

THE HOUSE OF FEAR



FRANK
RICHARDS

HOUSE OF FEAR

By

FRANK RICHARDS



No. 536

Published by BEAR, HUDSON LTD., LONDON, W. 6



HOUSE OF FEAR

CHAPTER ONE

SHOT IN THE DARK

"KEEP off! I'm armed—and I'll shoot!"

Dick Valentine jumped almost clear of the ground in his astonishment.

It was a dark night—black as the inside of a hat, under the great branches that extended over the narrow Sussex lane. Exactly where he was, Dick Valentine did not know; though he hoped that he was somewhere near Torrington Lodge.

His train had been late at Charney. There was no vehicle to be had for love or money. He had thought of phoning from the station to ask Enid to send the car. But in these days of exiguous petrol, you never could tell! He had decided to walk—it was only a mile's walk, and they gave him all the directions he could want. Which, unluckily, proved useless, in a maze of lanes in the dark.

On his left was a high park fence, which might be that of Torrington Lodge—or might not. On the right, a high hawthorn hedge shut off open fields. The country seemed as solitary and uninhabited as Robinson Crusoe's island. He had not passed a single wayfarer, and had given up hope of seeing one. Coming to a halt at last, wondering what he was going to do, he was suddenly gladdened by hearing the sound of tramping footsteps coming up the lane behind him. It was somebody, at long last—somebody who could tell him where he was, and whether he was anywhere near his destination.

A dim figure loomed up in the gloom. Dick started towards it; but before he could speak, came that hoarse, startled exclamation, and the man leaped back from him in sudden alarm. An arm swung up, and something that glimmered in the gloom was aimed full at Dick's amazed face.

"Keep off, George! No closer! I'll shoot if you come a step nearer!" rapped the husky, frightened voice.

"Look here——" began Dick.

"Keep your distance! I don't trust you an inch, George. What are you doing here? You were to wait for me outside the park gates. That's a good step further on. You're laying for me, you rat."

"If that's a gun, would you mind turning it another way?" asked Dick Valentine, politely. "I'm not George, whoever George may be; and I've looked at too many guns in the last six years, to want to look at any more."

He heard the man catch his breath.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Dick Valentine, if you're curious. Demobbed three months ago, if you want to know more. And walking to Torrington Lodge, if you can give me a tip where to find it."

"You're going to Torrington Lodge?"

"I hope so!" assented Dick. "That was the big idea—but all these lanes seem to lead to nowhere in particular."

There was a sudden flash of light. The man had turned on an electric torch, and the dazzle of light in his face made Dick Valentine blink. The man's right hand, holding the revolver, was lowered now, to Dick's relief. Blinking in the light, he glimpsed a dark face, with a thick, black moustache, and watchful, suspicious eyes that gleamed and glittered like a rat's. Those suspicious eyes scanned his face; and then the revolver disappeared into a coat pocket.

"Oh! You're not him!" came the husky voice. "I was startled—sorry if I made you jump, mister."

"You did make me jump!" agreed Dick. "But I'm not George—and considering how handy you seem to be with a gun, my friend, I'm rather glad that I'm not George."

The man chuckled huskily.

"Well, no harm done," he said. "A covey has to be on his guard. I didn't expect to see anybody else about here—so late and so dark. Lost your way?"

"Just that!" said Dick, "and if you can put me right—"

"If you're going to Torrington Lodge, the park gates ain't more than ten minutes walk on. Go on your way, mister."

The light was shut off.

Dick peered at the shadowy figure in the gloom. The husky voice came again, with a threatening tone in it.

"I said go on your way, mister. You ain't wanted around here, and the sooner you beat it, the better for your health."

"Oh, quite!" agreed Dick, cheerfully. "If I see George outside the park gates, shall I tell him you're coming?"

"You'll mind your own business, mister, and beat it, quick!" came in a snarl. "Get out of it, see?"

A vague movement in the gloom indicated that the hand was coming out of the coat pocket—the hand that held the revolver. Dick Valentine shrugged his shoulders.

"Never argue with the man who holds the gun!" he said, lightly. "I picked up that tip in the War! Good-night, my friend, and thanks for putting me on my way."

"Get out of it!"

"As soon as you like."

Dick Valentine moved on. The man stood where he was, watching him as he went. From his first startled words, it was clear that his own destination was the park gates, where he expected to meet the unknown "George." But clearly he did not intend to resume his way till this stranger was off the scene.

There was something mysterious, and not a little dubious, about the man, and his meeting with "George;" and his gun, and his readiness with it, seemed strangely out of keeping with the quiet Sussex countryside. But it

was, after all, no business of Dick Valentine's; and he was anxious to get to the Lodge and Enid and her uncle. He tramped on his way, leaving the black-moustached man standing in the lane, staring after him in the gloom.

"Queer game!" murmured Dick, as he went. "Who the deuce is he, and who the deuce is George? And what the dickens are they both doing, meeting outside the park gates of Sir Arthur Torrington? Does George live at the Lodge, I wonder. A queer business altogether——"

Bang!

For the second time, Dick Valentine jumped almost clear of the ground. He had covered hardly a dozen yards, when that sudden shot banged out behind him, with an effect almost of thunder in the quiet night. A short, sharp cry came with the shot, and he thought he heard a fall. He spun round—but there was nothing but darkness, as he stared back.

"Good heavens!" breathed Dick.

For a moment or two, he stood as if spell-bound, staring into the black night. Was it the man with the black moustache who had fired? Who else? Someone had fired—and someone had cried out and fallen. Only for a moment or two, he stood staring—then he ran swiftly back along the dark lane. Someone had fallen under that shot—someone who needed help.

He stumbled suddenly in the dark, and almost fell. His hand rested for a moment upon something that lay on the ground, and he knew, with a shudder, that it was a body. His hand had touched something wet and warm, and he knew what it was.

"In heaven's name!" panted Dick. "What——?"

He groped in his pockets for a match-box. He found one, and struck a match. The light glimmered out, and he stared down at the body at his feet. It lay still, huddled, inert, supine—a colourless face glimmering up in the flickering light of the match. He knew that dark face again, with the thick black moustache—but the eyes, that had gleamed and glittered like a wary rat's, were fixed and lifeless in their gaze, staring up at the dark sky. It was the man with whom he had talked—and he lay dead at Dick Valentine's feet, shot through the heart.

CHAPTER TWO

MURDER!

DICK VALENTINE struck another match. In its flicker his face was almost as white as that still, lifeless face barred with the black moustache. Dick had looked on death often enough, in years of War; he had seen men go down like corn under the sickle, at moments when his own life hung on a thread. But this was different—this was murder: a human life suddenly blotted out by a cruel, ruthless hand, in a quiet Sussex lane.

Only minutes had elapsed since he had been talking with this man, who now lay dead at his feet. The murderer must have been at hand—perhaps lurking in the dark, listening to them as they talked. Perhaps it was by the flash of the torch, when the man had turned it on to scan Dick's face, that the unseen enemy had seen and recognized him—and he had waited till Dick Valentine was gone, to fire that sudden fatal shot.

"Good heavens!" muttered Dick.

The match went out, leaving him in the dark again, the dead man an indistinct mass at his feet. Dick Valentine was a capable fellow and accustomed to deal with emergencies, but for the moment he did not know what to do. The man was dead—the murderer, probably, still within hearing, hidden in the night. If only someone had been at hand, or within call, in that dark solitude—. Then suddenly, as he stood, there came a glimmer of light on the road, approaching him from the direction which, according to what the dead man had told him, was that of the park gates of Torrington Lodge.

Someone was coming down the lane—and Dick, with a gasp or relief, stared towards the approaching light. It was the light of a torch, glimmering to and fro as the unseen man advanced towards the spot. He was coming on quickly, and Dick guessed that perhaps he had heard the shot.

"Hullo!" called out Dick. "This way! Bring that light here, will you?"

A few moments more, and the light was gleaming on him. It was held in the hand of a slightly-built man in a dark overcoat and Homburg hat, whose eyes glimmered behind a pair of large, horn-rimmed spectacles, that gave him a queerly owl-like look.

"What—!" began the newcomer, in a high, piping voice. "I heard something—what—Oh, good heavens!"

He jumped back as he saw the lifeless body and staring white face. The torch trembled and shook in his hand.

"What—what is that?" he panted. "Who are you—what have you done? What—"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Dick Valentine. "I came on this poor fellow a few minutes ago—he has been shot—"

"I—I can see that!" came the piping voice, through chattering teeth; the voice of a frightened man. "Is—is—is he dead?"

"I'm afraid so. But bring that light here."

"I—I—I—!" came in a stammer.

"I said don't be a fool!" exclaimed Dick, exasperated. "What are you frightened of! Do you think that if I had shot him, I should be still hanging about, and calling to a stranger to bring a light?"

"No! N-no! Of—of course not! But—but—"

"Oh, pull yourself together," snapped Dick, contemptuously. "If there was anything that got Dick Valentine's goat, it was cowardice; and he could see that the man was shaking like a leaf. "I'm not the murderer, you duffer. Do you fancy you're in danger?"

"N-n-no! But—but—who are you?"

"My name's Dick Valentine," snapped the young man. "I'm going to Torrington Lodge, if I can find the dashed place. Then this happened—"

"Oh!" The name seemed to reassure the man, for he came nearer, and his voice was steadier. "Captain Valentine?"

"You seem to know me!" grunted Dick.

"Yes, yes! I came out to look for you—If you are Captain Valentine, I know that it is all right, of course. I am James Chard, Sir Arthur's secretary. Miss Carlow was anxious—I understand that she expected you, and you are very late—so I offered—"

"Oh, thanks!" said Dick. "Very kind of you, Mr. Chard. I lost my way, walking from the station, and this poor fellow gave me my direction—"

I had left him hardly a minute when I heard the shot and ran back, and found him—like this.”

“I quite understand, sir,” Chard was self-possessed now. “You will excuse me—not knowing you, sir, and—and suddenly coming on you standing over a dead body—a murdered man—”

Dick laughed impatiently.

“Oh, yes, that’s all right. But look here, Mr. Chard, you know this place, and I don’t. What are we going to do?”

Chard turned the light of the torch on the man who lay inert. His eyes blinked owlishly behind the big spectacles.

“He is dead!” he said. “There is nothing we can do for him, Mr. Valentine. Poor—poor fellow—have you any idea who he is—or was?”

“I never saw him before,” answered Dick. “Perhaps you—”

“No—he is quite a stranger to me. The police must be informed of this at once,” said Chard. He swept the light of the torch round, blinking into the surrounding gloom. “You saw nothing of the man who—who—”

“Nothing! I expect he is far enough away by this time,” snapped Dick, irritated by the man’s renewed uneasiness. “He would not be likely to hang about here after what he has done.”

“No! No! Of course not! But—but this is a dreadful occurrence, Captain Valentine. We—we can do nothing here. Will you come with me—it is a very short walk to the Lodge—and the police-station at Charney can be notified by telephone of what has happened. It will really save time—and—and I would rather not walk there, in—in this darkness.”

Dick gave a grunt. He had no doubt that to the uneasy secretary, the dark hedges were peopled with lurking, threatening figures.

“We had better lift this poor fellow to the roadside,” he said. “There doesn’t seem much traffic about here, but we can’t leave him in the way of a passing car.”

“I—I would rather not touch him—”

“Oh, rot!” snapped Dick. “For goodness sake, Mr. Chard, pull yourself together and lend me a hand. I tell you we can’t leave him lying where he is.”

“Oh, very well!” stammered Chard. “As—as you think best. I—I am not used to such dreadful sights, Captain Valentine, as perhaps a military gentleman like yourself may be. And—and my nerves are not very good. I—I was bombed out during the War, and have never quite recovered from the shock. But I—I will help you, certainly.”

“Lend a hand then!” grunted Dick.

Chard set down the torch. He approached the body in a very gingerly way, and shivered as he took the dead man’s feet. Dick lifted the shoulders; and between them, the body was lifted to the grass under the hedge beside the road.

“Now, if you please, let us hurry in,” said Mr. Chard, picking up his torch. “Miss Carlow is uneasy about you, sir, I assure you. She telephoned to the station, and learned that you had arrived some time ago, and, as you did not come in, feared that you had lost yourself. So I came out—”

“Come on, then,” said Dick.

He started up the lane by Chard’s side, the secretary lighting the way with the torch. He noted that the secretary kept a few feet away from him, and was careful not to step in advance—noted it with intense exasperation and dislike. The man seemed to be afraid of him—not quite sure, perhaps,

that he was not after all the murderer, though he now knew that he was Captain Valentine, the expected guest at Torrington Lodge. The man seemed a nervous, frightened rabbit; and—bombed out or not—the man who had been through the War had only contempt for a frightened rabbit.

Dick was glad when they reached the park gates, which stood wide open. From the gateway, a long avenue of shadowy trees led to the house, of which the lighted windows could be seen glimmering at a distance.

Not a word had been exchanged during that brief walk. Dick could hardly have spoken without betraying the angry scorn he felt for the man who seemed to shrink from him in hardly-concealed fear. As he turned in at the gateway, he quickened his stride, and James Chard was left behind, as he tramped on rapidly towards the house.

Perhaps the secretary had been as glad to lose his company, as Dick had been to lose the secretary's—certainly he had not hurried after him. Dick gave a grunt of contempt, and knocked loudly at the door: A minute later he was standing in the lighted hall, Porson, the butler, was taking his bag and coat, and Enid Carlow was running from the library door to meet him.

CHAPTER THREE

A HOUSE UNDER THE SHADOW

"OH, Dick!"

Dick Valentine held both Enid's hands in his. He could not very well kiss Enid under Porson's grave eye, though never had the red, pouting lips tempted him so much. It was long since he had seen Enid—not since before she had come to live at her uncle's house in Sussex. And Enid was very attractive, and her glowing face told that she had not changed since last they had met.

"Oh, Dick, at last!" breathed Enid.

"At last, dearest!" he whispered, tenderly. "How's your uncle? Has anything happened here since you wrote? You can bet I chucked everything up, and came straight off, when I read your letter. Has anything?"

"Nothing since I wrote, Dick. But—I'm afraid," said Enid, in a low voice. "It's so inexplicable—it seems so mad—that anyone should think of hurting Uncle Arthur—yet twice he has been fired at—twice in a single week. It does not seem sense—yet it has happened. I—I thought that if—if you were here, Dick."

Dick Valentine grinned.

"A detective would be more useful," he said. "I'd like to handle the blighter, whoever he is—but picking him out is another matter. I suppose the police are looking into it."

"Inspector Grose, of Charney, is in the library with uncle now," said Enid. "He hasn't said so—but I'm certain that he's quite as puzzled as I am."

"Luck!" said Dick. "That's the man I want to see—I've got something to tell him. Something that happened on my way here. Why—what's the matter, Enid?"

The girl had uttered a sharp, startled cry.

"Dick! What has happened? Look at your cuff."

Dick Valentine hastily glanced at the cuff. There was a splash of red on it—it was crimson from contact with the man who had died in the dark lane.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "I never noticed that——"

"Dick! What has happened? Have you been in danger?" panted Enid. "Have you been hurt—what——?"

"No! No!" he answered, hastily. "It is not my blood, Enid—a poor fellow—I found him in the lane—that is what I want to report to the police-inspector. I was going to telephone, but as you say he's here, I'd better see him, at once."

"An accident——"

"Worse than that," he said, gravely. "I may as well tell you—you must hear soon. A man was shot in the lane, near the park wall."

"Oh," panted Enid, her face white. "Dick! Dick! Is it some madman who is loose in this neighbourhood! It was because some unknown man has tried twice to shoot my uncle that I begged you to come. And now——"

"I'd better see Sir Arthur and the inspector," said Dick.

Porson had disappeared, and Dick drew the girl towards him and kissed her. He held her for a moment or two. Then they went into the library together.

Two men were seated there—one Sir Arthur Torrington, grave and silver-haired, the other a stocky, ruddy-faced country police-inspector. They had been talking; but the talk ceased, and they rose, as Dick came in with Enid: And a sudden alertness came into the ruddy face of Inspector Grose. Dick noted it, and smiled faintly. The official eye had caught the stain of red on his cuff.

"It's Dick, uncle," said Enid.

The elderly baronet shook hands with him very cordially. Dick had met him once or twice before: and he could see that there was a change in the master of Torrington Lodge. His manner was calm and quiet; but it could not quite conceal that he was under a nervous strain.

"I'm glad to see you here, Captain Valentine," said Sir Arthur. "Though I'm hardly sure that you will enjoy your visit, under the strange circumstances."

Dick smiled, with a glance at Enid.

"You can bank on that, sir," he answered. "I only hope that I may be of some use, as Enid seems to think."

"My niece has told you——?"

"Yes, sir—some potty brute has been taking pot-shots at you. This is Inspector Grose, of Charney, I take it?"

"Yes. Inspector Grose—Captain Valentine."

The stocky inspector gave a stiff salute; his eyes, as Dick easily discerned, on the crimson stain.

"I have something to report to you, inspector!" said Dick. "A man has been shot in the lane, a few hundred yards from the park gates, and I found the body."

"A man—shot!" exclaimed Sir Arthur. "Dead?"

"I'm sorry—yes! I had been speaking to him only a minute or two before the shot was fired—I think very likely the villain was lurking in sound of our voices, though I saw nothing of him in the dark. I'd better make a statement to you, inspector."

"Please!" said Inspector Grose. His note-book came out, and he chewed the end of a pencil. Grose's face was broad, ruddy and stolid; but his

eyes were very keen and penetrating, and they were fixed unwaveringly on Dick Valentine's face, as the young man made his statement.

Sir Arthur Torrington sat down in his armchair, his thin white hands resting on the arms of it, the fingers moving nervously. Enid sat silent, her face pale and set, as Dick gave a succinct account of the happenings that night in Lodge Lane. Mr. Grose made no comment till the young man had finished. Then, as he was about to speak, the library door opened quietly, and Mr. Chard came in with a soft, quiet step. His spectacles turned owlshly from face to face.

"Excuse me, Sir Arthur," he said. "Porson told me that Inspector Grose was here, and I thought——"

"I shall require a statement from you also, Mr. Chard," said Inspector Grose. "Captain Valentine tells me that you came up a few minutes after he had found the body in the lane."

"That is correct," said Mr. Chard. "Miss Carlow was uneasy about Captain Valentine, thinking that perhaps he had lost his way, and I volunteered to go out and meet him, if I could——"

"Quite! The man was a stranger to you, Captain Valentine?"

"Entirely."

"You had never seen him before?"

"Never."

"You merely asked him the way, and he told you?"

"That is so."

"Then he appears to have been better acquainted with the locality than you were. A stranger to you, no doubt; but no stranger to the district. You say he was armed, and seemed nervous of attack, and that from his unguarded words you gathered that he was on his way to meet some person at the park gates. You have no idea who that person was?"

"How could I have?" grunted Dick.

"Please answer my question directly."

"I had no idea whatever, of course. He mentioned a name, but it was a christian name——"

"And that name?"

"George."

Sir Arthur Torrington suddenly sat upright in his chair. All eyes turned on his startled face.

"Did you say George, Captain Valentine?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," answered Dick. "The man plainly mistook me, in the dark, for somebody he called George——"

"George what?"

"Only George!"

Sir Arthur relaxed again, breathing hard. Inspector Grose's keen eyes were on the baronet now.

"That name calls something to your mind, Sir Arthur?" he said, quietly.

"Is there anyone at Torrington Lodge whose name is George?"

The baronet smiled faintly.

"Yes—Porson," he said. "My butler's name is George Porson. But it is, of course, impossible that——"

"Oh, quite," said the inspector. He turned to Dick again. "How long exactly was it, after you left this man, that you heard the shot?"

"Not more than a minute," answered Dick.

"And you ran back?"

"Yes, to help if I could. My first impression was that it was the man himself who had fired the shot. Then I stumbled on him, struck a match, and recognized him."

"No sign of anyone else on the spot?"

"None, till Mr. Chard arrived."

"How much later was that?"

"Two or three minutes, I think."

"What were you doing in the interval?"

"Standing by the body, wondering what I could do," said Dick restively.

"What could I do?"

"Exactly. You did not touch the body?"

"I touched it when I stumbled over it, as I have said. Later with Mr. Chard's help I lifted it to the roadside, out of the way of possible traffic. We could not leave the poor fellow lying in the middle of the road."

"Oh, quite." Inspector Grose rose from his chair. "I must see the body at once—perhaps you will guide me to the spot, Mr. Chard."

"Certainly, certainly," said the secretary, in his nervous, high-pitched voice. "With Sir Arthur's permission—"

"Please go with the inspector, Chard."

"Very good, sir."

After Inspector Grose and the secretary were gone, Dick Valentine drew a deep, deep breath. He had not failed to notice that Chard, while in the library, had kept at a little distance from him, and several times eyed him in a sidelong uneasy manner. Neither had he failed to notice that Inspector Grose had noted that circumstance. It came uncomfortably into his mind that the secretary's suspicion had communicated itself to the Charney inspector. He had no doubt whatever that, now that they were out of hearing, Inspector Grose was questioning Chard as to exactly how he had found Dick Valentine with the body, and what impression he had received at the time. It was intensely annoying to the young man.

Sir Arthur Torrington spoke suddenly.

"You are sure of the name, Captain Valentine?"

"The name?" repeated Dick, looking at him.

"I mean, the name spoken by the dead man."

"Oh, yes! He repeated the name—there's no mistake about that. He was going to meet someone named George, of whom he was terribly afraid. Not George Porson," added Dick, with a smile.

"No! No! But it is strange! But—but——" The baronet checked himself. "I will ring for Porson to show you to your room, Captain Valentine—and then you will want some supper. This is but an unpropitious beginning to your visit, my dear boy—you have come to a house that is under the shadow."

"I'm glad to be here," said Dick, simply.

The hour was late; and Dick, who had missed his dinner, was more than ready, when he came down from his room for the cold supper Porson laid out in the dining-room. Enid sat with him while he ate. The girl's face was pale and troubled. Dick's own usually cheerful look was overcast.

"What sort of a chap is that fellow Chard, Enid?" he asked suddenly.

"Chard?" repeated Enid. "Oh, just a secretary. He hasn't been here long—only a few weeks, but he is very useful to my uncle." She smiled.

"You noticed that he is a nervous man? He had a bad time in the bombing during the War, and his nerves have not quite recovered."

Dick grunted.

"I noticed that the silly ass got an idea into his head that it was I who shot that man in Lodge Lane," he growled, "and I've little doubt that he's passed that bright idea on to the policeman by this time."

"Dick!" exclaimed Enid, starting.

"The man's a frightened fool!" growled Dick. "If there's been shooting about here, I wonder that he hasn't cut and run. Enid, who the dickens can it be that has been potting at your uncle, and why?"

The girl clasped her hands.

"Nobody can guess. There is always a constable on duty in the grounds now, so perhaps my poor, dear uncle is safe. But—but—we live under a shadow, until the wretch is discovered. Dick, is it some irresponsible lunatic?"

"It looks as if it might be," he said, soberly, "and Mr. Grose doesn't look to me as if he will spot him."

"Duff Carter comes to-morrow," said Enid.

"Who's Duff Carter?"

"A private detective—a very well-known man, I believe, I'm afraid Mr. Grose wasn't pleased when he heard that uncle had sent for him. But—it has been going on for more than a week now, Dick, and the local police have been able to do nothing. Uncle has been fired at twice, and each time he had a very narrow escape—he cannot venture out of the house without danger. Perhaps this Mr. Carter——!" said Enid, hopefully.

"Perhaps!" said Dick, dubiously. "I haven't a lot of faith in detectives. Let's hope that Mr. Carter, anyway, isn't such a complete idiot as Mr. Grose."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE THIRD ATTEMPT

"BUT, uncle——!"

"My dear," said Sir Arthur, quietly. "You would not have me hide in the house like a frightened rat."

"No! No! But——"

"I am going with your uncle, Enid!" said Dick Valentine, "and there is a constable patrolling the grounds. Don't worry, dear."

But Enid Carlow could not help feeling troubled. It was a bright morning, and they were on the sunny terrace in front of Torrington Lodge. Trim gardens and lawns stretched away before the house, with the dark mass of the park at a little distance. All was peaceful, rural quiet: it seemed hard to think of peril and crime in such surroundings. Yet less than half a mile away was the spot where a man had been done to cruel death, the night before, in the lane bordering the park.

Sir Arthur smiled, and patted his niece's hand.

"Don't worry, Enid, my child. We shall be back in an hour—and did you not send for Captain Valentine to protect your uncle? Well, he is here."

"Here he is, with his old Service revolver in his pocket, Enid!" smiled Dick. "O.K. my dear?"

Enid nodded, but her face was clouded, as they walked away together down the avenue. There was a step, and she glanced round, as James Chard came out of the French window on the terrace. He glanced after the two figures on the avenue—the silver-haired old man, the sturdy young man at his side, and then looked at Enid: or rather, blinked at her like an owl through his big, horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Please excuse me, Miss Carlow," he said, hesitatingly. "Is—is your uncle going out with Captain Valentine?"

"Yes," said Enid, briefly.

"May I ask if they are going far?"

"They are going to the place where that unfortunate man was shot last night," answered Enid.

"By the road, I hope?"

Enid gave him a sharp look.

"It is twice the distance by the road," she answered. "They are going through the park. What do you mean, Mr. Chard?"

"I—I—in the circumstances, is it judicious?" stammered Chard. "Sir Arthur has been fired at in the park, as you know."

"He was alone then."

"Yes, yes, but—but—I have not been long in Sir Arthur's service, Miss Carlow, but he is a good master to me, I am anxious."

"We are all anxious," said Enid. The colour came into her face, and a gleam into her eyes, as she read what was in the secretary's mind, which he did not venture to put into words. Her voice rang sharply. "Do you mean, Mr. Chard, that my uncle is less safe with Captain Valentine than if he were alone? Are you mad?"

"Please forgive me, Miss Carlow. But—but I cannot help knowing that Inspector Grose is not wholly satisfied with Captain Valentine's account—"

"Then Inspector Grose is a fool, and you are another, Mr. Chard!" said Enid, deliberately.

Chard crimsoned.

"That is very cruel, Miss Carlow. I am only anxious about a kind master, who is very patient and considerate with my wretched nerves, which many employers would not be. I am terribly anxious. I am not, I suppose, a brave and resolute man, like Captain Valentine, but I would gladly stand between Sir Arthur Torrington and the wretch who threatens his life."

"If you are so anxious, Mr. Chard, you had better follow them, and see that my uncle comes to no harm," said Enid, with cool sarcasm.

His lip trembled.

"I—I should be of little use, I fear," he said. "But—but—the presence of a witness, at least, may be a safeguard. I—I will go."

"Nonsense!" snapped Enid.

"I will go," repeated Chard, more firmly. "I had a terrible experience in the bombing, during the War, Miss Carlow, and it has left my nerves in a bad state—but you shall see, at least, that I am not a coward."

He went down the steps from the terrace. Enid watched him with a frowning brow, and a shrug of contempt.

She went back into the house, at last, biting her lip. Dick had said that he was under suspicion, with both Chard and the inspector—and clearly he had been right. He was suspected of the crime he had discovered in Lodge Lane—and it was probable, at least, that the man who had fired the

fatal shot in the dark, was the same man who had fired on Sir Arthur Torrington. From which it followed that suspicion went further and that Dick was suspected of that also. The bare thought of so wild a suspicion connected with her soldier lover made Enid furious with anger.

Meanwhile, Dick Valentine and Sir Arthur Torrington were taking the path to the park, through which there was a short cut to a wicket gate in the fence, near the spot where the body had been found. Dick slowed down his vigorous stride to keep pace with the old man's slow step. It was some time before they entered a shady ride in the park, dusky under the branches that extended over it from side to side. At the opening of the "ride" was a man in uniform—the Charney constable who was on duty in the grounds of the Lodge. He saluted them as they passed and disappeared into the wood.

Sir Arthur was quite calm and self-possessed: but as they moved on deeper into the dense wood, Dick saw his glances stray from side to side, at the thick underwoods that shut in the path. The young man understood.

"Was it here, sir——?" he asked.

"It was on this very path that the shot was fired at me, one day last week," answered the baronet, quietly. "It went through my hat, and took a lock of hair from my head. The fellow was a good shot."

"Shall we go back, and go round by the road?" asked Dick.

"Certainly not," said Sir Arthur, stiffly.

They walked on, deeper into the shady wood. It was hard to imagine danger lurking in that quiet wood, on an English country estate. But at the sound of a rustle near the path, Sir Arthur gave a little start. Dick Valentine looked round quickly.

"A rabbit——!" he muttered.

Sir Arthur shook his head.

"That was not a rabbit. There is someone in the wood—my keeper, perhaps—or the constable."

Dick set his lips, and felt in his pocket.

"Hold on a minute here, and I'll see!" he answered.

He left the path, forcing a way through thick underwoods in the direction of the sound they had heard. Sir Arthur Torrington stood in the path, leaning on his stick, as the young man disappeared from sight. A long minute passed while he waited. The rustling made by Dick Valentine in the wood died away.

The old man stirred at last, moving towards the spot where Dick had plunged into the wood. That sudden movement, probably, saved the baronet's life—for even as he moved, a sudden shot rang from the wood, and a bullet gashed along his cheek in a stream of blood.

Sir Arthur Torrington gave a sharp cry, and fell headlong to the ground.

From the depths of the wood came a startled shout, in Dick Valentine's voice.

"Sir Arthur! Good God, what has happened?"

There was a crashing in the underwoods as Dick came—in a few seconds he was back in the path, a revolver in his hand. He gave the old man an almost stunned look, as he saw him lying in the grass, the blood streaming from his face.

"Sir Arthur! Good heavens! I heard the shot—Sir Arthur! Heaven! Has that villain got him at last!"

He threw himself on his knees in the grass by the old man's side, the revolver dropping from his hand. His face was wild with anxiety. As he raised Sir Arthur's head, the old man's eyes opened, and he made a feeble motion to put his hand to his face.

"A scratch!" he said, faintly. "I moved as he fired."

"Thank God!" breathed Dick.

There was a sound of running feet on the path. Dick Valentine looked up quickly, with the thought in his mind that the murderer was still at hand—that he was there to finish his deadly work. But it was James Chard who appeared, running breathlessly to the spot. Dick, who had grabbed up his revolver instinctively, stared at him as he came.

"Good heavens!" panted Chard. "You villain! Oh, you villain! You have shot him. Murderer!"

"You mad fool!" roared Dick.

"Murderer!" shrieked Chard. "I knew he was in danger with you—I followed—but you shall pay for this! Murderer!"

"I tell you——"

"Help! Help!" screamed the secretary. "Sir Arthur has been murdered! Help!"

There was already a sound of running feet. The shot had been heard by the constable at the end of the ride. The man in uniform came pounding up, crimson, panting. Chard leaped to him, catching him by the arm.

"Sir Arthur Torrington has been shot!" he panted. "And there is the murderer! Seize him—I will help you."

"You mad idiot!" shrieked Dick, "Sir Arthur is not dead—the murderer has missed again——"

"What?" panted Chard.

"Chard, for heaven's sake control yourself." It was Sir Arthur who spoke this time. "You must be mad. How dare you accuse Captain Valentine——"

Chard looked at him, staring, almost gibbering. It was plain that he had believed that it was a dead man who lay in the grass under the shady branches. Sir Arthur rose slowly to his feet, leaning heavily on Dick's strong arm. Dick slipped the revolver into his pocket, but the constable's eyes had gleamed at it before it disappeared from sight.

"Oh!" panted Chard. "You are alive—thank heaven! I—I thought—seeing you lie there, and that murderer bending over you——"

"Silence!" exclaimed Sir Arthur, angrily. "How dare you say that it was Captain Valentine who fired? Constable, search the wood—the man cannot be far away. I am very little hurt—I moved, and the shot grazed my cheek. Search the wood for that villain, constable."

The constable eyed him dubiously.

"Begging your pardon, sir!" he stammered. "Hadn't I better see you back safe to the house, sir?"

"Captain Valentine will do that!" said Sir Arthur. "Give me your arm, Captain Valentine. Chard, go with the constable."

"I will come with you, sir!" said Chard. "If I am wrong, I beg Captain Valentine's pardon—but I know what I saw, and I cannot trust you alone with him."

"You fool!" said Dick, between his teeth.

Sir Arthur pressed his handkerchief to his face. It was crimsoned with the blood from the deep cut in his cheek. Over it, his eyes glinted at Chard.

"I tell you——" he began, angrily.

"Let the babbling fool come, sir!" said Dick, hastily. "I must get you back to the house at once—your wound must be dressed. Come, come."

"You are mistaken, Chard," said Sir Arthur, more mildly. "You are making a wild and foolish mistake. But come if you like."

He moved back along the ride in the direction of the house, leaning on Dick's arm. The constable's eyes met Chard's, his ruddy face revealing very plainly what was in his mind.

"Search the wood, constable," said Chard, in a low voice. "You will find no one—I am sure of that. I know what I saw, and what I believe. But I will watch over Sir Arthur—he will not dare to act under a witness's eyes."

"I'll see you to the end of the wood, sir!" said the Charney constable.

"Yes, yes, perhaps that will be better."

Unheeding them, Dick led the baronet away up the path, slowly, the old man with the drenched handkerchief pressed to his torn cheek. Chard followed behind, and the constable accompanied them to the edge of the wood. Then he hurried away—not to search the wood, but to get on the telephone to report to Inspector Grose what had happened. And by the time Enid, white-faced with horror, but calm and steady, had dressed and bandaged the gash in her uncle's cheek, Inspector Grose had arrived breathless from Charney.

CHAPTER FIVE

DUFF CARTER: DETECTIVE

"MR. DUFF CARTER."

There was a sudden dead silence in the library at Torrington Lodge as Porson announced that name.

Five persons were in the room: Sir Arthur, his face half-hidden in bandages, in his old, deep armchair; Enid on a stool at his side; Inspector Grose standing like a stocky statue, with knitted brows; James Chard sitting with his fingers twining incessantly, nervously; and Dick Valentine, leaning on the mantelpiece with a frowning face. Porson glanced at the group. It seemed as if Mr. Carter had arrived at an awkward moment. But Porson had his orders to show Mr. Carter in the moment he arrived, and he had done so. Mr. Duff Carter came in with a quiet step and a grave face.

All eyes turned on him at once, Enid's with hope, Chard's with curiosity, Dick Valentine's with doubt, Inspector Grose's with unobscured hostility. The detective from London was not very impressive, at the first glance at least.

He was a somewhat slight man, almost dapper, dressed very quietly and neatly. His face was common-place in features—few would have given him a second glance in a crowd. His only handsome feature was his eyes, which were large and blue, and looked innocent and unsuspecting—utterly at variance with the idea of a detective. Dick Valentine gave a slight, hopeless shrug of the shoulders. If he had hoped anything from Mr. Carter, he lost that hope as soon as he saw him. The man might be a keen and capable detective—but if so, he assuredly did not look the part.

"Please come in, Mr. Carter," said the baronet, courteously. "I am very glad to see you here."

"Thank you, sir." The detective's voice was low-pitched and pleasant. The blue eyes took in the group at a swift glance. "If my visit is ill-timed, sir, I can of course wait——"

"Not at all!" said Sir Arthur. "We hope that you may be able to help us, Mr. Carter. Inspector Grose——"

The Charney inspector breathed hard.

"I have no use for help from Mr. Carter, sir!" he said, very distinctly.

Sir Arthur coughed. He was aware that the inspector's professional feeling was roused. Dick Valentine's lip curled. With the official policeman and the private detective playing cat-and-dog, it seemed to him unlikelier than ever that the mystery of Torrington Lodge would be solved.

Mr. Carter, however, did not seem to hear the inspector's brusque remark.

"I am here to help, if I can, Sir Arthur," he said, suavely. "Not, of course, to interfere in any way with the officers in official charge of the matter. I trust I shall know my place."

Inspector Grose's knitted brows unknit a little at that.

"But you have had an accident, sir——!" Mr. Carter's eyes were on the bandage. "My time is yours, sir, if you wish to postpone——"

"Far from that," said Sir Arthur. "I must speak to you at once, Mr. Carter. Enid, my dear——Captain Valentine——"

The girl went towards the door with Dick, Inspector Grose spoke sharply.

"Captain Valentine!"

Dick glanced round.

"Well?"

"I must ask you not to leave this house at present."

Dick's eyes gleamed.

"I have no intention of leaving it, Mr. Grose," he answered. "Come, Enid."

Chard followed them quietly from the room. Inspector Grose stood looking at Mr. Carter, a great deal like a bulldog eyeing a strange dog; then with a grunt, he followed Chard, and the door closed, leaving the London detective alone with Sir Arthur Torrington.

Sir Arthur signed to Mr. Carter to be seated. His eyes were curiously on the detective's face. Perhaps he, like the others, was very little impressed by the man from London. Yet he knew that Duff Carter was a well-known detective, considered an able man in his own line of business, reputed to have handled difficult cases with success, and to be *persona grata* at Scotland Yard. Big men at the Yard did not feel the same hostility that afflicted Inspector Grose of Charney.

"You will remain here, I hope, Mr. Carter," said Sir Arthur. "A room has been prepared for you——"

"I certainly hope to remain till I have proved of some use, Sir Arthur," answered Duff Carter. "Yours is a very strange case, and from what you have told me I am deeply interested in it. But you have been hurt——"

"A mere trifle," said the baronet, composedly. "The bullet grazed me——cutting the skin of my cheek——"

"The bullet?" repeated Carter.

"It was the third attempt on my life," said Sir Arthur. "Perhaps you have noted, Mr. Carter, that Inspector Grose resents your presence here."

I cannot help that. My life is in constant danger, and something must be done. Ten days have passed since the first attempt, and the matter is as deep a mystery now as at the beginning. If you cannot help me, I am a lost man."

"I have not counted many failures," said Duff Carter. "I shall, at any rate, do my best. Please give me an account of these attempts on your life."

"The first was on Monday of last week. I was driving the car back from Charney, when a shot was fired from a plantation beside Charney Lane. The car was going at a good speed, and if I had been hit, there would have been a crash. Probably the speed of the car saved me by making aim difficult. The shot grazed my shoulder, cutting my coat."

"And what followed?"

"I drove back to Charney and reported the incident to the police. It seemed possible that it might have been an accidental shot, so unlikely did I think it that anyone should deliberately attempt my life. But a few days later, when I was walking in my own wood, a shot was fired from the underbrush—so close, that it went through my hat, and cut a lock of hair from my head. One inch lower and I should have been a dead man."

"And the third attempt?"

"That occurred to-day. You see the result—only a movement I made, just as the shot was fired, saved me from a bullet through the head."

"Is it known what kind of a firearm was used on any of these occasions?"

"From the report, a pistol of some kind. A weapon easily concealed when not in use," said Sir Arthur, bitterly. "I may have passed the man in the lanes, without knowing that he was my enemy."

"You have no suspicion of his identity?"

Sir Arthur paused a second.

"I cannot say that I have," he answered.

The blue eyes grew keen for a moment. Duff Carter had not failed to note that momentary hesitation. But he went on:

"Have you any enemies you know of. Of course, I know that the police must have asked these questions—but I must ask over again."

"I have never made an enemy that I know of," answered Sir Arthur, but he spoke very slowly.

"Obviously," said Duff Carter, "there is no crime without a motive. The assassin stands to gain by your death, either in vengeance or in some other way. You are, I believe, a rich man, Sir Arthur."

"So far as modern taxation allows any man to call himself so," answered the baronet, with a faint smile.

"To whom would your property go if the assassin's bullet had gone home?" asked the detective, bluntly.

"The estate is entailed, and it would go to my nephew, George Torrington, if he is still living. But my investments, which total a very considerable sum, will all go to my dear niece, Enid—whom you saw here a few minutes ago."

"Have you other near relations?"

"None! The War took a very heavy toll, Mr. Carter." The old man's face clouded. "I am alone in the world, but for my dear niece."

"And the nephew you mentioned?"

"I have not heard from him for several years." Sir Arthur flushed. "I had better be frank. My nephew George is a blackguard—he consorted with racing men of the lowest stamp—he was always in debt—I paid his

debts over and over again, and at length cast him off. If justice had been done, he would have gone to prison for forging a cheque—after that, though he escaped the just penalty, I would have nothing to do with him. And—
and——” he hesitated.

“Please speak quite frankly, Sir Arthur.”

“I will do so. Something that happened yesterday—or rather last night—may have a bearing on the case. My niece is engaged to Captain Valentine—the young man you saw here—and in her uneasiness for me, she wrote to him begging him to come. And last night, when he came——” Sir Arthur paused again.

“Please go on.”

Quietly, succinctly, the old baronet related the events of the previous night in Lodge Lane, the detective listening without interruption.

“Whether it is the same man, no one knows,” he added. “But it seems likely . . . can there be two such desperadoes——”

“That does not follow,” said Duff Carter. “But we will take it as probable. Is anything known of the man whose body was found?”

“I have learned, to-day that when Inspector Grose reached the spot last night, he found that the man’s pockets had been rifled, and nothing of any kind remained on him to give a clue to his identity. His clothes appear to have been made in London, but that was all. Neither was the revolver found, with which he had threatened Captain Valentine at their first meeting.”

“Then the man is quite unknown?”

“Quite. The murderer—it must have been he—must have returned after Captain Valentine and Mr. Chard were gone. Captain Valentine did not touch the body, except to move it to the roadside with Chard’s assistance.”

“You regard Captain Valentine’s word as absolutely reliable?”

“I do!” said the baronet, firmly. “But Inspector Grose does not—and he has made it clear that he suspects Captain Valentine of the murder in Lodge Lane, and does not believe his story of the man having been armed at all. I must say that the same opinion is held by James Chard, my secretary. No doubt what happened to-day might have a suspicious look——”

“In what way?”

“I was in the wood with Captain Valentine, when the attempt on my life was made. We heard a rustle, and the young man hurried into the thickets to investigate, and——”

“The shot was fired at you, while Captain Valentine was out of your sight?”

“Yes,” said Sir Arthur, slowly.

Duff Carter pursed his lips.

“Then Mr. Chard came running up the path,” continued Sir Arthur. “I learn that he had told my niece that he did not think me safe with Captain Valentine, and he followed to see that I came to no harm. He found me fallen to the ground, my face streaming blood, and Captain Valentine bending over me, a revolver in his hand. He accused him——”

“Of having fired the shot?”

“Yes, and called him murderer!” The baronet frowned. “He fancied for the moment that I was dead—and had I been dead, Mr. Carter, there can be no doubt that Captain Valentine would have been arrested and charged with my murder. But my faith in that young man is unshaken.”

“You have known him well?”

"Well, no. I have met him in London a few times. But I am a judge of character, Mr. Carter, and so is Enid."

Duff Carter nodded.

"No doubt! What is the value, approximately, of the investments you intend to leave to your niece?" he asked, suddenly.

"Something between twenty-five and thirty thousand pounds."

"And she is engaged to Captain Valentine?"

"Yes."

"Then he stands to become a rich man—in the event——"

"I know! But I believe in and trust him."

"You have spoken of your nephew," said Duff Carter. "Have you anything more to tell me of George Torrington?"

There was a long silence. That some dark and troubled thought was in the baronet's mind was clear. But he hesitated to speak.

Duff Carter waited, quietly. It was Sir Arthur who broke the silence at last.

"I have said that my nephew George was a bad character, Mr. Carter. But I cannot—I will not—think of him in connection with the attempts on my life. And yet—yet—I had better tell you. I cannot forget what the dead man had said to Captain Valentine—that he was to meet a man at the park gates—a man he spoke of as 'George.' It is not an uncommon name, Mr. Carter, but it struck me very forcibly—in the circumstances."

"I understand," said Duff Carter. "But——"

The detective was interrupted. The library door was suddenly flung open, and both men looked round, startled. Dick Valentine's voice came:

"Enid! It's all right—it matters nothing—let them do as they like——"

"They shall not! They shall not!" The girl's voice came high and shrill with anger and indignation. "It is an insult! My uncle will not allow——"

She burst into the room with flashing eyes.

"Enid!" exclaimed Sir Arthur, rising from his chair.

"Uncle!" She ran to him. "They—the police—Inspector Grose—he demands to search Dick's room—and his things—he is mad enough to suspect Dick. Uncle, order them out of the house!"

CHAPTER SIX

INSPECTOR GROSE MAKES A DISCOVERY

"THIS way!" said Dick Valentine, with cool, sarcastic contempt.

"I have my duty to do!" grunted Inspector Grose, gruffly.

"Oh, quite! Get on with it."

Enid was weeping with indignation in the library. Sir Arthur soothing her as well as he could. Duff Carter, forgotten at that moment, quietly followed Inspector Grose, and the constable at his heels, up the staircase. Two or three servants were staring on, with startled faces—Porson almost shocked out of his professional gravity. Dick was quite cool and quite contemptuous: he had nothing to fear, and he was only angrily amused by the suspicions of the country inspector.

He threw open the door of his room, and stood aside with sarcastic politeness for the inspector and his man to enter. He followed them in: and quietly, at his heels, came Mr. Carter.

Inspector Grose turned sharply to the London detective.

"I do not require your presence, Mr. Carter," he snapped.

"A mere spectator," said Duff Carter, mildly, "I should like to remain, with Captain Valentine's permission."

"The more the merrier," said Dick flippantly. "Stay by all means. I can only hope that you will find it entertaining to watch our good friend turning over my shirts and collars."

Inspector Grose looked at him, and at Duff Carter. It was clear that he would have ordered the detective from the room, had his authority extended so far. As it was, he grunted, and turned a portly back on him.

Mr. Grose was at least capable and methodical. His search of Dick's room proceeded slowly and surely, and seemed unlikely to leave anything undiscovered—if anything was to be discovered. Not only the young man's suit-case and his personal belongings were examined with care but every corner and recess of the large lofty room and its furnishings.

Dick watched him at work with a sarcastic smile. He could guess what the inspector expected, or hoped, to discover—something that could be traced to the rifled pockets of the dead man in Lodge Lane—something that might, perhaps, prove a clue to the murdered man's identity. He was welcome to all the clues he could find in that room, so far as Dick Valentine was concerned.

"Ah!" breathed the inspector, suddenly. He was examining the interior of a large deep drawer, in the bottom of a tall mahogany wardrobe. With his arm in the drawer, he looked round at Dick.

"What do you keep in this drawer, Captain Valentine?" he asked.

"Nothing!" answered Dick, "I have no use for it! I brought only a suit-case with me here, and you have already seen all that it contained."

"Have you your wallet on you?"

"My wallet!" repeated Dick, blankly. He felt in his pocket, "yes, it is here! What on earth about my wallet?"

"This!" grunted the inspector, as he rose to his feet, and held up an article he had taken from the drawer. It was a leather wallet, and as the inspector opened it, it was seen that six or seven currency notes were packed inside. "Have you two note-wallets, Captain Valentine?"

"No—only one, naturally."

"Then what is this?"

Dick looked at it.

"Looks to me like a wallet," he answered. "It does not belong to me. Better ask Sir Arthur who occupied this room last, if you want to meet the owner. I suppose it must have been left here by oversight."

"I don't think I'll ask Sir Arthur Torrington about an earlier guest with a strange fancy for parking a wallet in a wardrobe drawer," said the inspector, drily. "A somewhat unusual place for such a thing, I think."

Dick's mocking face became grave.

"It's not mine," he said. "That's all I can say, Inspector Grose."

"You did not know that it was here?"

"I did not."

"I need not tell you," said the inspector, "that it is obvious that this wallet was hidden at the back of that empty drawer. It was put there to keep it out of sight. And—look at it!"

He held it up to the light, and Dick looked at it. On the leather was a dull stain, and the young man started as he saw it.

"Blood!" he whispered.

There was a tense silence in the room. The constable moved a little towards the door, as if to cut off any attempt at sudden escape. Mr. Grose's face was dark with suspicion, or rather certainty. Duff Carter's expressed nothing. Dick Valentine's face was grave enough now, and it paled a little.

One thought, one belief, was in every mind: that the discovered wallet had belonged to the murdered man in Lodge Lane. It was in Dick's own mind, though to him it seemed impossible. To the others it did not seem impossible—it seemed the clearest certainty. No money had been found on the unknown man—yet he could not have travelled from London to Sussex without money. A wallet of currency notes, stained with blood, was found hidden in the room of the man already suspected. What then became of Dick's story that he had not touched the body, save to remove it to the roadside?

Inspector Grose's belief was plainly written in his ruddy face. The murderer had stripped his victim of all clues to identify—thrown everything else, perhaps, into one of the chalk pits, but the wallet he had kept, with the money in it. Never dreaming that his room would be searched, he had hidden it in the depths of that deep drawer—temporarily, but it was still there when Mr. Grose made his search. Fortunately for Dick Valentine, the inspector's belief was not proof.

Dick found his voice at last.

"I don't get this," he said haltingly, "I can only say that I know nothing whatever of that wallet, Mr. Grose. I have never seen it before. I can only give you my word on that."

"You have nothing else to say?"

"Nothing."

"You have never touched this wallet?"

"Certainly not."

"Possibly the finger-prints may tell another tale!" said the inspector, grimly. "Come, Saunders: we are through here."

Inspector Grose and the constable stepped out of the room. Dick stood pale and troubled, breathing hard. Duff Carter stood quiet, by the window, watching him, but the young man had forgotten his presence.

"Good heavens!" muttered Dick. "What a strange chance—what an accursed chance. That wallet cannot belong to the dead man—it cannot! Yet it looks—it looks—good heavens, what does it all mean?"

A slight cough made him look round. He gave the silent detective a dark look.

"Oh, you're here, Mr. Carter!" he snapped. "I hear that you're considered a very able detective—out of the top drawer in that line."

"You flatter me, sir!" murmured Mr. Carter.

"Well, here's a chance for you," said Dick, savagely. "To whom does that wallet belong, and how did it get here, Mr. Sherlock Holmes?"

Mr. Carter cocked his head on one side, like a very thoughtful bird.

"Perhaps some servant may have pinched it somewhere, and hidden it temporarily in this room, which I suppose was unoccupied till you came yesterday," he suggested.

Dick snorted.

"And the blood-stain on it?" he exclaimed.

Mr. Carter's innocent blue eyes met his.

"He might have cut his finger," he suggested.

Dick gave him a look, and strode out of the room. He could not trust himself to answer Mr. Duff Carter. Inspector Grose might, or might not, be a fool: but there was no doubt about Duff Carter—he was not merely a fool, he was an utter idiot. Dick stamped away without a word: and Mr. Duff Carter, gazing after him with his limpid blue eyes, smiled faintly."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A SPOT OF TROUBLE!

"YOUR'E miserable here, Dick!" said Enid, softly. "These last two days have been terrible. But—"

"I can't be miserable with you, Enid! But—it's pretty awful." Dick Valentine made a restless movement. "Two days—it seems like two years, or more. Enid, does your uncle still trust me?"

"He does, Dick," said the girl, earnestly. "He trusts you as I do."

"I ought to go," muttered Dick. "But—Enid, I can't! I'm watched here—I can't take a walk on the terrace without a policeman at my heels. If I go as far as the park, they're watching me right and left. I verily believe that if I leave Torrington Lodge, that idiot Grose will take a chance, and run me in."

The girl shuddered.

"I wish I'd never——!" she whispered.

"That's rot," said Dick, "I've got to see you through this, and your uncle too. I'm glad I'm here. But—it's like being in a net. No chance of anything being discovered—so long as Grose is following up a false scent."

"But Mr. Carter is here——."

Dick gave an angry grunt.

"A more complete fool than Grose. But—we'd better face it, Enid—Grose isn't exactly a fool. I was the last to see that poor wretch alive—I'd had time to rifle the body, if I'd wanted, before Chard came up. A wallet of money was found in my room—it looks as if it might have belonged to the dead man—it cannot have, but that's how it looks. And—in the wood that day—I was out of sight when the shot was fired at Sir Arthur—and Chard believed——."

"Chard is nothing but a twitter of nerves. What he believes need not matter to anyone," said Enid, scornfully.

"Anyone might have believed as he did, Enid. The constable, Saunders, had the same belief. Good heavens!" Dick clenched his hands, "I'd never been near the place before the night I came—but they've got it cut and dried that I'd made two trips from London before—I must have, if I'm the

man that fired at Sir Arthur. And they've got the motive," Dick laughed mirthlessly, "If any of those shots had knocked Sir Arthur out, I should be marrying a rich heiress—and I'm not a rich man. Oh, Enid!"

She laid a soft hand on his arm.

"It will clear up, Dick—it must clear up. Patience."

Dick strode restlessly to and fro. They were in the library, after lunch—Sir Arthur was in his room, taking his afternoon rest. Mr. Chard opened the door once—perhaps he had some of his secretarial work to do there. But at the sight of the two, he had retired at once and closed the door. It was very quiet in the long lofty room, with its book-lined walls, and the French windows open on a green sunny lawn.

"What is that man Carter doing?" growled Dick, breaking a long silence. "He's been here two days—what is he doing? What is Sir Arthur paying him for?"

"Nothing, I suppose," said Enid, with a sigh. "I had hoped a great deal from Mr. Carter, but—"

"But the man's a fool!" snapped Dick. "His reputation, if he's got one, is all humbug. He ambles about the house, and talks to the servants, and makes jolly good meals—I've noticed that—what's going on here doesn't affect his appetite, at any rate. And he's done nothing, and hasn't sense enough to do anything."

Enid sighed again, and Dick, with long angry strides, paced the length of the library towards the tall French windows. As he turned to retrace his steps, he uttered an exclamation of surprise and rage.

In one of the many high-backed armchairs in the library, a man was seated—Mr. Duff Carter. The high back of the chair had hidden him from the sight of Enid and Dick, and he had made no sound. It was not till Dick turned back at the widow that he came within the young man's line of vision, and Dick stared at him in angry surprise. The man had not made a sound—neither Dick nor Enid had dreamed for a moment that they were not alone in the library.

"Carter!" roared Dick.

The detective had a book on his knees. Apparently he was reading—but he glanced up with his mild eyes as Dick roared at him.

"You spy!" shouted Dick, striding towards him.

"Dick!" exclaimed Enid. She ran to him.

"Look at him!" panted Dick. "We've been in this room an hour—and never knew he was here! He has been listening to everything we said! By gad, I'll throw the spying rat out on his neck."

"Dick!" She caught him by the arm, and stopped him. Then her eyes flashed at the little man in the armchair. "Mr. Carter! How dare you—?"

"Pray excuse me, young lady," said Mr. Carter, "Sir Arthur has kindly given me the freedom of the house, and I had no doubt that I was at liberty to use the library. I had found a very interesting book—"

"You rotter!" roared Dick. "You heard us, and you ought to have let us know you were here. You deliberately remained silent so that we never knew."

"I am not a noisy man, Captain Valentine," said Mr. Carter, apologetically. "Perhaps I might have coughed—"

"You've been eavesdropping!" shouted Dick. "Enid, let go my arm! I tell you I'll throw him out on his neck."

"Be calm, Dick! He is here by my uncle's permission—in my uncle's service. Let us leave him here," said Enid, with a contemptuous glance at the apologetic detective. "Come, Dick."

"I've a jolly good mind, all the same——"

"Oh, come, come."

Dick gave the detective a last glare of wrath and scorn, and allowed Enid to lead him from the library.

"Dear me!" murmured Mr. Carter, as the door closed with a slam. "Dear me! What a very excitable young man! Dear me!"

The book remained on his knees, but Mr. Carter did not glance at it again, interesting as he had stated it to be. He remained where he was, in the deep armchair, a thoughtful pucker in his brow, till the library door opened again, and Mr. Chard came in.

This time Mr. Carter did not keep his presence a secret. He glanced over the top of the chair-back, and gave Mr. Chard an affable nod.

"Shall I disturb you, Mr. Chard?" he asked.

"Not at all," answered Mr. Chard, civilly, "I have some writing to do for Sir Arthur, but your presence will make no difference."

But Mr. Carter rose from the armchair.

"I think I will take a little walk," he remarked. "Is Captain Valentine in the hall, Mr. Chard?"

"I passed him there a moment ago, Mr. Carter."

"A somewhat excitable young man, Mr. Chard," said Carter. "Was he looking angry?"

"I thought he looked a little disturbed." The secretary eyed Mr. Carter curiously, through his horn-rimmed glasses. "I trust there has been no disturbance—no dispute——"

"I am afraid I made Captain Valentine very angry," said Mr. Carter. "He seemed to resent my presence here."

"No doubt," said the secretary, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "A detective in the house can hardly be agreeable to him, in the circumstances."

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Carter. "But actual threats of violence——"

"He went so far as that?"

"He did! Only Miss Carlow's presence restrained him. I make no complaint," said Mr. Carter, "but it makes it a little awkward for me. I think I will go by the French windows, if Captain Valentine is in the hall. I should not like such a scene to be renewed."

"Certainly it would be better avoided, Mr. Carter."

The detective nodded, and went out at the open French windows. Chard stood looking after him, a sour smile on his face. A moment later there was a sudden patter of feet, and Mr. Carter came flying back through the French window, in such wild haste that he crashed into Mr. Chard, and sent him spinning.

"Oh!" gasped the secretary, as he crashed.

"Oh!" spluttered Mr. Carter, as he crashed over him.

His arm swept the horn-rimmed spectacles from Mr. Chard's face. They clattered on polished oak and smashed.

The detective struggled up. Chard lifted himself on his elbow, panting for breath, and glaring with rage.

"You mad fool! What do you mean!" he gasped.

"I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! I—I—Captain Valentine was on the balcony, and—and—I am no match for such a man!" stammered Mr. Carter, "I—I think I will go out by the door—Pray let me help you up, Mr. Chard."

"You fool!" panted Chard.

He scrambled to his feet, passing his hand over his face, where the spectacles had been. Mr. Carter pounced upon them.

"They are broken!" he exclaimed. "How can I apologize? Both lenses and frames—broken—good heavens! This is terrible, unless you have another pair, Mr. Chard. It will be dreadfully troublesome for you without your glasses—"

Chard's face, for the moment, was full of concentrated rage. But he controlled his passion, and calmed himself, with a great effort.

"I have another pair, in my room!" he said. "But—my poor eyes have had a very painful shock." He kept his hand over his eyes. "Really, Mr. Carter, it was very clumsy of you—really—"

"I admit it! I apologize humbly! But—but that excitable young man—I admit I had the wind up! I should be little more than a child in his grasp! But I am sorry—very sorry—"

"It does not matter." Mr. Chard was quite calm now, "I have had a shock, that is all."

"I must collect the broken glass—it may be dangerous—"

"I will help you."

A few minutes later, Mr. Chard—still with his hand to his eyes, and the other hand full of remnants of broken spectacles, left the library. Mr. Carter remained with an expression of apologetic sympathy on his face, till the secretary was gone.

Then Mr. Carter opened a closed hand, and gazed intently and curiously at something in his palm. It was a section of a broken lens. Mr. Carter seemed so interested in that fragment of glass, that he stood gazing at it, and looking at the light through it, for several minutes. Then he slipped it into his pocket, and left the library by the French windows—no longer, it seemed, in a state of alarm, though Dick Valentine was in full view, pacing on the lawn.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SHOT FROM THE WINDOW

"MR. CARTER! You have nothing to report?"

Sir Arthur Torrington's tone was quiet and courteous. But his manner revealed his disappointment, which could have been discerned by a much less keen eye than Duff Carter's.

Another day had passed—a heavy day to most of the occupants of Torrington Lodge. The house was under a grim shadow—suspicion and hostility seemed to haunt the old country-house. Dick Valentine never came upon Mr. Carter without a hostile glare; and Enid, when she encountered him, was freezing. Mr. Chard treated him with politeness: but Chard's manner to Dick was unmistakable: a mingling of suspicion and fear. The mystery that hung over the house seemed as impenetrable as ever. Inspector Grose, no doubt believed that he had his eye on the man who was wanted:

but he could not believe that he had sufficient proof to justify an arrest. But if Dick Valentine was guiltless, there existed absolutely no clue in any direction, and Sir Arthur Torrington almost despaired of a discovery being made. He had pinned his faith to Mr. Duff Carter—but the professional detective had proved as useless as the country inspector.

Mr. Carter coughed apologetically, as he sat facing the old baronet in the library. It was evening, and the dusk was deepening. The French windows stood wide open: the lights were not yet on. The last gleam of sunset was fading out.

"Nothing—so far!" said Mr. Carter, at last. "You must give me time, Sir Arthur. I assure you that I have not been idle."

"I do not doubt it!" said Sir Arthur. "But—time passes heavily in these strange circumstances, Mr. Carter. I understand that you attended the inquest on the unknown man who was shot in the lane?"

"I did, sir! The verdict was wilful murder, against some person or persons unknown," said Mr. Carter.

"And nothing transpired as to the man's identity?"

"Nothing. It seems clear that he came from London, and that is all. I think the coroner attached little value to Captain Valentine's evidence."

Sir Arthur gave an impatient shrug of the shoulders.

"No doubt he knew Inspector Grose's views. I myself believe every word of Captain Valentine's: and I have no doubt that the unknown man was, as he said, coming to meet someone outside my park gates. Someone—," Sir Arthur frowned, "whom he called 'George'."

"A singular place to choose for a meeting," said Mr. Carter, musingly. "It would seem to indicate that 'George' was an inmate of the place."

Sir Arthur smiled faintly.

"George Porson, my butler, is the only 'George' in Torrington Lodge," he said.

Mr. Carter nodded.

"I have told you of my nephew," said the baronet, abruptly. "Have you formed any ideas on that subject, Mr. Carter?"

"I am keeping it in mind, sir. I think—," Mr. Carter broke off, as a shadow darkened the open French window. Dick Valentine stepped in—then, as he saw Mr. Carter with the baronet, a look of distaste crossed his face, and he stopped.

"Come in, my boy!" said Sir Arthur, cordially.

But Dick did not seem to hear, as he stepped back on the balcony, and disappeared into the shadows. Mr. Carter gave his little cough.

"I fear that Captain Valentine does not like me very much," he murmured, "I quite inadvertently displeased him yesterday. But he is, of course, under somewhat of a strain at the present time. How long is it, sir, since you saw your ne'er-do-well nephew last?" asked the detective, changing the subject abruptly.

"Three years at least."

"And you are not sure that he is still alive?"

"I know nothing of him."

"Except that he will step into the estate in the unhappy event of your decease," murmured Mr. Carter. "You remember him, of course, clearly?"

"Naturally."

"You can tell me whether he was, for instance, a good shot?"

Sir Arthur bit his lip hard.

"He was!" he answered, briefly. "I understand you, Mr. Carter. Although I have escaped three times, the man who has fired on me was undoubtedly a good shot. That is what you are thinking of."

"That, and other things," murmured Mr. Carter. "We must always look to the motive, sir. You would, of course, know George Torrington at once if you saw him again."

"Undoubtedly," said Sir Arthur, with a stare. "Unless he had changed very much indeed, which is unlikely in three years." He compressed his lips. "My nephew is known by sight to very many people in this neighbourhood. If he had been seen anywhere about Charney, the fact would be known. Each attempt on my life was made in broad daylight—and though I did not see the man, others must have seen him coming and going. And Inspector Grose has made searching inquiries respecting all strangers in the locality, since the shooting began."

"And yet," said Mr. Carter, quietly, "the thought of him came into your mind when Captain Valentine mentioned the name of George."

"It is true! Yet it is impossible!" said the baronet, restlessly. "He could not be in this neighbourhood without being known."

"Still less at Torrington Lodge itself!" said Mr. Carter.

"That, of course, is unthinkable."

"Of course," assented Mr. Carter.

He seemed to fall into a muse. Sir Arthur Torrington stretched out his hand to a reading-lamp on the table at his elbow, and switched on the light. The great room remained in shadow, save where the single electric light shone on the faces of the two men. Outside, the darkness was thickening.

Mr. Carter's ear cocked suddenly, like a dog's, as if he had heard a sound. His glance shot to the dark open window on the balcony, and with a sudden blaze in his eyes, he reached out, grasped Sir Arthur Torrington by the shoulder, and dragged him over in his armchair—his left hand, at the same moment, knocking the reading-lamp over with a crash.

A startled gasp broke from the baronet. It was drowned by a sudden, almost deafening, report.

"Good heavens!" panted Sir Arthur, "What—Mr. Carter, are you mad? What was that—a shot—?"

Duff Carter did not reply. The room was in darkness again, from the moment the lamp had crashed. In the dark, the detective was racing to the open window, avoiding furniture in his way as if he could see, like a cat, in the dark.

The baronet, sprawling breathlessly in his great chair, panted for breath, dizzy with amazement. Duff Carter paid him no heed—swiftly, he was out on the shadowy balcony, staring with gleaming eyes into the shadows. A voice shouted from the dark lawn.

"What's that? It was a shot! What has happened?" Dick Valentine came running towards the balcony, and raced up the steps.

"Did you see anyone?" snapped Mr. Carter.

"No one! But what—?" Dick caught the detective's arm. "What has happened? Another attempt on Sir Arthur—?"

"Yes!"

"In his own house! Good heavens! But who—where—?" Dick stammered, helplessly. "I ran up at once—but I saw no one—it was too dark."

Duff Carter turned back into the room. Dick, with startled face, followed him in. At the same moment, the library door was flung open, and the light was switched on. The constable Saunders tramped in, followed by Porson, two or three other servants staring from behind.

"What's all this?" exclaimed Saunders, "I heard a shot——!"

"Sir Arthur!" exclaimed Porson.

"I am safe!" Sir Arthur Torrington was on his feet again, breathless, but recovering his calmness. He leaned his hand heavily on the table, and stood, catching his breath.

Duff Carter shut the French windows, and carefully drew the heavy curtains across. There was a cry from the hall, and Enid ran in.

"Uncle——!" she panted breathlessly, "I heard——"

"I am safe," repeated Sir Arthur, "Mr. Carter saved my life, Enid. He dragged me out of the line of fire, just as the shot came. Mr. Carter, I owe you my life."

"All in the day's work, sir," said Mr. Carter stolidly.

"You heard—or saw——?"

"I thought I heard a footstep on the balcony, sir—and I was taking no chances," said Mr. Carter.

"It was the assassin!" The old baronet breathed very hard. "This time I should not have escaped—the light gave him a chance to take good aim. But who would have dreamed that the wretch would dare venture so near the house?"

"Who indeed!" said Mr. Carter.

"You saw no one, Captain Valentine?" asked the baronet. "You were on the lawn, I think——"

"It was too dark outside to see anyone, sir," said Dick. "I ran up at once, but he was gone—whoever he was."

There was a mutter in the group at the door, and Dick flushed crimson. The Charney constable made a step nearer him, his face dark with suspicion.

"You was on the lawn, sir?" he asked grimly.

"I have said so."

"Not on the balcony?"

"No!" said Dick, with a hard breath.

His face from crimson became pale. He could read the same thought in almost every face. The shot had been fired from the dark outside—he had been on the spot—no one else had been seen. He turned to the baronet.

"Sir Arthur! You see what these people think! You do not believe—you cannot believe——?"

Sir Arthur did not reply, for a moment. Enid stepped to Dick Valentine's side, and slipped her arm through his.

"My uncle trusts you as I do, Dick!" she said, her voice low, but clear, and reaching every ear in the room.

"Let your uncle speak!" said Dick, drily.

"Yes," said Sir Arthur, His voice halted for a moment: then he went on, "Yes, my boy, I trust you entirely. Constable, you should be searching the grounds for the man who has got away."

"There's three in the grounds keeping watch, sir," said Saunders. "The man won't get away—if he's trying to." The constable's meaning was very clear: he believed that the man who had fired the shot was standing in the library at that moment.

"That will do," said Sir Arthur, quietly. "Please leave me now—all of you—I have business to discuss with Mr. Carter."

Slowly, Saunders left the library, and Porson and the servants disappeared. As Dick Valentine went out with Enid, a door on the hall opened, and Mr. Chard came out, with a sheaf of papers in his hand. He blinked at several startled faces, through his glasses—large, horn-rimmed, exactly like the pair Mr. Carter had smashed the day before.

"Has anything happened?" asked Mr. Chard, in his high-pitched voice. "I thought I heard something—what has happened?"

"Sir Arthur was fired on from the library window, sir," answered Porson. "It's all safe now—the curtains are closed."

"Oh!" exclaimed Chard. The papers in his hand shook. "This is—is terrible." He blinked at Dick. "You were with Sir Arthur, Captain Valentine?—I saw you come out of the library. Did you see no one?"

"I was not with Sir Arthur," said Dick curtly, "I was outside on the lawn, and came in by the French windows."

"Oh!" repeated Chard. He moved back quickly, as if shrinking from the young man, and Dick's eyes blazed at him.

"You cowardly fool, what are you afraid of?" he exclaimed, and he clenched his hands, making a step towards the secretary.

"None of that, sir, please." Saunders pushed his burly form between them. "Mr. Chard's a nervous gentleman, as we all know—and mebbe he's got reason for feeling nervous, too, as matters stand."

Dick gave the constable a furious look. But Enid's hand on his arm pulled him away, and he went in savage silence.

CHAPTER NINE

DUFF CARTER STATES HIS CASE

INSPECTOR GROSE came tramping, heavily up the avenue at Torrington Lodge, in the sunny morning. It was a bright morning: but the Charney inspector's brow did not reflect the brightness: it was dark and knitted. Porson, who had seen him coming, opened the door immediately he arrived. Mr. Chard was in the hall, and he greeted the inspector with an air of relief.

"I am glad you are here, Mr. Grose, he said. "We have all been feeling very uneasy since yesterday."

"No wonder!" grunted Inspector Grose. He glanced round, to see that Porson was gone. "The fact is, Mr. Chard, I've almost made up my mind. I need not beat about the bush with you—you know what I know."

"I—I think so," said Mr. Chard. "If you believe the evidence strong enough to justify an arrest—"

Mr. Grose grunted again, uneasily. Evidently he was not sure of that. He had "almost" made up his mind: but not quite.

"Have you seen that man Carter this morning?" he asked.

"Yes, I saw him at breakfast. He has asked me to be present while he sees you—he told me you were coming," said Chard. "He desires me to make some notes, I understand. Of course, I am very willing to oblige him."

Grunt again from the inspector.

"He got me on the telephone," he explained. "He says he thinks he can give me some useful information. I'm bound to hear him, of course—but I expect it's some balderdash. He calls himself a detective—pah!—and can't see what's as plain as the nose on his face. But I must give him a hearing, I suppose."

They went to the library together.

That room, at the moment, had two occupants: Duff Carter and Dick Valentine. Their conversation, carried on in low tones, broke off as the door opened and Chard and the inspector came in.

Mr. Grose gave Dick a dark look. This was his "man": if only he could feel sure enough to clap the handcuffs on his wrists. His glance at the young man became curious and searching. Dick's face seemed unusually bright and animated that morning—the cloud that had hung over him for days seemed to have lifted. He gave the inspector a nod and a smile, heedless of Grose's knitted brows.

"Good morning, good morning," said Duff Carter. "Please come in—Sir Arthur has placed the library at our disposal for our little conference."

"I've no time to cut to waste, Mr. Carter," said the inspector gruffly. "If you've anything to say, let me hear it, and have done."

"It will take more than a few minutes, Mr. Grose. And Sir Arthur Torrington must be present to hear it also. Mr. Chard has kindly consented to take some notes for us—he is used to secretarial work. I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Chard."

"Not at all, Mr. Carter," said the secretary, "I am quite at your service."

"Perhaps you will have pen and paper ready, when Sir Arthur comes," suggested Mr. Carter.

"Very good."

Inspector Grose gave an impatient grunt as the secretary sat down at a little table and sorted out papers and pen. Dick Valentine stood leaning on a bookcase, near the secretary, and a little behind him—his eyes

curiously on the man in the horn-rimmed glasses. Mr. Carter touched the inspector's arm and drew him to a little distance. Grose eyed him rather like a surly dog.

"If you've really something of importance to tell me——" he grunted.

"I am sure I have," said Carter. His voice was low. "One word—you have your handcuffs ready?"

Grose stared at him.

"They're always ready," he grunted. "All I want is the man to clap them on. And I don't mind telling you, Mr. Carter, that I've precious little doubt that he's in this room with us."

"I believe you are right!" breathed Mr. Carter. "You will use your own judgment, after what I have to tell you—but—I may say this, Mr. Grose—I believe you are right."

"Not much doubt about it, after last night!" muttered the inspector. His manner thawed considerably. "If you can tell me anything to make it clear enough to clap the darbies on him, Mr. Carter——."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Then you've found out something?" muttered Grose.

"I think so! Keep your eye on your man, and don't forget to have the bracelets ready, Grose. I am here simply as a spectator—you are the man to take official action; my duty simply is to place anything I have learned at your disposal."

Mr. Grose nodded, thawing still more.

"Keep an eye on him!" whispered Mr. Carter.

"Trust me for that!" smiled Mr. Grose; and he moved a little nearer to Dick Valentine, keeping a very wary eye indeed on him.

Sir Arthur Torrington entered the library. He bowed to the assembly there and gave Duff Carter an inquiring glance.

"We are now ready, sir!" said Mr. Carter. "We must not be interrupted—you do not object if I lock the door?"

"Really, Mr. Carter, is that necessary?" asked the baronet a little tartly.

"Please let me have my way."

"Oh, very well, very well."

Sir Arthur Torrington sat down in the great armchair by the fireside. Duff Carter locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then he crossed to the French windows, locked them and put that key also in his pocket. Sir Arthur watched these proceedings without concealing his impatience.—Mr. Chard watched them with a faint smile, as if watching a comedian. Inspector Grose did not smile—his face was grim and he moved, as if by chance, a little closer to Dick Valentine.

"Now, Mr. Carter," said Sir Arthur, speaking with forced patience, "We are all here—Mr. Chard is prepared to make notes as you desire—may we proceed to business?"

Mr. Carter nodded gravely, apparently not observing that the old gentleman regarded the whole proceedings as some sort of mummery. Duff Carter's complete failure, so far, to effect the purpose for which he had come to Torrington Lodge had shaken the baronet's faith in him: neither could he see any meaning or purpose in his conference in the library. He was impatient; the inspector dubious; Mr. Chard faintly amused. But Duff Carter's mild blue eyes did not seem to read what was plain in their faces.

"Certainly, Sir Arthur," he said. "You are ready, Mr. Chard?"

"Quite, Mr. Carter!" answered the secretary. He dipped his pen in the ink.

"I trust," said Mr. Carter, "that you will not think it a long story—but I must make myself clear. The incident of two months ago, of which I have learned by inquiry among members of the household—"

"One moment," said Sir Arthur. "The first attack on me was made hardly a fortnight ago. I know of no incident earlier."

"I am referring to an accident that occurred to your former secretary, a Mr. Belnap," said Carter. "That gentleman was in your service here before Mr. Chard came. I have learned that he was knocked down by a car near Charney."

Sir Arthur Torrington stared blankly.

"That is correct," he said. "Mr. Belnap did not recover sufficiently to carry on with his duties, and was retired upon a pension. But I entirely fail to see what it has to do with the matter in hand."

Chard looked round curiously at Mr. Carter. The London detective caught his eye and smiled.

"You are taking that down, Mr. Chard?" he asked.

"Oh! Yes! Certainly." Chard proceeded to make a note.

"You perplex me very much, Mr. Carter," said the baronet. And a grunt from Mr. Grose told that he was perplexed also, and that his patience was tried.

"I must carry on in my own way, sir," said Duff Carter. "I shall come to the point, all in good time. I come now to the man who was shot in Lodge Lane the night Captain Valentine arrived here. That unfortunate man's identity remained unknown at the inquest. Nothing was found upon him to reveal even his name. He was quite unknown in this locality. His description—a man of dark complexion with a black moustache—helped little. But—" Mr. Carter paused a moment, and now all ears were intent on his words, "but I chance to have a fairly wide acquaintance with the underworld in the metropolis, and that description caused me to pursue an inquiry in a certain quarter in London."

"Mr. Carter, you have not left Torrington Lodge for more than an hour at a time, since you came here!" exclaimed Sir Arthur. "I quite fail—"

"I do not work singlehanded, sir," said Mr. Carter. "I have been in constant touch with my office in London, by means of the telephone in my room."

"Oh! I understand. But—"

"One of my assistants, a very useful man, traced out the fact that 'Dago' Varney was missing from his usual haunts. Varney was nicknamed 'Dago' by his associates because of his dark complexion and his black moustache," explained Mr. Carter. "It was learned that Varney had left London for Sussex, and that his shady friends in the West End gangs had not seen him since. Another circumstance was equally important."

"And that?"

"That, sir, was that Dago Varney had been a close associate of a character called Gentleman George—a young man of good family who had gone to the bad and lived by card-playing and racing, and by still more dubious methods, as was suspected."

"Oh!" breathed the baronet, his face paling a little.

"Have you got that down, Mr. Chard?"

"I am making notes, sir," said Mr. Chard.

"Thank you," said Mr. Carter, urbanely.

"Let us speak plainly, Mr. Carter," said Sir Arthur Torrington, his voice a little agitated. "We have Captain Valentine's testimony that the man murdered in the lane was on his way to see someone he called 'George.' After what you have said, we can hardly doubt that the murdered man was the man Varney, and that the man he sought was the man called, as you say, 'Gentleman George.' All this can have no concern with me or my affairs, unless 'Gentleman George,' the young man of good family who had gone to the bad, was my nephew George Torrington. Is that what you intend to imply?"

"That certainly was in my mind, sir!" admitted Mr. Carter.

Sir Arthur drew a deep breath.

"That would imply that Geogre Torrington was in this locality," he said, "in the very proximity of Torrington Lodge, since the man Varney had arranged to meet him outside the park gates."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Carter, "and we may imagine, further, that Dago Varney, knowing that his friend Gentleman George was on to a good thing, paid him a very unwelcome visit, most likely with blackmail in view. I have no doubt that he knew George's real name, and was on the qui vive for news from this part of the country in his good friend's absence from the West End of London—and when the shooting at the master of Torrington Lodge was reported in the newspapers, Dago Varney knew at once what the game was."

"Oh!" muttered Sir Arthur.

"I have no doubt," continued Mr. Carter, "that Dago Varney planned to butt in for the price of his silence—worth all that Gentleman George could afford to pay for it, in the circumstances. But he knew his man and came armed—and on his guard—though that did not save him."

Inspector Grose was staring blankly at the London detective. He had not known what he was to expect to hear. But certainly he had not expected this. He opened his lips to speak; but closed them again, as Sir Arthur spoke in a shaking voice.

"What you say can have only one meaning, Mr. Carter. You believe that the attacks on my life have been made by my nephew, the heir to the entailed estate of Torrington—my nephew George."

"I fear that there is no doubt of it, sir!" said Mr. Carter. "I know how painful it must be to you to learn the truth—but it is the truth that I am here to establish."

Inspector Grose breathed like a grampus.

"Is this the information you had to give, Mr. Carter?" he rumbled.

"There is more to follow, inspector."

"I think I have heard enough!" said Mr. Grose. "It may interest you to know that I personally know George Torrington by sight, as well as many others in this locality; that every possible search and inquiry has been made; and that no person even remotely resembling him has been seen during the past weeks anywhere in the neighbourhood of Charney."

"That is certainly correct," said Sir Arthur, with a deep breath.

"Quite!" agreed Mr. Carter. "But in the circumstances George Torrington would scarcely venture to appear in his own proper person in a neighbourhood where he was known by sight. A disguise is indicated."

Snort from Mr. Grose.

"It is three years since he was seen here," argued Mr. Carter mildly. "Three years make a change, which may be added to by art. He might pose as quite another kind of character—a gamekeeper, a butler, a demobbed officer—anything, in fact."

Dick Valentine started a little—and then smiled. But the angry impatience disappeared from the inspector's face at the words "demobbed officer."

He moved a little nearer to Dick Valentine.

"Carry on!" he said gruffly.

"You are making notes, Mr. Chard?"

"Certainly, sir," said the secretary with a smile. "I have just written down—'demobbed officer'."

Sir Arthur Torrington knitted his brows.

"Mr. Carter! I cannot allow this! I refuse to listen to one word even remotely implying distrust of my niece's fiancé—Captain Valentine, in whom I have the most complete faith."

"Thank you, sir!" said Dick.

"I have not mentioned Captain Valentine, sir!" said Mr. Carter.

"Your words imply——"

"I was merely putting a case—I desire only to make it clear that, if George Torrington is hanging about Torrington Lodge, it is not under his own name or under his normal appearance."

Sir Arthur compressed his lips.

"Please be careful with your notes now, Mr. Chard," continued Duff Carter, "for we are now coming to a crucial point."

"I am listening, sir," said Mr. Chard.

"Having formed this theory in my mind," resumed Mr. Carter suavely, "I cast about to think of the kind of disguise that George would be likely to favour. He would make himself as unlike himself as possible, of course. Having come at length to the desperate resolve of putting his relative out of the way, in order to inherit the estate, he was placing his neck upon the cast of a die—and we may be assured that he gave the matter very deep and careful thought. Now, George Torrington had good eyesight—."

"That is true," said Sir Arthur, "but I fail to see how you know so much of a man you have never seen."

Mr. Carter smiled.

"You told me that he was a good shot," he answered.

"Oh! True."

"And it was easy to learn from people who had seen him that he never wore glasses. I concluded, therefore, that a very probable step in disguise would be to provide himself with spectacles."

"Surely, spectacles would be very awkward for a man whose eyesight is quite normal, Mr. Carter."

"They could be specially made of plain glass for the purpose, sir," answered Mr. Carter. "That is not a very uncommon trick."

"Oh! I—I see. No doubt you are right."

"Spectacles—especially large horn-rimmed spectacles—make a very great change in a man's appearance," said Mr. Carter. "Mr. Chard, for instance, would look very different, and much younger, without his spectacles—is not that so, Mr. Chard?"

"I had not thought about it, Mr. Carter," answered the secretary, with a strange look at Mr. Carter.

"Other little changes, in complexion and so on, could easily be made by a man accustomed to crooked ways," continued Mr. Carter blandly. "However, I looked about me for spectacled people on the spot, by way of a beginning. If I came on one whose spectacles proved to be made of plain glass I fancied that I should be on the track of something."

Grunt from Mr. Grose. All this was taking him away from Dick Valentine again. Captain Valentine was a demobbed officer—but he did not wear glasses of any kind. Grose's impatience rose once more.

The baronet was very intent now.

"And have you found such a person anywhere near Torrington Lodge, Mr. Carter?" he asked.

"I have, sir. A man," said the detective deliberately, "who was admittedly not far away when Captain Valentine found the body in Lodge Lane, and who appeared very quickly on the spot after the shot was fired in the wood on the occasion when Captain Valentine was with you. A man who obtained a post at Torrington Lodge, in the place of another man who was seriously injured by a car driven by an unknown person—which was not, in my belief, an accident, but a ruthless stratagem to cause you to engage a new secretary. A man who, having once forged a cheque,

could just as easily forge false testimonials to obtain a post he required for his purpose. A man of a nervous and frightened disposition—that being in striking contrast with the known character of cool resolution of George Torrington, and therefore a clever and cunning part of his disguise. A man who contrived to throw suspicion upon another man—even, I think, to the extent of concealing the murdered man's wallet in a drawer in his room. A man whom I knocked over, apparently by accident, causing him to smash his glasses, of which I secured a portion, that on examination proved to be of plain glass—proving that the spectacles were worn for disguise. A man——.”

There was a sudden interruption.

So far, the detective had been listened to in dead silence—and all eyes were on Chard, who sat, pen in hand, as if stunned by what he was hearing. He seemed like a man turned to stone.

But as the quiet voice went on, speaking the words of doom, the secretary came to himself.

The man in disguise knew now that the game was up—and that only escape remained—if that was yet possible. His chair went over backwards as he leaped to his feet, and his hand, dropping the pen, plunged into his pocket.

Shooting his way out was all that was left to the desperate man—but the hidden automatic was not drawn—for Dick Valentine, at the same moment, leaped on him, grasped him and bore him to the floor with a crash.

CHAPTER TEN.

LIGHT AT LAST!

“GOOD heavens!” panted Sir Arthur Torrington.

Inspector Grose stared on blankly.

Chard—or to give him his real name, George Torrington—was struggling wildly in Dick Valentine's grasp, and they rolled savagely on the floor, locked in a desperate grip. The desperate man was still making frantic efforts to draw the automatic. The nervous, hesitating secretary had quite vanished now—it was a strong, determined, desperate man who was struggling for his life. With a wild effort he dragged the automatic out—but Duff Carter's hand grasped his wrist, twisted it, and the deadly weapon dropped to the floor.

“Your handcuffs, Mr. Grose!” drawled Duff Carter.

Mr. Grose woke from his trance, as it were. He rolled forward. Even Mr. Grose no longer doubted who was his “man.” Dick Valentine had the desperate man round the body—Duff Carter was grasping his wrists—and Inspector Grose slipped on and snapped the handcuffs.

"We have our friend safe now, I think," remarked Duff Carter.

"Good heavens!" repeated Sir Arthur.

"Chard!" stammered the inspector. "Mr. Chard! And—and you say—you say that he is George Torrington?"

"I hardly think that he will deny it now," said Mr. Carter placidly.

The man was lifted from the floor and placed in a chair. He sat panting, spent from his desperate struggle, his eyes blazing at his captors. The horn-rimmed glasses had been swept away in the struggle, and the face looked very different without them. Sir Arthur Torrington peered at him.

"He is changed," he said. "But—I think I see a resemblance to my nephew now. Do you deny it?"

The prisoner burst into a savage laugh.

"What's the use?" The hard savage tones bore no resemblance to Mr. Chard's piping voice. "The game's up! I've played a desperate game—and lost! I'd like to get my hands free for one minute to handle your Mr. Carter." His eyes burned at the London detective. "I'd got the rest fooled—and when I'd got home with a final shot, that fool of an inspector would have got Dick Valentine hanged for it—seeing me safe through. Your cursed Carter has queered the pitch—I'd like to deal with him before I go." He spat in the direction of the little detective.

"Take him away!" said the baronet in a low voice.

Duff Carter unlocked the door. It closed after the inspector and his prisoner. Sir Arthur Torrington sighed deeply.

"This is a blow to you, sir," said Duff Carter quietly. "But the man deserves no pity—he is bad, through and through. He goes where he belongs, and the shadow of danger is gone from this house."

Sir Arthur nodded.

"I know how much I owe to you, Mr. Carter. And Captain Valentine also—I thank heaven that my faith in him never faltered. But—I do not wholly understand. You knew—yet you had Chard here to take notes—you knew that he was George Torrington, yet—"

Mr. Carter smiled.

"We were dealing with a desperate man, sir," he answered. "Gentleman George was the man to shoot his way out, if he had half a chance, and he had his automatic always at hand. He was safer sitting down, with so hefty a young gentleman as Captain Valentine watching him, ready to spring. This morning, sir, I took Captain Valentine into my confidence—and he was ready to play his part—which you played promptly and well, sir!" added Mr. Carter, turning to Dick.

"Thank you, Mr. Carter," Dick smiled. "I was ready, at any rate, to come in on the action, though you have had to do all the thinking."

"My long suit," said Mr. Carter, "though I think I gave you an early impression of being a fool. I gave Mr. Chard the same impression. It is easier to deal with people who deem themselves one's intellectual superior." He turned to Sir Arthur Torrington. "You feel the shame of this, sir—you are thinking of the trial, and what must follow—dismiss it from your mind. George Torrington will never be tried."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the baronet with a start.

"I noted that our friend contrived to get a couple of fingers—handcuffed as he was—into his waistcoat pocket, as Inspector Grose took him away. What he took from his pocket went into his mouth. He was a hard and desperate man, sir—prepared for possible failure, and for saving himself from its consequences. I have no doubt of what has happened—Mr. Grose will learn it by the time he has got his prisoner to Charney."

The baronet shivered.

"You saw—you knew—yet did not intervene——!" he exclaimed.

Mr. Carter raised his eyebrows.

"I!" he said, "I have no official position—the man was in official hands—it was not for me to intervene. Neither, in fact, should I have had time. I mention the fact so that you may know what to expect."

"It is better so!" said Sir Arthur in a low voice.

"GOD bless him!" said Dick Valentine. It was an hour later, and he was on the balcony with Enid. Mr. Carter, with a cheque in his pocket, was rolling away down the avenue in the station cab for Charney, to take his train.

"God bless him indeed!" said Enid. "He has saved my uncle—I think he has saved you, Dick. It has been terrible, but——."

"But it is over now," said Dick. "We shall forget all this in time, Enid—and we're going to be happy—forgetting everything else."

"Except Duff Carter!" said Enid, smiling.

"Except Duff Carter!" agreed Dick.

THE END.

*All Characters in this Story are fictitious.
If the names of actual persons appear it is
a matter of coincidence.*

HOUSE OF FEAR.

DUFF CARTER was forced to pierce a double screen of plot and counter-plot before he could drag from his hide-out, the man who had planned to kill Sir Arthur Torrington.

The mystery of the repeated attempts on his life deepened at every stage, and turned suspicion away from the hand which fired the shots, bringing the criminal within a hair's breath of accomplishing his fell aim of baffling detection.