his own expression. In the meantime I have recommended Southers to a very important and responsible job in Singapore, and naturally, if this story comes out, I'm going to look pretty foolish. I don't mind that,' he added quietly, 'but I do mind Anna Welford marrying this man.'

Mr. Reeder plucked at his lower lip. 'Do you know Attymar?'

The young man shook his head.

'I can't even say that I know Ligsey, but if he keeps his promise I shall know Attymar tomorrow morning.'

'What was his promise?' asked Mr. Reeder.

'He says Attymar has documentary proof—he didn't use that expression but that is what he meant—and that he was going to Attymar's house tonight to get it.'

Again Mr. Reeder thought, staring into vacancy.

'When did you see him last?'

'The morning I wrote to you, or rather the morning you received the letter.' He made a little gesture of despair. 'Whatever happens, Anna's going to think I'm the most awful—'

The telephone bell rang sharply. Mr. Reeder, with a murmured apology, picked up the receiver and listened with a face that did not move. He only asked

'What time?' and, after a long pause, said 'Yes.' As he was replacing the receiver, Desboyne went on:

'What I should like to do is to see Attymar—'

Mr. Reeder shook his head. 'I'm afraid you won't see Attymar. He was murdered between nine and ten tonight.'

CHAPTER IV. — THE ARREST

IT was half past twelve when Mr. Reeder's taxi brought him into Shadwick Lane, which was alive with people. A police cordon was drawn across the gate, but Gaylor, who was waiting for him, conducted him into the yard.

'We're dragging the river for the body,' he explained.

'Where was it committed?' asked Mr. Reeder.

'Come inside,' said the other grimly, 'and then you will ask no questions.'

It was not a pleasant sight that met Mr. Reeder's eyes, though he was a man not easily sickened. The little sitting-room was a confusion of smashed furniture, the walls splashed with red. A corner table, however, had been left untouched. Here were two glasses of whisky, one full, the other half empty. A hall-smoked cigar was carefully laid on a piece of paper by the side of these.

'The murder was committed here and the body was dragged to the edge of the wharf and thrown into the water,' said Gaylor. 'There's plenty of evidence of that.'

'We've taken possession of a lot of papers, and we found a letter on the mantelpiece from a man named Southers—John Southers. No address, but evidently from the handwriting a person of some education. At nine twenty-five tonight Attymar had a visitor, a young man who was admitted through the wicket gate, and who was seen to leave at twenty five minutes to ten, about ten minutes after he arrived.'

Gaylor opened an attaché case and took out a battered, cheap silver watch; which had evidently been under somebody's heel. The glass was smashed, the case was bent out of shape. The hands stood at nine-thirty.

'One of the people here recognized this as Ligsey's—a woman who lives in the street who had pawned it for him on one occasion. It's important, because it probably gives us the hour of the murder, if you allow the watch to be a little fast or slow. It's hardly likely to be accurate. We've sent a description round of Southers; although it isn't a very good one, it'll probably be sufficient. I'm having a facsimile of the writing—'

'I can save you the trouble; here is the young man's address.'

Mr. Reeder took a notebook from his pocket, scribbled a few lines and handed it to the detective. He looked glumly at the bloodstained room and the evidence of tragedy, followed the detective in silence, while Gaylor, with the aid of a powerful light, showed the telltale stains leading from the wharf, and...

'Very interesting,' said Mr. Reeder. 'When you recover the bodies I should like to see them.'

He stared out over the river, which was covered by a faint mist—not sufficient to impede navigation, but enough to shroud and make indistinct objects thirty or forty yards away.

'The barge is at Greenwich, I think,' he said, after a long silence. 'Could I borrow a police launch?'

One of the launches was brought in to the crazy wharf and Mr. Reeder lowered himself gingerly, never losing grip of the umbrella which no man had seen unfurled. It was a chilly night, an easterly wind blowing up the river, but he sat in the bow of the launch motionless, sphinxlike, staring ahead as the boat streaked eastwards towards Greenwich.

It drew up by the side of the barge, which was moored close to the Surrey shore, and a quavering voice hailed them.

'That you, Ligsey?'

Mr. Reeder pulled himself on board before he replied. 'No, my boy,' he said gently, 'it is not Ligsey. Were you expecting him?'

The youth held up his lantern, surveyed Mr. Reeder and visibly quailed.

'You're a copper, ain't yer?' he asked tremulously. 'Have you pinched Ligsey?'

'I have not pinched Ligsey,' said Mr. Reeder, patting the boy gently on the back. 'How long has he been gone?'

'He went about eight, soon after it was dark; the gov'nor come down for him.'

'The gov'nor come down for him,' repeated Mr. Reeder in a murmur. 'Did you see the governor?'

'No, sir; he shouted for me to go below. Ligsey always makes me go below when him and the gov'nor have a talk.'

Mr. Reeder drew from his pocket a yellow carton of cigarettes and lit one before he pursued his inquiries.

'Then what happened?'

'Ligsey come clown and packed his ditty box, and told me I was to hang on all night, but that I could go to sleep. I was frightened about being left alone on the barge—'

Mr. Reeder was already making his way down the companion to Ligsey's quarters. Evidently all the man's kit had been removed; even the sheets on his bed must have been folded and taken away, for the bunk was tumbled.

On a little swing table, which was a four-foot plank suspended from the deck above, was a letter. It was not fastened, and Mr. Reeder made no secret in opening and reading its contents. It was in the handprint which, he had been informed, was the only kind of writing Attymar knew.

'Dear Mr. Southers, If you come aboard the stuff is in the engine-room. I have got to be very careful because the police are watching.'

When he questioned the boy, whose name was Hobbs, he learned that Ligsey had come down and left the letter. Mr. Reeder went aft and found the hatchway over the little engine-room unfastened, and descended into the strong-smelling depths where the engine was housed. It was here, evidently, that Attymar remained during his short voyages. There was a signal bell above his head, and a comfortable armchair had been fixed within reach of the levers.

His search here was a short one. Inside an open locker he found a small, square package, wrapped in oiled paper, and a glance at the label told him its contents, even though he did not read Dutch.

Returning to the boy, he questioned him closely. It was no unusual thing for Attymar to pick up his mate from the barge. The boy had once seen the launch, and described it as a very small tender. He knew nothing of Mr Southers, had never seen him on board the ship, though occasionally people did come, on which occasions he was sent below.

At his request, Mr. Reeder was put ashore at Greenwich and got on the telephone to Gaylor. It was now two o'clock in the morning, and much had happened.

'We arrested that man Southers; found his trousers covered with blood. He admits he was at Attymar's house tonight, and tells a cock-and-bull story of what he did subsequently. He didn't get home till nearly twelve.'

'Extraordinary,' said Mr. Reeder, and the mildness of the comment evidently irritated Inspector Gaylor.

'That's one way of putting it, but I think we've made a pretty good capture,' he said. 'We've got enough evidence to hang him. Attymar's left all sorts of notes on his invoices.'

'Amazing,' said Mr. Reeder, and gathered from the abruptness with which he was cut off that, for some mysterious reason, he had annoyed the man at Scotland Yard.

He sent back a short report with the documents and the drugs to Scotland

Yard, and drove home by taxi. It was three o'clock by the time he reached Brockley Road, and he was not surprised to find his housekeeper up and to hear that Anna Welford was waiting for him.

She was very white and her manner was calm.

'You've heard about Johnny being arrested—' she began. Mr. Reeder nodded.

'Yes, I gave them the necessary information as to where he was to be found,' he said, and he saw the colour come and go in her face.

'I—I suppose you—you had to do your duty?' she said haltingly. 'But you know it's not true, Mr. Reeder. You know Johnny... he couldn't...' Her voice choked.

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

'I don't know Johnny really,' he said apologetically. 'He is—um—the merest acquaintance, Miss Welford. I am not saying that in disparagement of him, because quite a number of people who aren't my friends are respectable citizens. Did you see him before he was arrested?'

She nodded.

'Immediately before?'

'Half an hour before. He was terribly disappointed; he had gone to see about this partnership but he had a feeling that he'd been tricked, for nothing came of it. He'd arranged to see me, and I waited up for him... he was crossing the road to his own house when he was arrested.'

'Did he wear a blue suit or a grey suit?'

'A blue suit,' she said quickly.

Mr. Reeder looked at the ceiling.

'Of course he wore a blue suit; otherwise—um...' He scratched his chin irritably. 'It was a cold night, too. I can't understand until I have seen his—um—trousers.'

She looked at him in bewilderment, a little fearfully. And then suddenly Mr. Reeder gave one of his rare smiles and dropped a gentle hand on her shoulder.

'I shouldn't be too worried if I were you,' he said with a kindly look in his eyes. 'You've quite a number of good friends, and you will find Mr Desboyne will do a lot to help your Johnny.'

She shook her head.

'Clive doesn't like Johnny,' she said.

'That I can well believe,' said Mr. Reeder good-humouredly. 'Nevertheless, unless I'm a bad prophet, you will find Mr. Desboyne the one person who can

clear up this—um—unpleasantness.'

'But who was the man who was killed? It's all so terribly unreal to me. Attymar was his name, wasn't it? Johnny didn't know anybody named Attymar. At least, he didn't tell me so. I'm absolutely stunned by this news, Mr. Reeder. I can't realize its gravity. It seems just a stupid joke that somebody's played on us. Johnny couldn't do harm to any man.'

'I'm sure he couldn't,' said Mr. Reeder soothingly, but that meant nothing.

CHAPTER V. — THE RED STAINS

MR REEDER's housekeeper had, since his arrival, behaved with a certain secretiveness which could only mean that she had something important to communicate. It was after he had seen the girl to her house that he learned what the mystery was all about.

'The young gentleman who came to see you last night,' she said in a low voice. 'I've put him in the waiting-room.'

'Mr. Desboyne?'

'That's the name,' she nodded. 'He said he wouldn't go until he'd seen you.'

In a few seconds Clive Desboyne was shown in.

'I've only just heard about Southers' arrest—it's monstrous! And the things I said about him tonight. Mr. Reeder, I'll spend all the money you want to get this young man out of his trouble. My God, it's awful for Anna!'

Mr. Reeder pulled at his long nose and said he thought it was rather unpleasant. 'And,' he added, 'for everybody.'

'They say this man Ligsey is dead too. If I'd had any sense I'd have brought over the note I had of our conversation.'

'I could call for it in the morning,' said Mr. Reeder, and his voice was surprisingly brisk.

Mr. Desboyne gazed at him in startled astonishment. It was as though this weary man with the drooping lips and tired eyes had suddenly received a great mental tonic.

'You made notes? Not one man in ten would have thought of that,' said Mr. Reeder. 'I thought I was the only person who did it.'

Clive Desboyne laughed.

'I've given you the impression that I'm terribly methodical,' he said, 'and that isn't quite exact.' He looked at the watch on his wrist. 'It's too late to ask you to

breakfast.'

'Breakfast is my favourite meal,' said Mr. Reeder gaily.

Late as was the hour, he was standing in front of the polished mahogany door of 974, Memorial Mansions, Park Lane, at nine o'clock next morning. Mr Desboyne was not so early a riser, and indeed had doubted whether the detective would keep his promise. Mr. Reeder was left standing in the hall while the valet went to inquire exactly how this strangely appearing gentleman should be disposed of.

There was plenty to occupy Mr. Reeder's attention during his absence, for the wide hall was hung with photographs which gave some indication of Desboyne's wide sporting and theatrical interests. There was one interesting photograph, evidently an enlargement of a snapshot showing the House of Commons in the background, which held Mr. Reeder's attention, the more so as the photograph also showed the corner of Westminster Bridge across which buses were moving. He was looking at this when Clive Desboyne joined him.

'Here is a piece of detective work,' said Mr. Reeder triumphantly, pointing to the photograph. 'I can tell you almost to the week that picture was taken. Do you see those two omnibuses bearing the names of two plays? I happen to know there was only one week in the year when they were both running together.'

'Indeed,' said Desboyne, apparently not as impressed by this piece of deduction as Mr. Reeder had expected.

He led the way to the dining-room, and Reeder found by the side of his plate three foolscap sheets covered with writing.

'I don't know whether you'll be able to read it,' said Desboyne, 'but you'll notice there are one or two things that I forgot to tell you at the interview. I think on the whole they favour Southers, and I'm glad I made a note of them. For example, he said he had never seen Southers and only knew him by name. That in itself is rather curious.'

'Very,' said Mr. Reeder. 'Regarding that photograph in the hall—it must have been in May last year. I remember some years ago, by a lucky chance, I was able to establish the date on which a cheque was passed, as distinct from the date on which it was drawn, by the fact that the drawer had forgotten to sign one of his initials.'

It was surprising how much Mr. Reeder, who was not as a rule a loquacious man, talked in the course of that meal. Mostly he talked about nothing. When Clive Desboyne led him to the murder Mr. Reeder skilfully edged away to less unpleasant topics.

'It doesn't interest me very much, I confess,' he said. 'I am not a member of the

—um—Criminal Investigation Department; I was merely called in to deal with this man's smuggling—and he seems to have smuggled pretty extensively. It is distressing that young Southers is implicated. He seems a nice lad, and has rather a sane view of the care of chickens. For example, he was telling me that he had an incubator...'

At the end of the meal he asked permission to take away the notes for study, and this favour was granted.

He was at the house in Shadwick Lane half an hour later. Gaylor, who had arranged to meet him there, had not arrived, and Mr. Reeder had two men who had had semi-permanent jobs on the wharf. It was the duty of one to open and close the gates and pilot the lorries to their positions. He had also, as had his companion, to assist at the loading.

They had not seen much of Attymar all the years they had been there. He usually came in on one of the night or early morning tides. Ligsey paid them their wages.

'There was never any change,' said one mournfully. 'We I ain't had the gates painted since I've bin here—we've had the same little anvil to keep the gate open—'

He looked round first one side and then the other. The same little anvil was not there.

'Funny,' he said.

Mr. Reeder agreed. Who would steal a rusty little anvil? He saw the place where it had lain; the impression of it still stood in the dusty earth.

Later came Gaylor, in a hurry to show him over the other rooms of the house. There was a kitchen, a rather spacious cellar, which was closed by a heavy door, and one bedroom that had been divided into two unequal parts by a wooden partition. The bedroom was simply but cleanly furnished. There was a bed and bedstead, a dressing-table with a large mirror, and a chest of drawers, which was empty. Indeed, there was no article of Attymar's visible, except an old razor, a stubbly shaving brush and six worn shirts that had been washed until they were threadbare. From the centre of the ceiling hung an electric light with an opalescent shade; another light hung over a small oak desk, in which, Gaylor informed him, most of the documents in the case had been found. But Mr. Reeder's chief interest was in the mirror, and in the greasy smear which ran from the top left hand corner almost along the top of the mirror. The glass itself was supported by two little mahogany pillars, and to the top of each of these was attached a piece of string.

'Most amusing,' said Reeder, speaking his thoughts aloud.

'Remind me to laugh,' said Mr. Gaylor heavily. 'What is amusing?'

For answer Mr. Reeder put up his hand and ran the tip of his finger along the smear. Then he began to prowls around the apartment obviously looking for something, and as obviously disappointed that it could not be found.

'No, nothing has been taken out of here,' said Gaylor in answer to his question, 'except the papers. Here's something that may amuse you more.'

He opened a door leading to the bedroom. Here was a cupboard—it was little bigger. The walls and floor were covered with white tiles, as also was the back of the door. From the ceiling projected a large nozzle, and in one of the walls were two taps.

'How's that for luxury? Shower bath—hot and cold water. Doesn't that make you laugh?'

'Nothing makes me laugh except the detectives in pictures,' said Mr. Reeder calmly. 'Do you ever go to the cinema, Gaylor?'

The inspector admitted that occasionally he did.

'I like to see detectives in funny films, because they always carry large magnifying glasses. Do they make you laugh?'

'They do,' admitted Mr. Gaylor, with a contemptuous and reminiscent smile.

'Then get ready to howl,' said Mr. Reeder, and from his pocket took the largest reading glass that Gaylor had ever seen.

Under the astonished eyes of the detective Reeder went down on his knees in the approved fashion, and began care fully to scrutinize the floor. Inch by inch he covered, stopping now and again to pick up something invisible to the Scotland Yard man, and placed it in an envelope which he had also taken from his pocket.

'Cigar ash?' asked Gaylor sardonically.

'Almost,' said Mr. Reeder.

He went on with his search, then suddenly he sat back on his heels, his eyes ablaze, and held up a tiny piece of silver paper, less than a quarter of an inch square. Gaylor looked down more closely.

'Oh, it's a cigarette you're looking for?'

But Mr. Reeder was oblivious to all sarcasm. Inside the silver paper was a scrap of transparent paper, so thin that it seemed part of the tinsel. Very carefully, however, he separated the one from the other, touched its surface and examined his finger-tips.

'Where's the fireplace?' he asked suddenly.

'There's a fireplace in the kitchen—that's the only one.' Mr. Reeder hurried downstairs and examined this small apartment. There were ashes in the grate,

but it was impossible to tell what had been burnt.

'I should like to say,' said Gaylor, 'that your efforts are wasted, for we've got enough in the diary to hang Southers twice over. Only I suspect you when you do things unnecessarily.'

'The diary?' Mr. Reeder looked up.

'Yes, Attymar's.'

'So he kept a diary, did he?' Mr. Reeder was quite amused. 'I should have thought he would, if I had thought about it at all.'

Then he frowned.

'Not an ordinary diary, of course? Just an exercise book. It begins—let me see—shall we say two weeks ago, or three weeks?'

Gaylor gazed at him in amazement. 'Mason told you?'

'No, he didn't tell me anything, partly because he hasn't spoken to me. But, of course, it would be in a sort of exercise book. An ordinary printed diary that began on the first of January would be unthinkable. This case is getting so fascinating that I can hardly stop laughing!'

He was not laughing; he was very serious indeed, as he stood in the untidy yard in front of the little house and looked across its littered surface.

'There is no sign of the tender that brought Ligsey here? The little boy on the barge was much more informative than he imagined! I'll tell you what to look for, shall I? A black, canoe-shaped motor boat which might hold three people at a pinch. Remember that—a canoe-shaped boat, say ten feet long.'

'Where shall I find it?' asked the fascinated Gaylor.

'At the bottom of the river,' said Mr. Reeder calmly, 'and in or near it you will find a little anvil which used to keep the gate open!'

Mr. Reeder had a very large acquaintance with criminals, larger perhaps than the average police officer, whose opportunities are circumscribed by the area to which he is attached; and he knew that the business of detection would be at a standstill if there were such a thing in the world as a really clever criminal. By the just workings of providence, men who gain their living by the evasion of the law are deprived of the eighth sense which, properly functioning, would keep them out of the hands of the police.

He made yet another survey of the house before he left, pointed out to Gaylor something which that officer had already noticed, namely, the bloodstains on the floor and the wall of a small lobby which connected the main living-room with the yard.

'Naturally I saw it,' said Gaylor, who was inclined to be a little complacent.

'My theory is that the fight started in the sitting-room; they struggled out into the passage—'

'That would be impossible,' murmured Mr. Reeder.

CHAPTER VI. — MYSTERY

JOHN SOUTHERS made a brief appearance at the Tower of London Police Court—a dazed, bewildered young man, so overwhelmed by his position that he could do no more than answer the questions put to him by the magistrate's clerk.

Gaylor had seen him earlier in the morning.

'He said nothing except that he went to Attymar's house—oh, yes, he admits that—by appointment. He says Attymar kept him waiting for some time before he opened the door, and then only allowed him to come into the lobby. He tells some rambling story about Attymar sending him to meet a man at Highgate. In fact, it's the usual man story.'

Mr. Reeder nodded. He was not unacquainted with that mysterious man who figures in the narratives of all arrested persons. Sometimes it was a man who gave the prisoner the stolen goods in the possession of which he had been found; sometimes it was the man who asked another to cash a forged cheque; but always it was a vague Somebody who could never be traced. Half the work of investigation which occupied the attention of the detective force consisted of a patient search for men who had no existence except in the imaginations of prisoners under remand.

'Did he see him?' asked Mr. Reeder.

Gaylor laughed. 'My dear chap, what a question!'

Mr. Reeder fondled his bony chin. 'Is it possible to—um—have a little chat with our friend Southers?'

Gaylor was dubious, and had reason for his doubt. Chief Constable Mason and the high men at Headquarters were at the moment writhing under a periodical wave of criticism which sweeps across Scotland Yard at regular intervals; and their latest delinquency was the cross-examination of a man under suspicion of a serious crime. There had been questions in Parliament, almost a Royal Commission.

'I doubt it,' said Gaylor. 'The Chief is feeling rather sick about this Hanny business, and as the kick has come down from your department it isn't likely that they'll make an exception. I'll ask Mason and let you know.'

Mr. Reeder was home that afternoon when Anna Welford called. She was most amazingly calm. Mr. Reeder, who had shown some hesitation about receiving her, was visibly relieved.

'Have you seen Johnny?' was the first question she asked.

Mr. Reeder shook his head, and explained to her that in the strictest sense he was not in the case, and that the police were very jealous of interference.

'Clive has been to see me,' she said when he had finished, 'and he has told me everything—he's terribly upset.'

'Told you everything?' repeated Mr. Reeder.

She nodded.

'About Ligsey, and the story that Clive told you. I understood—in a way. He is doing everything he can for Johnny; he has engaged a lawyer and briefed counsel.'

For the second time Mr. Reeder motioned her to a chair and, when she was seated, continued his own restless pacing.

'If there was any truth in that story, your Johnny should be rather well off,' he said. 'The wages of sin are rather—um—high. Yet his father told me this morning—I had a brief interview with him—that young Mr. Southers' bank balance is not an excessive one.'

He saw her lower her eyes and heard the quick little sigh. 'They've found the money—I thought you knew that,' she said in a low voice.

Mr. Reeder halted in his stride and peered down at her.

'They've found the money?'

She nodded.

'The police came and made a search about an hour ago, and they found a box in the toolshed with hundreds of pounds in it, all in notes.'

Mr. Reeder did not often whistle, but he whistled now.

'Does Mr. Desboyne know this?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'Clive doesn't know. It happened after he'd left. He's been terribly nice—he's made one confession that isn't very flattering to me.'

Reeder's eyes twinkled.

'That he is—um—engaged to somebody else?' he suggested, and she stared at him in amazement.

'Do you know?'

'One has heard of such things,' said Mr. Reeder bravely. 'I was very glad,' she went on. 'It removed the'—she hesitated—' personal bias. He really is sorry for all he has said and done. Johnny's trouble has shaken him terribly. Clive thinks that the murder was committed by this man Ligsey,'

'Oh!' said Mr. Reeder. 'That is interesting.'

He stared down at her, pursing his lips thoughtfully. 'The—um—police rather fancy that Mr. Ligsey is dead,' he said, and there was a note of irritation in his voice as though he resented the police holding any theory at all. 'Quite dead—um—murdered, in fact.'

There was a long pause here. He knew instinctively that she had come to make some request, but it was not until she rose to go that she spoke her thoughts.

'Clive wanted to see you himself to make a proposition. He said that he didn't think you were engaged on the—official side of the case. He's got a tremendous opinion of your cleverness, Mr. Reeder, and so of course have I. Is it humanly possible for you to take up this case... Johnny's side, I mean? Perhaps I'm being silly, but just now I'm clutching at straws.'

Mr. Reeder was looking out of the window, his head moving from side to side.

'I'm afraid not,' he said. 'I really am afraid not! The people on your—um—friend's side are the police. If he is innocent, I am naturally on his side, with them. Don't you see, young lady, that when we prove a man's guilt we also prove every body else's innocence?'

It was a long speech for Mr. Reeder, and he had not quite finished. He stood with his hands deep in his pocket, his eyes half closed, his body swaying to and fro.

'Let me see now—if Ligsey were alive?—A very dense and stupid young man, quite incapable, I should have thought, of—um—so many things that have happened during the last twenty-four hours.'

After Anna had left, he went to Southers' house and interviewed Johnny's father. The old man was bearing his sorrow remarkably well. Indeed, his principal emotion was a loud fury against the people who dared accuse his son.

He led the way to the toolshed in the yard and showed the detective just where the box had been hidden.

'Personally, I never go into the shed. It's Johnny's little cubby hutch,' she said. 'The boy's fond of gardening and, like you, Mr. Reeder, he has a fancy for poultry.'

'Is the shed kept locked?'

'No, I've never seen it locked,' said old Southers.

The place from which the box had been extricated was at the far end of the shed. It had been concealed behind a bag of chicken seed.

Mr. Reeder took a brief survey of the garden: it was an oblong strip of ground, measuring about a hundred yards by twenty. At the further end of the garden was a wall which marked the boundary of the garden which backed on to it. The garden could be approached either from the door leading to a small glass conservatory, or along a narrow gravel strip which ran down one side of the house. Ingress, however, was barred by a small door stretched across the narrow path.

'But it's seldom locked,' said Southers. 'We leave it open for the milkman; he goes round to the kitchen that way in the morning.'

Mr. Reeder went back to the garden and walked slowly along the gravel path which ran between two large flower-beds. At the farther end was a wired-in chicken run. Mr. Reeder surveyed the flower-beds meditatively.

'Nobody has dug up the garden?' he asked, and, when the other replied in the negative: 'Then I should do a bit of digging myself if I were you, Mr Southers,' he said gently; 'and whether you tell the police what you find, or do not tell the police, is entirely a matter for your own conscience.'

He looked up at the sky for a long time as though he were expecting to see something unusual, and then:

'If it is consistent with your—um—conscience to say nothing about your discovery, and if you removed it or them to a safe place where it or they would not be found, it might be to the advantage of your son in the not too distant future.'

Mr. Southers was a little agitated, more than a little bewildered, when Mr Reeder took his leave. He was to learn that the ban on his activities in regard to the Attymar murder had been strengthened rather than relaxed, and he experienced a gentle but malignant pleasure in the thought that in one respect he had made their task a little more difficult.

It was Gaylor who brought the news.

'I spoke to the Chief about your seeing Southers in Brixton, but he thought it was best if you kept out of the case until the witnesses are tested.'

Mr. Reeder's duties in the Public Prosecutor's Department were to examine witnesses prior to their appearance in court, to test the strength or the weakness of their testimony, and he had been employed in this capacity before his official connection with the department was made definite.

'At the same time,' Gaylor went on, 'if you can pick up anything we'll be glad to have it.'

'Naturally,' murmured Mr. Reeder.

'I mean, you may by accident bear things—you know these people: they live in the same street: and I think you know the young lady Southers is engaged to?'

Mr. Reeder inclined his head.

'There's another thing, Mr. Reeder,' Gaylor evidently felt he was treading on delicate ground, having summarily declined and rejected the assistance of his companion. 'If you should hear from Ligsey—'

'A voice from the grave,' interrupted Mr. Reeder.

'Well, there's a rumour about that he's not dead. In fact, the boy on the barge, Hobbs, says that Ligsey came alongside last night in a skiff and told him to keep his mouth shut about what he'd seen and heard. My own opinion is that the boy was dreaming, but one of Ligsey's pals said he'd also seen him or heard him—I don't know which. That's a line of investigation you might take on for your own amusement—'

'Investigation doesn't amuse me,' said Mr. Reeder calmly; 'it bores me. It wearies me. It brings me in a certain—um—income, but doesn't amuse me.'

'Well,' said the detective awkwardly, 'if it interests you, that's a line you might take up.'

'I shall not dream of taking up any line at all. It means work, and I do not like work.'

Here, however, he was permitting himself to romance.

That afternoon he spent in the neighbourhood which Ligsey knew best. He talked with lorry drivers and van boys, little old women who kept tiny and unremunerative shops, and the consequence of all his oblique questionings was that he made a call in Little Calais Street, where lived an unprepossessing young lady who had gained certain social recognition—her portrait would appear in the next morning's newspapers—because she had been engaged to the missing man. She had, in fact, walked out with him, among others, for the greater part of a year.

Miss Rosie Loop did not suggest romance; she was short, rather stout, had bad teeth and a red face; for the moment she was important, and might not have seen Mr. Reeder but for the mistaken belief that he was associated with the Press.

'Who shall I say it is?' asked her blowsy mother, who answered the door.

'The editor of The Times,' said Mr. Reeder without hesitation.

In the stuffy little kitchen where the bereaved fiancée was eating bread and jam, Mr. Reeder was given a clean Windsor chair, and sat down to hear the

exciting happening of the previous night.

'I haven't told the Press yet,' said Rosie, who had a surprisingly shrill voice for one so equipped by nature for the deeper tones. 'He come last night. I sleep upstairs with mother, and whenever he used to anchor off the crik he used to come ashore, no matter what time it was, and throw up a couple of stones to let me know he was here. About 'arf past two it was last night, and lord! it gave me a start.'

'He threw up the stones to let you know he was there?' suggested Mr Reeder.

She nodded violently.

'And was it Mr. Ligsey?'

'It was him!' she said dramatically. 'I wouldn't go to the window for a long time, but mother said "Don't be such a fool, a ghost carn't hurt yer," and then I pulled up the sash and there he was in his old oilskin coat. I asked him where he'd bin, but he was in a 'urry. Told me not to get worried about him as he was all right.'

'How did he look?' asked Mr. Reeder.

She rolled her head impatiently.

'Didn't I tell yer it was the middle of the night. But that's what he said—"Don't get worried about anything"—and then he popped off.'

'And you popped in?' said Mr. Reeder pleasantly. 'He didn't have a cold or anything, did he?'

Her mouth opened.

'You've seen him? Where is he?'

'I haven't seen him, but he had a cold?'

'Yes, he had,' she admitted, 'and so would you 'ave if you 'ad to go up and down that river all day and night. It's a horrible life. I hope he's going to give it up. He's bound to get some money if he comes forward and tells the police the truth. It was very funny, me thinkin' he was dead. We'd bin to buy our black—hadn't we, mother?'

Mother offered a hoarse confirmation.

'And all the papers sayin' he was dead, an' dragging the river for him, an' that Captain Attymar. He used to treat Ligsey like a dog.'

'He hasn't written to you?'

She shook her head.

'He was never a one for writing.'

'What time was this?'

She could tell him exactly, because she had heard Greenwich church striking the half-hour.

Mr. Reeder might be bored with investigation, but he found some satisfaction in boredom.

The Allanuna still lay off Greenwich, and he hired a boat to take him to the barge. The disconsolate Master Hobbs was still on board, and even the fact that he was now commander did not compensate him for his loneliness, though apparently the police had supplied him with food and had arranged to relieve him that evening.

He was very emphatic about the visitation of Ligsey. He had rowed alongside and whistled to the boy—the whistle had wakened him. From under the companion steps he had looked over and seen him sitting in the boat, a big white bandage round his head. Miss Rosie had said nothing about the white bandage but, calling there on his way home, Reeder had confirmation.

'Yes, I forgot to tell you about that,' said Rosie. 'I see it under 'is 'at. I said "What's that white round your head?" Fancy me forgettin' to tell you that!'

As a matter of form, Mr. Reeder, when he got home that night, jotted down certain sequences.

At some time after eight on the night of the murder, Attymar had come in a launch, had collected Ligsey and taken him towards London. At nine-thirty Johnny Southers had called at Attymar's house and, according to his story, had been sent on a fool's errand to Highgate. At some time about eleven o'clock the murder had been discovered—Mr. Reeder put down his pen and frowned.

'I'm getting old and stupid,' he said, reached for the telephone and called a number to which he knew Gaylor would certainly be attached at that hour.

It was Gaylor's clerk who answered him and, after about four minutes' wait, Gaylor himself spoke.

'Have you found anything, Mr. Reeder?'

'I find I am suffering from a slight softening of the brain,' said Mr Reeder pleasantly. 'Do you realize I never asked how the murder was discovered?'

He heard Gaylor laugh.

'Didn't I tell you? It was very simple. A policeman on his beat found the wicket door open, saw the lantern on the ground and the other lantern burning in the lobby of the house—what's the matter?'

Mr. Reeder was laughing.

'Pardon me,' he said at last. 'Are you sure there wasn't an alarm bell ringing?'

'I didn't hear of any alarm bell—in fact, I don't know that there is one.'

Mr. Reeder exchanged a few commonplaces, denied that he was making any inquiries about Ligsey and, replacing the receiver, sat back in his chair, his hands clasped about his middle and real amusement in his eyes.

Later he had a call from the solicitor engaged to defend young Southers. He also suggested that Mr. Reeder should place his services at the call of the defence; but again he refused.

Opening the telephone directory, he found the number of Mr. Clive Desboyne, and it was that gentleman who answered his call.

'That's queer, I was just going to ring you up,' said Desboyne. 'Have you taken up the case?'

'I am wavering,' replied Reeder. 'Before I reach a decision I'd like to have another talk with you. Could I call at your flat tonight about—nine?'

There was a pause.

'Certainly. I was going out, but I'll wait in for you.'

At the conclusion of this call Mr. Reeder again leaned back in his chair, but this time he was not smiling; he was rather puzzled. Perhaps he was thinking of Ligsey; possibly he was impressed by the generosity of this man who was ready to spend a considerable part of his fortune to prove the innocence of a man he disliked.

Whatever trains of thoughts started and slowed, switched into side tracks or ran off into tributary lines, they all arrived at one mysterious destination...

'It will be spring-cleaning,' said Mr. Reeder, as he got up from his chair.

CHAPTER VII. — THE REVOLVER CLUE

REEDER spent the rest of the afternoon in the West End of London, calling upon a succession of theatrical agents. Some were very important personages who received him in walnut-panelled salons; a few were in dingy offices on third floors; one, and the most important of these, he interviewed in the bar of a public-house in St. Martin's Lane—a fat and seedy man, with a fur collar and frayed cuffs, a half-stupid tippler with no business but many reminiscences; and, as he proudly claimed, the best collection of old theatrical programmes in London.

Mr. Reeder, who was a good listener and very patient, heard all about the agent's former grandeur, the amount of commission out of which eminent artistes had swindled him, and at last he accompanied his bibulous companion to his lodgings off the Waterloo Road, and from seven till eight was engrossed

in masses of dog-eared literature.

Mr. Reeder had a meal in a Strand restaurant and drove to Park Lane. As the lift carried him to the floor on which Desboyne's flat was situated—

'I'm sure its spring cleaning,' murmured Mr. Reeder to himself.

He rang the bell of the flat and waited. Presently he heard the sound of footsteps echoing hollowly in the hall. Clive Desboyne opened the door with an apologetic smile.

'I hope you don't mind the place being in confusion?' he said. 'We've started our spring cleaning. The truth is, I'd arranged to go away today if this wretched business hadn't turned up.'

The carpet had been taken up from the floor of the hall, the walls had been stripped, and the crystal pendant which lit the hall showed through a gauze covering. Clive Desboyne's own study had, however, been left untouched by the decorators. 'I'm going to clear out to an hotel tomorrow. It'll probably be the Ritz-Carlton, but if you want me urgently my solicitors will be able to put us in touch. Now, Mr. Reeder, you're going to do this for Anna and me?'

Mr. Reeder shook his head feebly.

'You've got to do it,' insisted the other energetically. 'You're the only detective in London in whom I've any confidence. I know you're attached to the Public Prosecutor's Department, but I've been making a few inquiries too,' he said with a little smile, 'and I hear that you take outside commissions.'

'Banks,' said Mr. Reeder reverently. 'Banks—not private work.'

'I shall insist!' Clive was very earnest. 'I've told Anna everything—about the way I behaved over young Southers. Honestly, I still think that Ligsey's story was true and that Southers was making something on the side. A lot of decent people, otherwise perfectly honest, do that sort of thing, and I'm not condemning him. In fact, when I expressed my—what's the word for being shocked?'

'Horror, amazement?' suggested Mr. Reeder.

'Well, whatever it was—I was being a hypocrite. I myself haven't always been rich. I've known what it is to be devilishly poor. If I hadn't made good speculations when I was quite a kid, I should probably be worse off than Southers.'

'You're rather fond of the young lady?' said Mr. Reeder after an interregnum of silence.

Again Desboyne laughed.

'Of course I am! The fact that a man is engaged to another girl—and the sweetest girl in the world—doesn't prevent him philandering. Of course, it's

got me into quite a lot of trouble, but the fact remains, I'm terribly fond of Anna. I won't say I love her like a brother, because I'm tired of being a hypocrite. I'm going to try to get Southers out of the mess he's in; and that doesn't mean I love him like a brother, either! Now, Mr Reeder, what do you want to see me about, if it isn't to tell me that you're taking up this case?'

All that Mr. Reeder wanted to see Clive Desboyne about was spring cleaning, but he could not say this. He had, however, a good excuse for calling: Ligsey was apparently alive, he explained. Clive Desboyne was not impressed.

'I didn't worry whether he was alive or dead,' he said frankly. 'Naturally, I don't know what theory the police have, but I understood from the newspapers that they were concentrating on the murder of Attymar—that is the charge against John Southers. If Ligsey is alive I'm hardly likely to meet him, unless, of course, he feels, as so many of these crooks do, that once one has given them money they're entitled to a pension! If I hear from him I'll let you know.'

As they came out into the hall Mr. Reeder's eyes wandered up and down the bare walls.

'You will have this repainted, Mr. Desboyne?' he asked. 'At present it is rather a delicate cream. If I were you I should have it painted green. Green is a very restful colour, but possibly my views are—um—suburban.'

'I think they are,' said the other good-humouredly.

Mr. Reeder had made an appointment to see the bibulous agent at ten o'clock. The agent knew where certain photographs were to be obtained, and had promised to be waiting at the corner of St. Martin's Lane at that hour. Mr. Reeder arrived as St. Martin's Church clock was striking, but there was no sign of Billy Gurther. He had not appeared at half-past ten, and Mr. Reeder decided to go to his house, for he was very anxious to complete his dossier.

The landlady at Mr. Gurther's lodgings had a surprising and disconcerting story to tell. Mr. Reeder had hardly left (she had witnessed his departure) before a messenger came, and Billy had gone out. He had returned in half an hour, very voluble and excited. He had been given a commission to collect cabaret turns in Spain. He had to leave London some time after nine, travel all night, and catch the Sud Express in the morning. He was plentifully supplied with money.

'He was so excited, he was nearly sober,' said the uncharitable landlady. The sudden departure of an obscure music-hall agent, of whose existence he had been unaware until that afternoon, did not at all distress Mr. Reeder. It was the circumstances which attended his leaving, its rapidity, and, most important of all, the knowledge that was behind this sudden move, which made him alert and watchful.

He might not be persona grata at Scotland Yard, but little things like that did not trouble Mr. Reeder and later that night he drove to the big building on the Thames Embankment and sought, nay, demanded, an interview with the Chief Constable, who should have been at home and in bed, but was in fact in consultation with his five chiefs when the detective arrived.

The first message sent to Mr. Reeder was cold and unpromising. Would he call in the morning? It was Gaylor who was detached from the conference to carry this message.

'Go back to your chief, Mr. Gaylor,' said Reeder acidly, 'and tell him I wish to see him this evening, at once. If I see him tomorrow it will be at the Home Office.'

This was a threat: nobody knew it better than Gaylor. The exact extent and volume of Reeder's power was not known. One thing was certain: he could be extremely unpleasant, and the consequences of his displeasure might even affect a man's career. Gaylor returned instantly and summoned him to the conference, and there Mr. Reeder sat down and, quite uninvited, expounded a theory, and supported his fantastic ideas with a considerable amount of grimy literature.

'We can stop Gurther at Southampton,' suggested Gaylor, but Reeder shook his head.

'I think not. Let him soak into the Continent, and then we may pick him up without any trouble. Send a man to Southampton, and let him shadow him to Paris. In Paris he can blanket him.'

Mason nodded.

'If your theory is correct, there must be a method of proving it,' he said; 'not a simple one perhaps—'

'On the contrary, a very simple one,' said Mr. Reeder.

He turned to Gaylor.

'You remember the bedroom above the one where the murder took place, or where we think it was committed? You probably took a photograph.'

'I'll get it right away,' said Gaylor, and left the room. He was back with a sheaf of photographic enlargements which he laid on the table.

'There it is,' said Reeder, and pointed.

'The clock? Yes, I noticed that.'

'Naturally,' said Reeder.

'But most people who go to sea, or even bargees, have it put there.'

The little clock was fastened to the ceiling, immediately over the bedstead, so

that anybody lying in bed could look up and tell the time. It had luminous hands, Reeder had noticed.

'I want you to have that clock removed and the ceiling plastered. I want you to take away the bed and put a table and chair there. In two days I think I will make the further prosecution of young Southers unnecessary.'

'You can do as you like,' said Mason. 'You're well in the case now, Mr Reeder. I've put out a special call to get Ligsey, and the river police are searching all the reaches.'

'The river police are more likely to get Mr. Ligsey than any other section of the Metropolitan Police Force,' replied Reeder.

Big Ben was striking eleven as he mounted a bus that carried him from Westminster Bridge to the end of his road. In the days, and particularly the nights, when Mr. Reeder was heavily engaged in his hazardous occupation his housekeeper remained on duty until he was ready to go to bed. She met him at the door now with a telephone message.

'Mr. Gaylor called up, sir. He says he's sending you a lacquered box which he wishes you to examine, and will you be careful not to touch it with your fingers because of the prince? He didn't say which prince it was.'

'I think I know His Highness,' said Mr. Reeder, who was a little ruffled that Gaylor should find it necessary to warn him against oversmearing fingerprints. 'Has the box arrived?'

'Ten minutes ago, sir.'

'When did Mr. Gaylor telephone?'

She was rather vague as to this; thought it might have been half an hour before. In that case, thought Reeder, it must have been immediately after he left the Yard, and the box must have come on by cyclist messenger.

He found it on his table in a service envelope, and took it out: a heavy, oblong box about six inches long and three inches square. Pen-printed on the lid, which was tacked down, were the words: 'Mr. Reeder to see and return. Room 75, New Scotland Yard.' Reeder weighed the package in his hand.

Some people remember by smell, some trust to their eyesight, and the recollections of vision. Mr. Reeder had a remarkable sense of weight—and he remembered something that weighed just as heavy as this. He put the package carefully on the table and rang through to Scotland Yard. Gaylor had gone. He tried him at his house, but he had not arrived.

'Tell him to phone the moment he comes in,' he said, and went to his desk to examine for the third time that day, the old music-hall programmes and playbills, photographs, cuttings from the Era and the Stage, the data which he

had collected in the course of the day.

At one o'clock his housekeeper came in and asked if any thing more would be required.

'Nothing at all,' said Mr. Reeder. And then a thought struck him. 'Where do you sleep?'

'In the room above, sir.'

'Above this?' said Mr. Reeder hastily. 'No, no, I think you'd better stay in the kitchen until I hear from Mr. Gaylor. If you could make yourself comfortable there, in fact if you could sleep there, I should be very much obliged. There is nothing to be alarmed about,' he said, when he saw consternation dawning in her face. 'It is merely that I may want to—um—send a detective upstairs to—um—overhear a conversation.'

It was a lame excuse. Mr. Reeder was a poor liar; but his housekeeper was a very simple soul and, except that she insisted on going up to make the room tidy, agreed to retire to the basement. She had hardly gone when Gaylor came through, and for five minutes he and Reeder spoke together. After this the detective settled down to await his coming, and Inspector Gaylor did not arrive alone, but brought with him two expert officials from the Explosives Department. One of them had a delicate spring-balance, and with this the package was weighed.

'Allow an ounce and a quarter for the wood,' said the expert, 'and that's the exact weight of a Mills bomb. I'm sure you're right, Mr. Reeder.'

He held the package to his ear and shook it gently.

'No, nothing more complicated.'

He took a case of instruments from his pocket and removed a slither of wood from the lid.

'Yes, there's the lever, and the pin's out,' he said after examining it under a strong light.

He cut away the side, and revealed a black, segmented egg shape, grinning as he recognized an old friend.

'You see that?' He pointed to a little hole at the end of the box. 'The fellow who brought this was taking no risks: he kept an emergency pin through until it was delivered. I'll have this out in a jiff.'

It was no idle promise. Mr. Reeder watched with interest as the skilful fingers of the man removed the lid, catching the lever at the same time and holding it firm against the swelling side. From his pocket he took a steel pin and thrust it home, and the bomb became innocuous.

'You've kept every scrap of paper, of course?' said Gaylor. 'There was no other

packing but this?'

Every piece of paper was carefully folded and put in an envelope, and the two explosive experts went down to pack away Mr. Reeder's dangerous gift.

'There was a lot you didn't tell the chief,' said Gaylor at parting. 'That's the trouble with you, you old devil!'

Mr. Reeder looked pained.

'That is not a very pleasant expression,' he said.

'But it is,' insisted Gaylor. 'You always keep back some juicy bit to spring on us at the last moment. It's either your sense of drama or your sense of humour.'

For a moment Reeder's eyes twinkled, and then his face became a mask again.

'I have no—um—sense of humour,' he said.

He had at any rate a sense of vanity, and he was irritated that his little idiosyncrasy had been so cruelly exposed to description.

He was up at six the next morning, and by half past seven was on his way to the Thames Valley. On the previous day he had telephoned to eight separate boathouses between Windsor and Henley, and he was satisfied that he had found what he wanted in the neighbourhood of Bourne End. He had telephoned to the boatbuilder on whom he was calling, and he found that industrious man at work in his yard.

'You're the gentleman who wanted to know about the Zaira? I was going to send one of my boys up to see if she was still tied up, but I haven't been able to spare him this morning.'

'I'm rather glad you haven't,' said Mr. Reeder.

'It was a funny thing you telephoning to me when did,' said the builder. 'She'd just gone past on her way to Marlow. No, I've never seen her before, but I caught the name; in fact, it was because she was new in this part of the river that I noticed her. She's a forty-foot cruiser, nearly new, and I should think she's got pretty powerful engines. As it was, she made a bit of a wash.'

He explained that after Mr. Reeder's inquiry he had telephoned through to Marlow, had learned that the boat had not passed, and had sent one of his assistants up the towpath to locate her.

'She's lying at a private quay that runs in from the river to a big red house which has been empty for years. There's nobody on board her, and I suppose the owner's had permission from the agents. Are you thinking of buying her?'

That view had never presented itself to Mr. Reeder. He thought for a long time, and gave the boatbuilder the impression that it was only a question of price that prevented him from ownership.

'Yes, it's quite usual for people to tie up and leave their boats for months at a time, especially at a private quay like that. It's not safe: you get a craft full of rats, especially in the winter months. These big boats cost a lot to keep up, and you couldn't afford to have a caretaker on board.'

Mr. Reeder made a very leisurely way along the towpath, stopping now and again to admire the lovely reach. Although he had explicit instructions, he might have passed the narrow canal which runs in from the river, in spite of the brick bridge across, for the stream was choked with weeds, and ran apparently into a tangle of trees and undergrowth. With some difficulty Mr. Reeder reached its bank. He then saw that the canal was brick-lined. Nevertheless, though he had this indication of its edge, he walked gingerly.

It opened to a larger pool, a sort of backwater. Passing a clump of bushes, he came suddenly upon the boat. The bow lay almost within reach of his hand. It was tied up fore and aft and had a deserted appearance. Across the forepart of the boat was drawn a canvas cover, but he was prepared for this by the description of the boatbuilder. Mr. Reeder slipped his hand in his pocket and went cautiously along the length of the boat. He noted that all the portholes were not only closed but made opaque with brown paper.

'Is anybody there?' he called loudly.

There was no answer. In midstream a moorhen was paddling aimlessly; the sound of his voice sent it scurrying to cover.

The foremost part of the ship was evidently the engine-room, and possibly accommodation for a small crew. The living saloon was aft. It was these that had their portholes covered. Both cabins were approached from the well deck amidships, and he saw here a canvas-covered wheel. The doors were padlocked on the outside.

Mr. Reeder looked around, and stepped on to the boat down a short ladder to the well. He tried the padlock on the saloon door. It was fast; but it was a simple padlock, and if fortune favoured him, and the boat he sought was really discovered, he had prepared for such an emergency as this.

He tried three of the keys which he took from his pocket before the lock snapped back. He unfastened the hasp, turned the handle and pulled open the door. He could see nothing for a moment, then he switched on a torch and sent its rays into the interior.

The saloon was empty. The floor of it lay possibly eighteen inches below the level of the deck on which he was standing. And then—

Lying in the middle of the floor, and glittering in the light of his lamp, was a white-handled, silver-plated revolver.

'Very interesting,' said Mr. Reeder, and went down into the saloon.

He reached the bottom of the steps and turned, walking backwards with his face to the door through which he had come, the muzzle of his Browning covering the opening. Presently his heel kicked the pistol. He took another step back and stooped to pick it up.

CHAPTER VIII. — RED ROBE

MR REEDER was conscious of a headache and that the light shining in his eyes was painful. It was a tiny globe which burned in the roof of the cabin. Somebody was talking very distressedly; the falsetto voices Mr. Reeder loathed. His senses came back gradually.

He was shocked to find himself one of the figures in a most fantastical scene; something which did not belong to the great world of reality in which he lived and had his being. He was part of an episode, torn bodily from a most imaginative and impossible work of fiction.

The man who sat in one corner of the lounge, clasping his knees, was— Mr. Reeder puzzled for a word. Theatrical, of course. That red silk robe, Mephistophelian cap, and a long black mask with a lace fringe that even hid the speaker's chin. His hands were covered with jewelled rings which scintillated in the feeble light overhead.

Mr. Reeder could not very well move; he was handcuffed, his legs were strapped painfully together, and in his mouth was a piece of wood lightly tied behind his ears. It was not painful, but it could be, he realized. At any rate he was spared the necessity of replying to the exultant man who sat at the other end of the settee.

'Did you hear what I said, my master of mystery?'

He spoke with a slightly foreign accent, this man in the red robe.

'You are so clever, and yet I am more clever, eh? All of it I planned out of my mind. The glittering silver pistol on the floor—that was the only way I could get you to stoop and bring your head into the gas. It was a very heavy gas which does not easily escape, but I was afraid you might have dropped a cigarette, and that would have betrayed everything. If you had waited a little time the gas would have rolled out of the open door; but no, you must have the pistol, so you stooped and picked it up, and voilà!'

His hands glittered dazzlingly.

'You are used to criminals of the stupid kind,' he went on. 'For the first time, my Reeder, you meet one who has planned everything step by step. Pardon me.'

He stepped down to the floor, leaned forward and untied the gag.

'I find it difficult if conversation is one-sided,' he said pleasantly. 'If you make a fuss I shall shoot you and that will be the end. At present I desire that you should know every thing. You know me?'

'I'm afraid I haven't that pleasure,' said Mr. Reeder, and the man chuckled.

'If you had lived, I would have been your chief case, your chef d'oeuvre, the one man of your acquaintance who could plan murder and—what is the expression?—get away with it! Do you know where you are?'

'I'm on the Zaira,' said Mr. Reeder.

'Do you know who is her owner?'

'She is owned by Mr. Clive Desboyne.'

The man chuckled at this.

'Poor fellow! The lovesick one, eh? For him this boat is—where do you think?—at Twickenham, for its spring repairs. He told you perhaps he had been mad enough to let it for two months? No, he did not tell you? Ah, that is interesting. Perhaps he forgot.'

Mr. Reeder nodded slowly.

'Now tell me, my friend—my time is very short and I cannot waste it here with you—do you know who killed Attymar?'

'You are Attymar,' said Mr. Reeder, and was rewarded by a shrill chuckle of delighted laughter.

'So clever, after all! It is a good thing I have you, eh? Otherwise'—he shrugged his shoulders lightly. 'That is the very best joke—I am Attymar! Do I speak like him, yes? Possibly—who knows?'

He slipped from his seat and came stealthily towards Reeder and fixed the gag a little tighter.

'Where shall you be this night, do you think, with a big, heavy chain fastened around you? I know all the deepest holes in this river, and years and years will pass before they find your body. To think that this great London shall lose its Mr. Reeder! So many people have tried to kill you, my friend, but they have failed because they are criminals—just stupid fellows who cannot plan like a general.'

Mr. Reeder said nothing; he could not raise his hand far enough to relieve the pressure on his mouth, for attached to the centre link of the handcuffs was a cord fastened to the strap about his ankles.

The man in the red cloak bent over him, his eyes glaring through the holes in the mask.

'Last night I tried you. I say to myself, "Is this man stupid or is he clever?"' He spoke quickly and in a low voice. 'So I send you the little bomb. I would have sent it also to Desboyne—he also will die tonight, and our friend Mr. Southers will be hanged, and there will be the end of you all! And I will go sailing to the southern seas, and no man will raise his hand against me, because I am clever.'

Mr. Reeder thought he was a little monotonous. In spite of his terrible position, he was intensely bored. The man in the red cloak must have heard something, for he went quickly to the door and listened more intently, then, mounting the stairs, slammed the door behind him and put on the padlock.

Presently Mr. Reeder heard him mount the side of the boat and guessed he had stepped ashore to meet whatever interruption was threatened. It was, in truth, the boatbuilder, who had come to make inquiries, and the grey-haired man with the stoop and the white moustache and twisted face was able to assure him that Mr. Reeder had made an offer for the boat, but it had been rejected, and that the detective had gone on to Marlow.

The prisoner had a quarter of an hour to consider his unfortunate position and to supply a remedy. Mr. Reeder satisfied himself that it was a simple matter to free his hands from the steel cuffs. He had peculiarly thin wrists and his large, bony hands were very deceptive. He freed one, adjusted the gag to a less uncomfortable tension, and brought himself to a sitting position. He swayed and would have fallen to the floor but for a stroke of luck. The effort showed him how dangerous it would be to make an attempt to escape before he recovered strength. His gun had been taken from him; the silver-handled revolver had also been removed. He resumed his handcuffs and had not apparently moved when his captor opened the door, only to look in.

'I'm afraid you will have to do without food today—does it matter?'

Now Mr. Reeder saw that on the inside of the saloon door was a steel door. It was painted the same colour as the woodwork, and it was on this discovery that he based his hope of life. For some reason, which he never understood, his enemy switched on two lights from the outside, and this afforded him an opportunity of taking stock of his surroundings.

The portholes were impossible—he understood now why they had been made airtight with brown paper. It would be as much as he could do to get his arms through them. Having decided upon his plan of campaign, Mr. Reeder acted with his customary energy. He could not allow his life to depend on the caprice of this man. Evidently the intention was to take him out late at night, loaded with chains, and drop him overboard; but he might have cause to change his mind. And that, Mr. Reeder thought, would be very unfortunate.

His worst forebodings were in a fair way to being realized, did he but know.

The man who stood in his shirt sleeves, prodding at the centre of the backwater, had suddenly realized the danger which might follow the arrival of a curious-minded policeman. The boatbuilder would certainly gossip. Reeder had something of an international reputation, and the local police would be only too anxious to make his acquaintance.

Gossip runs up and down a river with a peculiar facility. He went into the engine cabin, where he had stowed his fantastic robe and hat, and dragged out a little steel cylinder. Unfasten that nozzle, leave it on the floor near where the helpless man lay, and in a quarter of an hour perhaps...

He cold-bloodedly pulled out two links of heavy chain and dropped them with a crash on the deck. Mr. Reeder heard the sound; he wrenched one hand free of the cuff, not without pain, broke the gag and, drawing himself up into a sitting position, unfastened the first of the two straps. His head was splitting from the effect of the gas. As his feet touched the floor he reeled. The second cuff he removed at his leisure. He was so close to the door now that he could drop the bar. It stuck for a little while, but presently he drew it down. It fell with a clatter into the pocket.

The man on the deck heard, ran to the door and tugged, drew off the padlock and tried to force his way in.

'I'm afraid you're rather late,' said Mr. Reeder politely.

He could almost feel the vibration of the man's fury. His vanity had been hurt; he had been proved a bungler by the one man in the world he wished to impress, whilst life held any impressions for him.

Then the man on the bridge heard a smash and saw some splinters of glass fly from one of the ports. There were five tiny airholes in one of the doors, but four of these had been plugged with clay. Taking the cylinder, he smashed the nozzle end through the obstruction. A wild, desperate idea came to the harassed man. Reeder heard the starting wheel turn, and presently the low hum of machinery. He heard the patter of feet across the deck and peered through the porthole, but it was below the level of the bank.

He looked round for a weapon but could find none. Of one thing he was certain: Mr. Red Robe would not dare to run for the river. There was quite enough traffic there for him to attract attention. He could not afford to wait for darkness to fall; his position was as desperate as Reeder's own had been—

Bang!

It was the sound of a shot, followed by another. Reeder heard somebody shout, then the sound of a man crashing through the bushes. Then he heard the deep voice of Clive Desboyne.

'Reeder... are you there? How are you?'

Mr. Reeder, a slave to politeness, put his mouth up to the broken porthole.

It was some time before Desboyne could knock off the padlock. Presently the door was opened and Mr. Reeder came out.

'Thank God, you're safe!' said the other breathlessly. 'Who was the old bird who shot at me?'

He pointed towards the place where the backwater turned.

'Is there a house there or a road or something? That's the way he went. What's happened?'

Mr. Reeder was sitting on a deck chair, his throbbing head between his hands. After a while he raised his face.

'I have met the greatest criminal in the world,' he said solemnly. 'He's so clever that he's alive. His name is Attymar!'

Clive Desboyne opened his mouth in amazement.

'Attymar? But he's dead!'

'I hope so,' said Mr. Reeder viciously, 'but I have reason to know that he isn't. No, no, young man, I won't tell you what happened. I'm rather ashamed of myself. Anyway, I am not particularly proud of being caught by this'—he paused—'amateur. Why did you come?'

'It was only by luck. I don't know why I came. I happened to phone through to Twickenham about some repairs to the boat—by the way, you must have seen a picture of it hanging in my hall. In fact, it was in that picture where you were clever enough to tell the date. I lend the Zaira at times; I lent it a few months ago to an Italian, but he so ill-used it that I sent a message that it was to be sent back to the yard. They telephoned along the river for news of it, and that's when I learnt you were down here—you look rotten.'

'I feel rotten,' said Mr. Reeder. 'And you came—'

'I drove down. I had a sort of feeling in my mind that something was wrong. Then I met a man who'd seen the builder, and he told me about the little old fellow. Until then I didn't know that he was in the boat, and I came along to make inquiries. For some reason, which I can't understand, he no sooner saw me than he pulled a gun and let fly at me; then he turned and went like mad through those bushes.'

'Have you a gun?' asked Mr. Reeder.

Desboyne smiled.

'No, I don't carry such things.'

'In that case it would be foolish to pursue my ancient enemy. Let one of the Buckingham Constabulary carry on the good work. Is your car anywhere

handy?'

There was a road apparently within fifty yards.

'Good Lord!' said Desboyne suddenly. 'I left it outside the gates of an empty house. I wonder whether that's the place where the old boy went— and whether my car is still there?'

It was there, in the drive of a deserted house: the new car which had so excited the disgust of poor Johnny Southers. With some difficulty Clive started it up, and the action recalled something to him.

'Did we leave the engines of the boat running?' he asked suddenly. 'If you don't mind I'll go back and turn them off; then I'll notify the police, and I'll send a man to bring the Zaira into Maidenhead.'

He was gone ten minutes. Mr. Reeder had an opportunity of walking round the car and admiring it.

Rain had fallen in the night: he made this interesting discovery before Desboyne returned.

'We'll run up to Marlow and I'll get a man to go down and collect the boat,' he said as he climbed in. 'I've never heard anything more amazing. Tell me exactly what happened to you.'

Mr. Reeder smiled sadly.

'You will pardon me if I do not?' he asked gently. 'The truth is, I have been asked by a popular newspaper to write my reminiscences, and I want to save every personal experience for that important volume.'

He would talk about other subjects, however; for example, of the fortunate circumstance that Desboyne's car was still there though it was within reach of the enemy.

'I've never met him before. I hope I'll never meet him again,' said Desboyne. 'But I think he can be traced. Naturally, I don't want to go into court against him. I think it's the most ridiculous experience, to be shot at without replying.'

'Why bother?' asked Mr. Reeder. 'I personally never go into court to gratify a private vendetta, though there is a possibility that in the immediate future I may break the habit of years!'

He got down at the boathouse and was a silent listener while Clive Desboyne rang up a Twickenham number and described the exact location of the boat.

'They'll collect it,' he said as he hung up. 'Now, Mr. Reeder, what am I to do about the police?'

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

'I shouldn't report it,' he said. 'They'd never understand.' On the way back to

London he grew more friendly to Clive Desboyne than he had ever been before, and certainly he was more communicative than he had been regarding the Attymar murder.

'You've never seen a murder case at first hand—'

'And I'm not very anxious to,' interrupted the other.

'I applaud that sentiment. Young people are much too morbid,' said Mr. Reeder. 'But this is a crime particularly interesting, because it was obviously planned by one who has studied the art of murder and the methods of the average criminal. He had studied it to such good purpose that he was satisfied that if a crime of this character were committed by a man of intelligence and acumen, he would—um—escape the consequence of his deed.'

'And will he?' asked the other, interested.

'No,' said Mr. Reeder, rubbing his nose. He thought for a long time. 'I don't think so. I think he will hang; I am pretty certain he will hang.'

Another long pause.

'And yet in a sense he was very clever. For example, he had to attract the attention of the policeman on the beat and establish the fact that a murder had been committed. He left open the wicket gate on the—um—wharf, and placed a lantern on the ground and another within the open door of his little house, so that the policeman, even if he had been entirely devoid of curiosity, could not fail to investigate.'

Clive Desboyne frowned.

'Upon my life I don't know who is murdered! It can't be Attymar, because you saw him today; and it can't possibly be Ligsey, because, according to your statement, he's alive. Why did Johnny Southers go there?'

'Because he'd been offered a job, a partnership with Attymar. Attymar had two or three barges, and with vigorous management it looked as if his business might grow into a more important concern. Southers didn't even know that this man Attymar was the type of creature he was. An appointment was made on the telephone; Southers attended; he interviewed Attymar or somebody in the dark, during which time I gather he was sprinkled with blood—whose blood, we shall discover. There was a similar case in France in eighteen-forty-seven. Madame Puyères...'

He gave the history of the Puyères case at length.

'That was our friend's cleverness, the blood-sprinkling, and the lantern-placing: but he made one supreme error. You know the house—no, of course, you've never been there.'

'Which house?' asked Clive curiously.

'Attymar's house. It's little more than a weighing shed. You haven't been there? No, I see you haven't. If you would like a little lecture, or a little demonstration of criminal error, I would like to show you at first-hand.'

'Will it save Johnny Southers—this mistake?' asked Desboyne curiously.

Mr. Reeder nodded.

'Nothing is more certain. How amazing are the—um—vagaries of the human mind! How peculiar are the paths into which—um—vanity leads us!'

He closed his eyes and seemed to be communing with him self all the way through Shepherd's Bush. Desboyne put him down at Scotland Yard, and they arranged to meet at the end of Shadwick Lane that same afternoon.

'There is no further news of Ligsey,' said Gaylor when Reeder came into his office.

'I should have been surprised if there had been,' said Mr. Reeder cheerfully, 'partly because he's dead, and partly because—well, I didn't expect any communication from him.'

'You know he telephoned the Chief last night?'

'I shouldn't be surprised at that,' said Mr. Reeder, almost flippantly.

They talked about Johnny Southers and the ease against him, and of the disappointing results of a careful search of the garden. They had dug up every bed and had done incalculable damage to Mr. Southers' herbaceous borders.

'Our information was that he had a couple of thousand pounds cached there in real money, but we found nothing.'

'How much was there in the box you discovered in the tool shed?'

'Oh, only a hundred pounds or so,' said Gaylor. 'The big money was hidden in the garden, according to what we were told. We didn't find a penny.'

'Too bad,' said Mr. Reeder sympathetically. Then, remembering: 'Do you mind if I take a young—um—friend of mine over Attymar's house this afternoon? He's not exactly interested in the crime of wilful murder, but as he is providing for the defence of young Mr. Southers—'

'I don't mind,' said Gaylor, 'but you'd better ask the Chief.'

The Chief Constable was out, and the opportunity of meeting him was rendered more remote when Clive Desboyne rang him up, as he said, on the off-chance of getting him at Scotland Yard, and invited him out to lunch.

'Anna Welford is coming. I've told her you think that Johnny's innocence can be established, and she's most anxious to meet you.'

Mr. Reeder was in something of a predicament but, as usual, he rose to the occasion. He instantly cancelled two important engagements, and at lunchtime

he sat between a delighted girl and a rather exhilarated benefactor. The one difficulty he had anticipated did not, however, arise. She had some shopping to do that afternoon, so he went alone with Clive Desboyne to what the latter described as 'the most gruesome after-lunch entertainment' he had ever experienced.

CHAPTER IX. — THE SECOND TRAP

A CAR dropped them at the end of Shadwick Lane, which had already settled down to normality and had grown accustomed to the notoriety which the murder had brought to it.

There was a constable on duty on the wharf, but he was inside the gate. Mr. Reeder opened the wicket and Olive Desboyne stepped in. He looked round the littered yard with disgust visible on his face.

'How terribly sordid!' he said. 'I'm not too fastidious, but I can't imagine anything more grim and miserable than this.'

It was grimmer for the—um—gentleman who was killed,' said Mr. Reeder.

He went into the house ahead of his companion, pointed out the room where the murder was committed, 'as I feel perfectly sure,' he added; and then led the way up the narrow stairs into what had been Captain Attymar's sitting-room. 'If you sit at that table you'll see the plan of the house, and I may show you one or two very interesting things.'

Mr. Reeder switched on a handlamp on the table and Clive Desboyne sat down, and followed, apparently entranced, the recital of J.G. Reeder's theory.

'If you have time—what is the time?'

Clive Desboyne looked up at the ceiling, stared at it for a while.

'Let me guess,' he said slowly. 'Four o'clock.'

'Marvellous,' murmured Mr. Reeder. 'It is within one minute. How curious you should look up at the ceiling! There used to be a clock there.'

'In the ceiling?' asked the other incredulously.

He rose, walked to the window and stared out on to the wharf. From where he stood he could see the policeman on duty at the gate. There was nobody watching at a little door in the ragged fence which led to Shadwick Passage. Suddenly Clive Desboyne pointed to the wharf.

'That is where the murder was committed,' he said quietly. Mr. Reeder took a step towards the window and cautiously craned his neck forward. He did not feel the impact of the rubber truncheon that crashed against the base of his

skull, but went down in a heap.

Clive Desboyne looked round, walked to the door and listened, then stepped out, locked the door, came down the stairs and on to the wharf. The policeman eyed him suspiciously, but Mr. Desboyne turned and carried on a conversation with the invisible Reeder.

He strolled round to the front of the house. Nobody saw him open the little gate into the passage. The end of Shadwick Lane was barred, but Gaylor did not remember the passage until too late. It was he who found Reeder and brought him back to consciousness.

'I deserve that,' said Mr. Reeder when he became articulate. 'Twice in one day! I'm getting too old for this work.'

CHAPTER X. — THE FINAL PLUNGE

ONE of those amazing things which so rarely happen, that fifty-thousand-to-one-against chance, had materialized, and the high chiefs of Scotland Yard grew apoplectic as they asked the why and the wherefore. A man wanted by the police on a charge of murder had walked through a most elaborate cordon. River police had shut off the waterway; detectives and uniform men had formed a circle through which it was impossible to escape; yet the wanted man had, by the oddest chance, passed between two detectives who had mistaken him for somebody they knew.

While Reeder was waiting at Scotland Yard he explained in greater detail the genesis of his suspicion.

'The inquiries I made showed me that Attymar was never seen in daylight, except by his crew, and then only in the fading light. He had established buying agencies in a dozen continental cities, and for years he has been engaged in scientific smuggling. But he could only do that if he undertook the hardships incidental to a bargemaster's life. He certainly reduced those hardships to a minimum for, except to collect the contraband which was dumped near his barge, and bring it up to the wharf he had first hired and then bought in the early stages of his activity, he spent few nights out of his comfortable bed.

'I was puzzled to account for many curious happenings. If Clive Desboyne had not taken the trouble to appear in Brockley at almost the hour at which the crime would be discovered—he knew the time the policeman came down Shadwick Lane—my suspicions might not have been aroused. It was a blunder on his part, even in his clever assumption of frankness, to come along and tell me the story of what Ligsey had told him; for as soon as the crime was

discovered and I examined the place, I was absolutely certain that Ligsey was dead, or Clive would never have dared to invent the story.

'Desboyne prides himself on being a clever criminal. Like all criminals who have that illusion, he made one or two stupid blunders. When I called at his flat I found the walls covered with photographs, some of which showed him in costume. It was the first intimation I had that he had been on the stage. There was also a photograph of the Zaira when it was going upstream, with the House of Commons in the background. Attached by the painter at the stern was a small canoe-shaped tender, which had been faithfully described to me that day by the boy Hobbs. Desboyne knew he had blundered, but hoped I saw no significance in those two photographs, especially the photograph of him dressed up as a coster, with the identical make-up that Attymar wore.

'I started inquiries, and discovered that there was a Clive Desboyne who worked in music-halls, giving imitations of popular characters and making remarkably quick changes on the stage. I met people who remembered him, some who gave me the most intimate details about his beginnings. For ten years he had masqueraded as Attymar, sunk all his savings in a barge, rented the wharf and house, and eventually purchased it. He is an extraordinary organizer, and there is no doubt that in the ten years he's been working he's accumulated a pretty large fortune. Nobody, of course, associated the bargemaster with this elegant young man who lived in Park Lane.

'What Ligsey knew about him I don't know. Personally, I believe that Ligsey knew very little, and could have told us very little. Attymar discovered that Ligsey was communicating with me. Do you remember the letter he sent to me? I told you the envelope had been opened—and so it had, probably by "Attymar." From that moment Ligsey was doomed. Clive's vanity was such that he thought he could plan a remarkable crime, throw the suspicion on the man he hated, and at the same time remove Ligsey, the one danger, from his path. I should think that he had been planning Johnny Southers' end for about three weeks before the murder. The money that was found in the tool house was planted there on the actual night of the murder, while the money in the garden—'

'Money in what garden?' asked Mason. 'The garden was searched but none was found.'

Mr. Reeder coughed. 'At any rate, the money in the tool house was put there to support the suspicion. It was clumsily done. The message, the piece of paper, the old invoices, as well as the story that Desboyne told me with such charming effect were designed with two objects. One was to cover the disappearance of Attymar and the other to ruin Southers.

'But perhaps his cleverest and most audacious trick was the one he performed

this morning. He had me in his boat; he had been waiting for me; probably had watched me from the moment I arrived at Bourne End. Then, wearing his fantastic get-up, and jealous to the very last that I should suspect him, he planned his scheme for my—um—unpleasant exit. I give him credit for his resourcefulness. As a quick change artist he has probably few equals. He could go on to the bank and deceive the boatbuilder from Bourne End. Who could believe that he was a little old man with a humped shoulder? He could equally come to my rescue when there was no other way of throwing suspicion from himself. Unfortunately for him, I saw not only that the car had been in the grounds all night, and that his story of having driven down from town was a lie, but—um—certain other things.'

The telephone rang, and Mason lifted the receiver.

'She went out a quarter of an hour ago—you don't know where?... It was Desboyne, was it? She didn't say where she was meeting him?'

Reeder sighed and rose wearily.

'Do I understand that Miss Anna Welford has been allowed to leave her house?' There was a quality of exasperation in his tone, and Mason could not but agree that it was justified. For the first request that Reeder had made, and that by telephone from Rotherhithe, was that a special guard should be put over Anna Welford. Certain of Mason's local subordinates, however, thought that the least likely thing that could happen would be that Desboyne would come into the neighbourhood, and here they were right. Matters had been further complicated by the fact that the girl had gone out that day, and was still out when the police officers called. She had rung up, however, a moment before Desboyne had telephoned, and had given her number, which was transferred to him. Later, when she was called up at the address she had given, it was discovered that she had gone out to meet him; nobody knew where.

'So really,' said Gaylor, 'nobody is to blame.'

'Nobody ever is!' snapped Mr. Reeder.

It was Clive Desboyne's conceit that he should arrange to meet the girl at the corner of the Thames Embankment, within fifty yards of Scotland Yard. When she arrived in some hurry, she saw nothing that would suggest that anything unusual had happened, except the good news he had passed to her over the telephone.

'Where's Johnny?' she asked, almost before she was within talking distance, and he was amused.

'I really ought to be very jealous.'

He called a taxi as he spoke, and ordered the man to drive him to an address in Chiswick.

'Reeder hasn't been on to you, of course? I'm glad—I wanted to be the first to tell you.'

'Is he released?' she asked, a little impatiently.

'He will be released this evening. I think that is best. The authorities are very chary of demonstrations, and Scotland Yard have particularly asked that he should give no newspaper interviews, but should spend the night, if possible, out of town. I've arranged with my cousin that he shall stay at his place till tomorrow.'

It all seemed very feasible, and when of his own accord he stopped the cab and, getting out to telephone, returned to tell her that he had phoned her father that she would not be back before eight, the thought of his disinterestedness aroused a warm glow of friendship towards him.

'I've been besieged by reporters myself, and I'm rather anxious to avoid them. These damned papers will do anything for a sensation.'

The swift express van of one of these offending newspapers passed the taxi at that moment. On its back doors was pasted a placard.

ALLEGED MURDERER'S DARING ESCAPE

Later the girl saw another newspaper poster.

POLICE OF METROPOLIS SEARCHING FOR MURDERER

The taxi drove up a side street and, as he tapped on the window, stopped. There was a garage a little further along and, leaving Anna, he went inside and came out in a few moments with a small car.

'I keep this here in case of emergency,' he explained to her. 'One never knows when one might need a spare car.'

Exactly why he should need a spare car in Chiswick he did not attempt to explain.

Avoiding the Great West Road, he took the longer route through Brentford. Rain was falling heavily by the time they reached Hounslow.

She was so grateful to him for all he had done that she did not resist his suggestion that they should go on to Oxford. She wondered why until they were on the outskirts of the town, and then he explained with a smile that Johnny had been transferred to Oxford Gaol that morning.

'I kept this as a surprise for you,' he said. 'Only about three people in London know, and I was most anxious that you shouldn't tell.'

They went into a café on the other side of the city, and she was puzzled why he should prefer this rather poverty-stricken little place to an hotel, but thought it was an act of consideration on his part—part of the general scheme for

avoiding reporters. They lingered over tea until she grew a little restless.

'We'll go to the prison and make inquiries,' he told her.

Actually they did go to the prison, and he descended and rang the bell. When he came back he was grinning ruefully.

'He was released half an hour ago. My cousin's car picked him up. We can go on.'

It was getting dark now and the rain continued to fall steadily. They took another route towards London, passed through a little town which she thought she recognized as Marlow, turned abruptly from the main road, and as abruptly again up a dark and neglected carriage drive. She had a glimpse of the sheen of a stagnant backwater on her left, and then the car drew up before a forbidding looking door and, stepping down, Clive Desboyne opened the door with his key.

'Here we are,' he said pleasantly and, before she realized what had happened, she was in a gloomy hall smelling of damp and decay.

The door thundered close behind her.

'Where are we? this isn't the place,' she said tremulously, and at that moment all her old suspicions, all her old fears of the man returned.

'It is quite the place,' he said.

From the pocket of his raincoat he took a torch and switched it on. The house was furnished, if rotting carpets and dust-covered chairs meant anything. He held her firmly by the arm, walked her along the passage then, opening a door, pushed her inside. She thought there was no window, but found afterwards that it was shuttered.

The room was fairly clean; there was a bed, a table and a small oil stove. On a sideboard were a number of packets of foodstuffs.

'Keep quiet and don't make a fuss,' he said.

Striking a match, he lit a paraffin lamp that stood on the table.

'What does this mean?' she asked. Her face was white and haggard.

He did not answer immediately, and then: 'I'm very fond of you—that's what it means. I shall probably be hanged in about six weeks' time, and there's a wise old saying that you might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. You for the moment are the lamb.'

The bright, shining eyes were fixed on hers. She almost fainted with horror.

'That doesn't mean I'm going to murder you or cut your throat or do any of the things I tried to do to Mr. Reeder this morning—oh, yes, I was the fantastical gentleman on the Zaira. The whole thing happened a few yards away from

where you're standing. Now, Anna, you're going to be very sensible, my sweet—there's nobody within five miles of here who is at all concerned—'

The hinges of the door were rusty: they squeaked when it was moved. They squeaked now. Clive Desboyne turned in a flash, fumbling under mackintosh and coat.

'Don't move,' said Mr. Reeder gently. It was his conventional admonition. 'And put up your hands. I shall certainly shoot if you do not. You're a murderer—I could forgive you that. You're a liar—that, to a man of my high moral code, is unpardonable.' The dozen detectives who had been waiting for three hours in this dank house came crowding into the room, and snapped irons on the wrists of the white-faced man.

'See that they fit,' said Mr. Reeder pleasantly. 'I had a pair this morning which were grossly oversize.'

THE END

Freeditorial 

Liked This Book?

For More FREE e-Books visit Freeditorial.com