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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE AFFAIR OF THE IVORY BOXES

There was a substantial aspect about Blenheim Square, not of that monotonous type which characterizes so many London squares, but a certain grace and consciousness of well-being.

The houses, though maintaining some uniformity, possessed individuality, and in the season were gay with window-boxes and flowers; the garden in the center was not too stereotyped in its arrangement, and plenty of sunlight found its way into it. The inhabitants were people of ample means, and the address was undoubtedly a good one. There was no slum in close proximity, that seamy background which so constantly lies behind a fair exterior of life; it was seldom that any but respectable people were seen in the square, for hawkers and itinerant musicians were forbidden; and, beyond a wedding or a funeral at intervals, nothing exciting ever seemed to happen there.

It looked particularly attractive when I entered it one spring morning early and made my way to No. 12.

As I approached the house and noted that the square was still asleep, an old gentleman, clad in a long and rather rusty overcoat, shuffled toward me from the opposite direction. He wore round goggles behind which his eyes looked unusually large, and a wide-awake hat was drawn over his silver locks.

He stopped in front of me and, without a word, brought his hand from his pocket and gave me a card.

"Christopher Quarles," I said, reading from the bit of pasteboard.

"My name. What is yours?"

"Murray Wigan," I answered, and the next instant was wondering why I had told him.

"Ah, I do not fancy we have met before, Detective Wigan. Perhaps we may help each other."

"You knew Mr. Ratcliffe?" I asked.

"No, but I have heard of him."

"I am afraid that – "

He laid two fingers of a lean hand on my arm.

"You had better. It will be wise."

A sharp retort came to my tongue, but remained unspoken. I can hardly explain why, because in an ordinary way his manner would only have increased my resentment and obstinacy.

I was young, only just over thirty, but success had brought me some fame and unlimited self-confidence. I was an enthusiast, and have been spoken of as a born detective, but the line of life I had chosen had sadly disappointed my father. He had given me an excellent education, and had looked forward to his son making a name for himself, but certainly not as a mere policeman, which was his way of putting it.

Indeed, family relations were strained even at this time, a fact which may have accounted for that hardness of character which people, even my friends, seemed to find in me.

My nature and my pride in my profession were therefore assailed by the old man's manner, yet the sharp answer remained unspoken.

"You will find that I am known to your people," he added while I hesitated.

I did not believe him for a moment, but there was something so compelling in the steady gaze from the large eyes behind the goggles that I grudgingly allowed him to enter the house with me.

Early that morning, before the first milk-cart had rattled through Blenheim Square, Constable Plowman had been called to No. 12 by the cook-housekeeper, who had found her master, Mr. Ratcliffe, dead in his study. Plowman had at once sent for a doctor and communicated with Scotland Yard. The doctor had arrived before me, but nothing had been moved by the constable, and the housekeeper declared that the room was exactly as she had found it.

The study was at the back of the house, a small room lined with books. In the center was a writing table, an electric lamp on it was still burning, and, leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on vacancy, sat Mr. Ratcliffe. The doctor said he had been dead some hours.

On the blotting-pad immediately in front of him was a large blue stone – a sapphire – and arranged in a rough semicircle round the pad were the various boxes of one of those Chinese curiosities in which box is contained within box until the last is quite small.

They were of thin ivory, the largest being some three inches square, the smallest not an inch, and they were arranged in order of size. There was no confusion in the room, no sign of violence on the dead man. Curtains were drawn across the window, which was open a little at the top.

At first my attention was somewhat divided; the old man interested me as well as the case.

He looked closely into the face of the dead man, then glanced at the curtained window, and nodded his head in a sagacious way, as if he had already fathomed the mystery. He looked at the sapphire and at the semicircle of boxes, but he did not attempt to touch anything, nor did he say a word.

Well, it is easy enough to look wise; it is when a man opens his mouth that the test begins. I came to the conclusion that he was a venerable fraud, and that I had been a fool to let him come in. I dismissed him from my mind and commenced my own investigations.

On the window-sill there were marks which made it practically certain that someone had entered the room that way, but neither then nor later could I discover any footprints in the small garden which was some eight feet below the window.

The housekeeper, who had been with Mr. Ratcliffe a dozen years, explained that, on coming down that morning, she had gone into the study to draw the curtains as usual. The room was exactly as we saw it. Her master spent most of his time in his study when he was at home, and seemed to enjoy his own company. He went little into society, but a friend sometimes dined with him; indeed, his nephew, Captain Ratcliffe, had dined with him last night.

She had gone to bed before the captain left, and did not hear him go. She would not admit that her master was peculiar or eccentric in any way, but said he had seemed worried and rather depressed lately. The slightest noise in the house disturbed him, and she fancied he had got into the habit of listening for noises, for once or twice she had come upon him in a listening attitude. She knew nothing about the sapphire, and had never seen the ivory boxes before.

The old man never asked a question; I do not think he said a single word until we were leaving the house, and then he remarked in a casual manner:

"A curious case, Detective Wigan."

"Some curious points in it," I said.

I was glad when the old fellow had shuffled off. He was a disturbing influence. His eyes behind those goggles seemed to have a paralyzing effect upon me. I could not think clearly.

Certainly there were many curious points in the case, and my inquiries quickly added to the number.

Mr. Ratcliffe had traveled extensively, was a linguist, and a far richer man than his neighbors had supposed. Collecting precious stones had been his hobby, and in a case deposited with his bankers there were many valuable, and some unique, gems. Probably he had others with him in the house, but none were found except the sapphire lying on the blotting-pad. Robbers might have

taken them, the marks on the window-sill were suggestive, but I was doubtful on this point. Even if robbers had entered the room, how was Mr. Ratcliffe's death to be accounted for? There was no mark upon the body, there was no trace of poison. The doctors declared he was in a perfectly healthy condition. There was no apparent reason for his death. Besides, if he had been robbed of his jewels, why should the sapphire have been left?

It was only natural, perhaps, that suspicion should fall upon the dead man's nephew. Might he not have left the house by the window? it was asked. I had put the same question to myself.

Captain Ratcliffe's behavior, however, was not that of a guilty man, although there were certain things which told against him.

He answered questions frankly and without hesitation. He was in a line regiment, and was somewhat heavily in debt. It was close upon midnight when he left his uncle, he said, and they had not gone into the study at all. They had sat smoking and talking in the dining room, and just before he left they had both had a little whisky. The empty glasses and the cigar ends in the dining room went to confirm this statement.

He knew about his uncle's hobby for stones, was surprised to find that he was such a rich man, and declared that he had no idea he was his heir. Mr. Ratcliffe had never helped him in any way; in fact, that very night he had refused, not unkindly but quite frankly, to lend him a sum of money he had asked for.

There had been no quarrel, and they had parted excellent friends.

I am convinced that a large section of the public wondered why Captain Ratcliffe was not arrested, and possibly some detectives would have considered there was sufficient evidence against him to take this course. I did not, although I had him watched.

The fact was that Christopher Quarles lurked at the back of my mind. I found that he had spoken the truth when he said that he was known at Scotland Yard. He was a professor of philosophy, and some two years ago had made what seemed a perfectly preposterous suggestion in a case which had puzzled the police, with the result that he had been instrumental in saving an innocent man from the gallows. A chance success was the comment of the authorities; my own idea was that he must have had knowledge which he ought not to possess. Now it might prove useful to cultivate the acquaintance of this mysterious professor, so I called upon him one morning in his house at West Street, Chelsea, as keen upon a difficult trail as I had ever been in my life.

The servant said the professor was at home and requested me to follow her.

Through open doors I had a glimpse of taste and luxury – softly carpeted rooms, old furniture, good pictures – and then the servant opened a door at the extreme end of the hall and announced me.

Astonishment riveted me to the threshold for the moment. Except for a cheap writing-table in the window, a big arm-chair by the fireplace, and two or three common chairs against the wall, this room was empty. There was no carpet on the floor, not a picture on the whitewashed walls. The window had a blind, but no curtains; there were no books, and the appointments of the writing-table were of the simplest kind possible.

"Ah, I have been expecting you," said Quarles, crossing from the window to welcome me.

A skull-cap covered his silver locks, but he wore no glasses, and to-day there were few signs of age or deterioration of physical or mental force about him. His shuffling gait when he had met me in Blenheim Square that morning had evidently been assumed, and probably he had worn glasses to conceal some of the expression of his face.

"You had been expecting me?" I said.

"Two days ago I gave the servant instructions to bring you in whenever you came. Zena, my dear, this is Detective Wigan – my granddaughter who often assists me in my work."

I bowed to the girl who had risen from the chair at the writing-table, and for a moment forgot the professor – and, indeed, everything else in the world. Since no woman had ever yet succeeded

in touching any sympathetic chord in me, it may be assumed that she was remarkable. In that bare room she looked altogether out of place, and yet her presence transformed it into a desirable spot.

"You are full of surprises, professor," I said, with a keen desire to make myself agreeable. "I enter your house and have a glimpse of luxury through open doors, yet I find you in – in an empty room; you tell me I am expected, when until a few hours ago I had not determined to call upon you; and now you further mystify me by saying this lady is your helper."

"Philosophy is mysterious," he answered, "and I am interested in all the ramifications of my profession. To understand one science perfectly means having a considerable knowledge of all other sciences."

"My grandfather exaggerates my usefulness," said the girl.

"I do not," he returned. "Your questions have constantly shown me the right road to travel, and to have the right road pointed out is half the battle. Sit down, Mr. Wigan – in the arm-chair – no, I prefer sitting here myself. Zena and I were talking of Blenheim Square when you came in. A coincidence? Perhaps, but it may be something more. In these days we are loath to admit there are things we do not understand. This case puzzles you?"

The detective in me was coming slowly uppermost again, and I remembered the line I had decided to take with this curious old gentleman.

"It does. From first to last I am puzzled. To begin with, how came you to hear of the tragedy that you were able to be upon the scene so promptly?"

"Are you here as a spy or to ask for help? Come, a plain answer," said Quarles hotly, as though he were resenting an insult.

"Dear!" said the girl soothingly.

"Zena considers you honest," said the old man, suddenly calm again. "My helper, as I told you, and not always of my opinion. Let that pass. You are a young man with much to learn. I am not a detective, but a philosopher, and sometimes an investigator of human motives. If a mystery interests me I endeavor to solve it for my own satisfaction, but there it ends. I never give my opinion unless it is asked for, nor should I interfere except to prevent a miscarriage of justice. If this is clear to you, you may proceed and tell me what you have done, how far you have gone in the unraveling of this case; if you are not satisfied, I have nothing more to say to you except 'Good morning!'"

For a moment I hesitated, then shortly I told him what I had done, and he listened attentively.

"I have always worked alone," I went on, "not without success, as you may know. In this case I am beaten so far, and I come to you."

"Why?"

"For two reasons. First – you will forgive my mentioning it again – your prompt arrival puzzled me; secondly, I believe in Captain Ratcliffe, and am anxious to relieve him of the suspicion which undoubtedly rests upon him."

The old man rubbed his head through his skull-cap.

"You would like to find some reason to be suspicious of me?"

"Mr. Wigan does not mean that, dear," said Zena.

The professor shook his head doubtfully.

"Crime as crime does not interest me. It is only when I am impelled to study a case, against my will sometimes, that I become keen; and, whenever this happens, the solution of the mystery is likely to be unusual. My methods are not those of a detective. You argue from facts; I am more inclined to form a theory, and then look for facts to fit it. Not a scientific way, you may say, but a great many scientists do it, although they would strenuously deny the fact. I can show you how the facts support my theory, but I cannot always produce the actual proof. In many cases I should be a hindrance rather than a help to you."

"It is courteous of you to say so," I returned, wishing to be pleasant.

"It is quite true, not a compliment," said the girl.

"First, the dead man," Quarles went on. "Quite a healthy man was the medical opinion – but his eyes. Did you particularly notice his eyes? You look into the brain through the eyes, see into it with great penetration if you have accustomed yourself to such scrutiny as I have done. Mr. Ratcliffe had not been dead long enough for his eyes to lose that last impression received from the brain. They were still looking at something, as it were, and they still had terror in them. Now he was a traveler, one who must have faced danger scores of times; it would take something very unusual to frighten him."

I acquiesced with a nod.

"We may take it, I think, that such a man would not be terrified by burglars."

I admitted this assumption.

"He was looking at the curtains which were drawn across the window – that is a point to remember," said the professor, marking off this fact by holding up a finger. "Then the little boxes; did you count them?"

"Yes, there were twenty-five."

"And the last one was unopened; did you open it?"

"Yes; it contained a minute head in ivory, wonderfully carved."

"I did not touch the box," said Quarles, "but if the toy was complete it would naturally contain such a head. Did you notice the nineteenth box?"

"Not particularly."

"Had you done so you would have noticed that it was discolored like the first and largest one, not clean and white like the others – and more, beginning from the nineteenth box the semi-circular arrangement was broken, as though it had been completed in a hurry, and possibly by different hands."

I did not make any comment.

"The largest box had become discolored because it was the outside one, always exposed; I judged therefore that the nineteenth box was discolored for the same reason. For some time it had been the outside box of the last few boxes. In other words, the toy in Mr. Ratcliffe's possession had not been a complete one. This led me to look at box eighteen, the last in Mr. Ratcliffe's series; it was just the size to contain the sapphire. This suggested that the sapphire was the central point of the mystery."

"You think the thieves were disturbed?"

"No."

"Then why didn't they take the sapphire?"

"Exactly. By the way, is the stone still at Scotland Yard?"

"Yes."

"Has it been tested?"

"No."

"Have it examined by the most expert man you can find. I think you will find it is paste, a wonderful imitation, capable of standing some tests – but still paste."

"Then why did Mr. Ratcliffe – an expert in gems, remember – treasure it so carefully?" I asked.

"He didn't," Quarles answered shortly. "It is obvious that a man who possessed such stones as were found in that packet at the bank would certainly not make such a mistake; yet he was apparently playing with his treasure when he met his death. My theory had three points, you see. First, the sapphire was the sole object of the robbery; secondly, the thieves had substituted an exact duplicate for the real stone; thirdly, the stone must have some special fascination for Mr. Ratcliffe, or he would have put it in the bank for safety as he had done with others."

"An interesting theory, I admit, but – "

"Wait, Mr. Wigan. I have said something about my methods. I began to look for facts to support my theory. You remember the cook-housekeeper?"

"Perfectly."

"She spoke of her uncle's sensitiveness to noises; she had on one or two occasions surprised him in a listening attitude. That gave me a clew. What was he listening for? Mr. Ratcliffe had only given way to this listening attitude recently; in fact, only since his return from his last voyage. It would seem that since his return his mental balance had become unstable. There was some constant irritation in his brain which brought fear, and in his dead eyes there was terror. My theory was complete; I had only to fit the facts into it. I suppose, Mr. Wigan, you have found out all about the people living on either side of Ratcliffe's house?"

"Both are families above suspicion," I answered. "I also tried Ossery Road, the gardens of which run down to those on that side of Blenheim Square. The house immediately behind No. 12 is occupied by a doctor."

"I know. I called upon him recently to put some scientific point to him," said Quarles with a smile. "I came to the conclusion that he could give me no information about Mr. Ratcliffe. Rather curiously, he did not like Mr. Ratcliffe."

"So I discovered," I answered, and I was conscious of resenting the professor's active interference in the case. There is no telling what damage an amateur may do.

"His dislike was a solid fact," said Quarles. "I congratulate you on not being put on a false scent by it. Many detectives would have been. The gardens end on to each other – a doctor, a knowledge of subtle poisons – oh, there were materials for an excellent case ready to hand."

"We are getting away from the point, professor," I said, somewhat tartly.

"No, I am coming to it. I concentrated my attention on the house two doors further down the road. It would not be difficult to creep along the garden wall even in the dark. Two Chinese gentlemen boarded there, I was told. No one had noticed them very particularly in the neighborhood. There are several boarding-houses in Ossery Road, and many foreigners over here for study or upon business go to live in them. I called, but the Chinese gentlemen were visiting in the country, and were not expected back for another fortnight. As a fact, they were not Chinamen at all, but Tibetans, and I do not fancy they will come back."

"Tibetans. How do you know? You did not see them?"

"No, it is a guess; because on his last journey Mr. Ratcliffe wandered in Tibet. I have correspondents in Northern India, and it was not very difficult to get this information by cable. You do not know Tibet, Mr. Wigan?"

"No."

"Nor I, except from travelers' tales and through my correspondents. A curious people, given to fetish worship in peculiar forms. I can tell you of one strange place, strange as Lhasa. Were you to go there presently – it might be too soon yet, I cannot say for certain – but presently, I am convinced you would witness a scene of rejoicing, religious processions in the streets, men wearing hideous masks; and in a temple there you would find an idol with two blue eyes – eyes of sapphire."

"Two?"

"For some time there has been only one," said Quarles; "the other was stolen. You would find also in this temple talismans, ivory boxes fitting into each other, the smallest containing a little carved head representing the head of the idol. Further, you would be told some strange tales of this idol, of the psychic influence it possesses, and how those who offend it remain always under that influence which brings terror. Were you present at a festival in this temple, you would hear the idol speak. First you would find the great assembly in the attitude of listening, and then from the idol you would hear a sound, half sigh, half groan. I suppose the priests produce it mechanically – I do not know. It may be that – "

"If this be true the mystery is solved," I said.

"I think so," said Quarles. "The Tibetans followed Mr. Ratcliffe to recover the lost eye, I have no doubt of that, and to be ready for any emergency had supplied themselves with a paste duplicate of the stone. Exactly how Mr. Ratcliffe died I can only conjecture. I remember that his eyes evidently saw something, and I fancy terror killed him. The Tibetans had undoubtedly watched him constantly, and had found out that he had the stone hidden in the boxes. Probably they expected to find it so hidden, having discovered that Mr. Ratcliffe had discarded the inner boxes of the talisman at the time of the robbery. Having made certain of this, I think that on the fatal night they made the curious sound that the idol makes when speaking, expecting that he would be listening for it, as their priests declared those who offended the god always did, and as a curious fact Mr. Ratcliffe actually was, remember; then possibly they thrust between the curtains one of those hideous masks which figure in so many religious ceremonies in Tibet. Mr. Ratcliffe was in a state of mind to give any sudden terror an enormous power over him, and I think he died without any violence being offered him. So the gem was recovered, the paste sapphire and the remaining boxes being left as a sign that the god had been avenged, a sign which I believe I have been able to read. There are the theory and some facts; you must make further inquiries yourself."

The professor rose abruptly from his chair. Evidently he had no intention of answering questions, and he meant the interview to come to an end.

"Thank you," I said. "I shall take steps at once to find out if you are correct."

"For your own satisfaction, not mine," said Quarles; "I am certain. You asked how it was I came to Blenheim Square that morning. Chance! It is called that. I do not believe in chance. When I am impelled to do a thing, I do it because I recognize a directing will I am forced to obey. We live in a world girt with miracles, in an atmosphere of mystery which is beyond our comprehension. We find names for what we do not understand, psychic force, mind waves, telepathy, and the like, but they are only names and do not help us much. Keep an open mind, Mr. Wigan; you will be astonished what strange imaginings will enter it – imaginings which you will discover are real truths. An empty mind in an empty room, there you have the best receptacle for that great will which guides and governs all thought and action. I speak as a philosopher, and as an old man to a young one. Come to me if you like when you are in a difficulty, and I will help you if I am allowed to. Do you understand? Good-bye."

Subsequent inquiries made by Scotland Yard through the authorities in India established the fact that the sapphire eye of the image in Tibet had been stolen; that Mr. Ratcliffe was in Tibet at the time; and that not long after the tragedy in Blenheim Square the jewel was restored to its place with much rejoicing and religious enthusiasm.

I was not disposed to like Professor Quarles nor to believe in him altogether. I found it easy to see the charlatan in him, yet the fact remained that he had solved the problem.

Certainly he was interesting, and, besides, there was his granddaughter, Zena. If only for the sake of seeing her, I felt sure I should have occasion to consult Christopher Quarles again.

CHAPTER II
THE IDENTITY OF THE FINAL VICTIM

I soon fell into the habit of going to see Professor Quarles. As an excuse I talked over cases with him, but he seldom volunteered an opinion, often was obviously uninterested. Truth to tell, I was not there for his opinion, but to see his granddaughter. A detective in love sounds something like an absurdity, but such was my case, and, since Zena's manner did not suggest that she was particularly interested in me, my love affair seemed rather a hopeless one.

My association with Christopher Quarles has, however, led to the solution of some strange mysteries, and, since my own achievements are sufficiently well known, I may confine myself to those cases which, single-handed, I should have failed to solve. I know that in many of them I was credited with having unraveled the mystery, but this was only because Professor Quarles persisted in remaining in the background. If I did the spade work, the deductions were his.

They were all cases with peculiar features in them, and it was never as a detective that Quarles approached them. He was often as astonished at my acumen in following a clew as I was at his marvelous theories, which seemed so absurd to begin with yet proved correct in the end.

Perhaps his curious power was never more noticeable than in the case of the Withan murder.

A farmer returning from Medworth, the neighboring market town, one night in January, was within a quarter of a mile of Withan village when his horse suddenly shied and turned into the ditch.

During the afternoon there had been a fall of snow, sufficient to cover the ground to a depth of an inch or so, and in places it had drifted to a depth of two feet or more. By evening the clouds had gone, the moon sailed in a clear sky, and, looking round to find the cause of his horse's unusual behavior, the farmer saw a man lying on a heap of snow under the opposite hedge.

He was dead – more, he was headless.

It was not until some days later that the case came into my hands, and in the interval the local authorities had not been idle. It was noted that the man was poorly dressed, that his hands proved he was used to manual labor, but there was no mark either on his body or on his clothing, nor any papers in his pockets to lead to his identification. So far as could be ascertained, nobody was missing in Withan or Medworth. It seemed probable that the murderer had come upon his victim secretly, that the foul deed had been committed with horrible expedition, otherwise the victim, although not a strong man, would have made some struggle for his life, and apparently no struggle had taken place.

Footprints, nearly obliterated, were traceable to a wood on the opposite side of the road, but no one seemed to have left the wood in any direction. From this fact it was argued that the murder had been committed early in the afternoon, soon after the storm began, and that snow had hidden the murderer's tracks from the wood. That snow had drifted on to the dead body seemed to establish this theory.

Why had the murderer taken the head with him? There were many fantastic answers to the question. Some of the country folk, easily superstitious, suggested that it must be the work of the devil, others put it down to an escaped lunatic, while others again thought it might be the work of some doctor who wanted to study the brain.

The authorities believed that it had been removed to prevent identification, and would be found buried in the wood. It was not found, however, and the countryside was in a state bordering on panic.

For a few days the Withan murder seemed unique in atrocities, and then came a communication from the French police. Some two years ago an almost identical murder had been committed outside a village in Normandy. In this case also the head was missing, and nothing had

been found upon the body to identify the victim. He was well dressed, and a man who would be likely to carry papers with him, but nothing was found, and the murder had remained a mystery.

These were the points known and conjectured when the case came into my hands, and my investigations added little to them.

One point, however, impressed me. I felt convinced that the man's clothes, which were shown to me, had not been made in England. They were poor, worn almost threadbare, but they had once been fairly good, and the cut was not English. That it was French I could not possibly affirm, but it might be, and so I fashioned a fragile link with the Normandy crime.

On this occasion I went to Quarles with the object of interesting him in the Withan case, and he forestalled me by beginning to talk about it the moment I entered the room.

Here I may mention a fact which I had not discovered at first. Whenever he was interested in a case I was always taken into his empty room; at other times we were in the dining-room or the drawing-room. It was the empty room on this occasion, and Zena remained with us.

I went carefully through the case point by point, and he made no comment until I had finished.

"The foreign cut of the clothes may be of importance," he said. "I am not sure. Is this wood you mention of any great extent?"

"No, it runs beside the road for two or three hundred yards."

"Toward Withan?"

"No; it was near the Withan end of it that the dead man was found."

"Any traces that the head was carried to the wood?"

"The local authorities say, 'Yes,' and not a trace afterward. The ground in the wood was searched at the time, and I have been over it carefully since. Through one part of the wood there runs a ditch, which is continued as a division between two fields which form part of the farm land behind the wood. By walking along this the murderer might have left the wood without leaving tracks behind him."

"A good point, Wigan. And where would that ditch lead him?"

"Eventually to the high road, which runs almost at right angles to the Withan road."

"Much water in the ditch?" asked Quarles.

"Half a foot when I went there. It may have been less at the time of the murder. The early part of January was dry, you will remember."

"There was a moon that night, wasn't there?"

"Full, or near it," I returned.

"And how soon was the alarm raised along the countryside?"

"That night. It was about eight o'clock when the body was found, and after going to the village the farmer returned to Medworth for the police."

"A man who had walked a considerable distance in a ditch would be wet and muddy," said Zena, "and if he were met on the road carrying a bag he would arrest attention."

"Why carrying a bag?" asked Quarles.

"With the head in it," she answered.

"That's another good point, Wigan," chuckled Quarles.

"Of course, the head may be buried in the wood," said Zena.

Quarles looked at me inquiringly.

"I searched the wood with that idea in my mind," I said. "One or two doubtful places I had dug up. I think the murderer must have taken the head with him."

"To bury somewhere else?" asked Quarles.

"Perhaps not," I answered.

"A mad doctor bent on brain experiments – is that your theory, Wigan?"

"Not necessarily a doctor, but some homicidal maniac who is also responsible for the Normandy murder. The likeness between the two crimes can hardly be a coincidence."

"What was the date of the French murder?"

"January the seventeenth."

"Nearly the same date as the English one," said Zena.

"Two years intervening," I returned.

"Wigan, it would be interesting to know if a similar murder occurred anywhere in the intervening year at that date," said Quarles.

"You have a theory, professor?"

"An outlandish one which would make you laugh. No, no; I do not like being laughed at. I never mention my theories until I have some facts to support them. I am interested in this case. Perhaps I shall go to Withan."

There was nothing more to be got out of the professor just then, and I departed.

I took the trouble to make inquiry whether any similar crime had happened in England in the January of the preceding year, and had the same inquiry made in France. There was no record of any murder bearing the slightest resemblance to the Withan tragedy.

A few days later Quarles telegraphed me to meet him at Kings Cross, and we traveled North together.

"Wait," he said when I began to question him. "I am not sure yet. My theory seems absurd. We are going to find out if it is."

We took rooms at a hotel in Medworth, Quarles explaining that our investigations might take some days.

Next morning, instead of going to Withan as I had expected, he took me to the police court, and seemed to find much amusement in listening to some commonplace cases, and was not very complimentary in his remarks about the bench of magistrates. The next afternoon he arranged a drive. I thought we were going to Withan, but we turned away from the village, and presently Quarles stopped the carriage.

"How far are we from Withan?" he asked the driver.

"Five or six miles. The road winds a lot. It's a deal nearer as the crow flies."

"You need not wait for us, driver. My friend and I are going to walk back."

The coachman pocketed his money and drove away.

"Couldn't keep him waiting all night, as we may have to do," said Quarles. "Mind you, Wigan, I'm very doubtful about my theory; at least, I am not certain that I shall find the facts I want. A few hours will settle it one way or the other."

After walking along the road for about a mile Quarles scrambled through a hedge into a wood by the roadside.

"We're trespassers, but we must take our chance. Should we meet anyone, blame me. Say I am a doddering old fool who would walk under the trees and you were obliged to come to see that I didn't get into any mischief. Do you go armed?"

"Always," I answered.

"I do sometimes," he said, tapping his pocket. "We might come up against danger if my theory is correct. If I tell you to shoot – shoot, and quickly. Your life is likely to depend upon it. And keep your ears open to make sure no one is following us."

He had become keen, like a dog on the trail, and, old as he was, seemed incapable of fatigue. Whether he had studied the topography of the neighborhood I cannot say, but he did not hesitate in his direction until he reached a high knoll which was clear of the wood and commanded a considerable view.

We were trespassers in a private park. To our right was a large house, only partially seen through its screen of trees, but it was evidently mellow with age. To our left, toward what was evidently the extremity of the park, was hilly ground, which had been allowed to run wild.

To this Quarles pointed.

"That is our way," he said. "We'll use what cover we can."

We plunged into the wood again, and were soon in the wilderness, forcing our way, sometimes with considerable difficulty, through the undergrowth. Once or twice the professor gave me a warning gesture, but he did not speak. He had evidently some definite goal, and I was conscious of excitement as I followed him.

For an hour or more he turned this way and that, exploring every little ravine he could discover, grunting his disappointment each time he failed to find what he was looking for.

"I said I wasn't certain," he whispered when our path had led us into a damp hollow which looked as if it had not been visited by man for centuries. "My theory seems – and yet this is such a likely place. There must be a way."

He was going forward again. The hollow was surrounded by perpendicular walls of sand and chalk; it was a pit, in fact, which Nature had filled with vegetation. The way we had come seemed the only way into it.

"Ah! this looks promising," Quarles said suddenly.

In a corner of the wall, or, to be more precise, filling up a rent in it, was a shed, roughly built, but with a door secured by a very business-like lock.

"I think the shed is climbable," said Quarles. "Let's get on the roof. I am not so young as I was, so help me up."

It was not much help he wanted. In a few moments we were on the roof.

"As I thought," he said. "Do you see?"

The shed, with its slanting roof, served to block a narrow, overgrown path between two precipitous chalk walls.

"We'll go carefully," said Quarles. "There may be worse than poachers' traps here."

Without help from me he dropped from the roof, and I followed him.

The natural passage was winding, and about fifty yards long, and opened into another pit of some size. A pit I call it, but it was as much a cave as a pit, part of it running deeply into the earth, and only about a third of it being open to the sky. The cave part had a rough, sandy floor, and here was a long shed of peculiar construction. It was raised on piles, about eight feet high; the front part formed a kind of open veranda, the back part being closed in. The roof was thatched with bark and dried bracken, and against one end of the veranda was a notched tree trunk, serving as a ladder.

"As I expected," said Quarles, with some excitement. "We must get onto the veranda for a moment. I think we are alone here, but keep your ears open."

The shed was evidently used sometimes. There was a stone slab which had served as a fireplace, and from a beam above hung a short chain, on which a pot could easily be fixed.

"We'll get away quickly," said Quarles. "Patience, Wigan. I believe we are going to witness a wonderful thing."

"When?"

"In about thirty hours' time."

The professor's sense of direction was marvelous. Having reclimbed the shed which blocked the entrance to this concealed pit, he made practically a straight line for the place at which we had entered the wood from the road.

"I daresay one would be allowed to see over the house, but perhaps it is as well not to ask," he said. "We can do that later. I'm tired, Wigan; but it was safer not to keep the carriage."

Try as I would, I could get no explanation out of him either that night or next day. He was always as secret as the grave until he had proved his theory, and then he seemed anxious to forget the whole affair, and shrank from publicity. That is how it came about that I obtained credit which I did not deserve.

"We go there again this evening," he said after lunch next day; "so a restful afternoon will suit us."

It was getting dark when we set out, and again Quarles's unerring sense of locality astonished me. He led the way without hesitation. This time he took more precaution not to make a sound when climbing over the shed into the narrow path.

"I think we are first, but great care is necessary," he whispered.

We crept forward and concealed ourselves among the scrub vegetation which grew in that part of the pit which was open to the sky. It was dark, the long shed barely discernible, but the professor was particular about our position.

"We may have to creep a little nearer presently," he whispered. "From here we can do so. Silence, Wigan, and don't be astonished at anything."

The waiting seemed long. Moonlight was presently above us, throwing the cave part of the pit into greater shadow than ever.

I cannot attempt to say how long we had waited in utter silence when Quarles touched my arm. Someone was coming, and with no particular stealth. Whoever it was seemed quite satisfied that the night was empty of danger. I heard footsteps on the raised floor of the shed – a man's step, and only one man's. I heard him moving about for some time. I think he came down the ladder once and went up again. Then there was a light and sudden tiny flames. In the dark he had evidently got fuel, and had started a fire on the stone slab.

As the flames brightened I watched his restless figure. He was not a young man. I caught a glimpse of white hair, but he took no position in which I could see his face clearly. He was short, thick-set, and quick in his movements.

From somewhere at the back of the shed he pushed forward a block of wood, and, standing on this, he fixed something to the short chain I had noted yesterday. When he got down again I saw that a bundle was suspended over the fire, not a pot, and it was too high for the flames or much of the heat to reach it, only the smoke curled about it.

Then the man moved the wooden block to the side of the fire and sat down facing us, the flickering flames throwing a red glow over him.

"Wigan, do you see?" whispered Quarles.

"Not clearly."

"We'll go nearer. Carefully."

From our new point of view I looked again. The man's face was familiar, but just then I could not remember who he was. It was the bundle hanging over the fire which fascinated me.

Tied together, and secured in a network of string, were five or six human heads, blackened, shriveled faces, which seemed to grin horribly as they swung deeply from side to side, lit up by the flicker of the flames.

"Do you see, Wigan?" Quarles asked again.

"Yes."

"And the man?"

"Who is he?"

"On the bench yesterday. Sir Henry Buckingham. Don't you remember?"

For an hour – two, three, I don't know how long – that horrible bundle swung over the fire, and the man sat on his block of wood, staring straight before him. I had a great desire to rush from my hiding-place and seize him, and I waited, expecting some further revelation, listening for other footsteps. None came. The fire flickered lower and went out. The moon had set, and the cold of the early morning got into my bones.

In the darkness before the dawn the man moved about the shed again, and presently I heard him go.

"Patience!" whispered Quarles, as I started up to go after him. "He will not run away."

His calmness almost exasperated me, but he would answer no questions until we had returned to our hotel and had breakfast.

"My dear Wigan," he said, when at last he condescended to talk, "it was Zena who first set me on the right road, when she remarked that a man who had walked in a ditch carrying a bag would arrest attention. Two points were suggested – first, that the man might not have far to go to reach a place of safety; secondly, that he had come prepared to take a head away with him. A mere speculation, you may say, but it set me putting questions to myself. Why should a head be required? What kind of man would be likely to want a head? A theory took shape in my brain, and I hunted up the history of the well-to-do people who lived in the neighborhood of Withan. My theory required a man who had traveled, who was elderly, who could be connected with the case in France two years ago. I found such a man in Sir Henry Buckingham. I told you I was not certain of my theory. I was doubtful about it after I had watched Sir Henry for a whole morning on the bench. I sought for some peculiarity in his manner, and found none. Yet his history coincided with my theory. You know nothing about him, I suppose?"

"Nothing."

"Rather an interesting career, but with an hereditary taint in it," Quarles went on. "His mother was eccentric. Her husband was rich enough to have her looked after at home; had she been a poorer person she would have died in a madhouse. Religious mania hers was, and her son has inherited it in a curious fashion. In the year intervening between the Normandy crime and this one Sir Henry was in Rome, where he was very ill, delirious, and not expected to live, so there was no similar crime that year. But he was in Normandy at the time of the murder there, motoring, and usually alone."

"How have you learnt all this?"

"He is important enough to have some of his doings chronicled, and he wrote some interesting articles for a country gentlemen's newspaper about his Normandy tour – nature studies, and such like. Another point, both these murders happened at the time of the full moon. I am not absolutely sure, but I think you will find that for the last half-dozen years Sir Henry has not been in England in January."

"You think – "

"I think there would have been other heads missing if he had been," Quarles answered. "He was sane enough to be somewhere where he was not known when this time of the year came round. At the full moon he is always queer – witness last night; but he is only dangerous in January – dangerous, I mean, without provocation. To preserve his secret, I have little doubt he would go to any length; that is why I warned you to be ready to shoot when we went upon our journey of discovery. Now this year he was in England; illness had kept him to his house yonder, but he was well enough to get out at the fatal time, and the insane desire proved irresistible. He was cunning too. He must know everybody in the neighborhood, yet the man he killed was unknown. We shall find presently, I have no doubt, that the victim was some wanderer returning unexpectedly to friends in Withan. That would account for the foreign cut of his clothes. Sir Henry, waiting in the wood, perhaps for hours, may have allowed others to pass before this man came. He realized that he was a stranger, and attacked him."

"But the head?"

"Was among those hanging over the fire. Sir Henry was for many years in Borneo, Wigan, and for a large part of the time was up-country helping to put down the head-hunting which still existed there, and still does exist, according to all accounts, when the natives think they can escape detection. The horrible custom proved too much for his diseased brain, and fascinated him. You see how my theory grew. Then I looked for the actual proof, which we found last night. The long shed in that pit is built exactly as the Dyaks of Borneo build theirs – a whole village living on communal terms under one roof. The stone slab for the fire is the same, and over it the Dyaks hang the treasured heads, just as we saw them last night. Now you had better go and see the police, Wigan. Don't drag me into it. I am going back to London by the midday train."

The arrest of Sir Henry Buckingham caused an enormous sensation.

He was subsequently put into a lunatic asylum, where he died not many months afterward. Fortunately he had no children to run the risk of madness in their turn, and neither his wife nor any of the servants knew anything of the concealed pit where he went to revel in his insane delight.

Hidden under the long shed the heads were found – six of them, five so hideously shriveled that identification was altogether impossible.

The sixth was less shriveled, was the only English one, and, perhaps, had we shown it in Withan, some old person might have recognized a lost son believed to be still wandering the world.

It was thought better not to do so, and the identity of Sir Henry's last victim remains a mystery.

CHAPTER III
THE MYSTERY OF THE CIRCULAR COUNTERS

However obscure a mystery may be, there is always some point or circumstance which, if rightly interpreted, will lead to its solution. Even in those crimes which have never been elucidated this point exists, only it has never been duly appreciated. It is this key-clew, as I may call it, for which the detective first looks, and, since few crimes, if any, are committed without some definite reason, it is most frequently found in the motive.

His almost superhuman power of recognizing this key-clew was the foundation of Christopher Quarles's success, and his solution of the mysterious burglaries which caused such speculation for a time was not the least of his achievements.

Sir Joseph Maynard, the eminent physician of Harley Street, had given a small dinner party one evening. The guests left early, and soon after midnight the household had retired.

Neither Sir Joseph nor Lady Maynard nor any of the servants were disturbed during the night, but next morning it was found that burglars had entered. They had got in by a passage window at the back – not a very difficult matter – and had evidently gone to the dining room and helped themselves to spirits from a tantalus which was on the sideboard. Three glasses, with a little of the liquor left in them, were on the table, and near them were some biscuit crumbs. There were several silver articles on the sideboard, but these had not been touched.

The burglars appeared to have given all their attention to Sir Joseph's room, which was in a state of confusion. Two cupboards and every drawer had been turned out and the contents thrown about in all directions. A safe which stood in a corner had been broken open. It was a large safe, but of an old-fashioned type, presenting little difficulty to experts. In it, besides papers and about seventy pounds in gold in a canvas bag, Sir Joseph had a considerable amount of silver, presentations which had been made to him, and some unique specimens of the Queen Anne period. All this silver was upon the floor, also the bag of money intact.

So far as Sir Joseph could tell, not a thing had been taken. Half a dozen cigarette-ends had been thrown down upon the carpet, and a small box containing some round counters lay broken by the writing-table. It looked as if the box had been knocked down and trodden on by mistake, for the counters were in a little heap close to the broken fragments. It appeared that the burglars must have been disturbed and had made off without securing their booty.

This was the obvious explanation, but it did not satisfy me. I questioned Sir Joseph about his papers. Had he any document which, for private or public reasons, someone might be anxious to obtain? He said he had not, was inclined to laugh at my question, and proceeded to inform me that he had no family skeleton, had no part in any Government secret, had never been in touch with any mysterious society, and had no papers giving any valuable details of scientific experiments upon which he was engaged.

Of course the thieves might have been disturbed, but there were certain points against this idea. No one had moved about the house during the night, so apparently there had been nothing to disturb them. The silver on the floor was scattered, not gathered together ready to take away as I should have expected to find it, and it looked as if it had been thrown aside carelessly, as though it were not what the thieves were in search of; and surely, had they left in a hurry, the bag of money would have been taken. Moreover, the cigarette-ends and the dirty glasses suggested a certain leisurely method of going to work, and men of this kind would not be easily frightened.

The cigarette-ends puzzled me. They were of a cheap American brand, had not been taken from Sir Joseph's box, which contained only Turkish ones, and, although they had apparently been thrown down carelessly, there was no ash upon the carpet nor anywhere else. They looked like old

ends rather than the remains of cigarettes smoked last night. If my idea were correct, it would mean that they had been put there on purpose to mislead.

I examined the three glasses on the dining-room table; there was the stain of lips at the rim of one, but not of the other two. Only one had been drunk out of, and probably a little of the liquid had been emptied out of this into the other two. On inquiry, one of the servants told me that only a very little of the spirit had been taken. She also said there was only one biscuit left in the box last night, and it was there now; therefore a few crumbs from the box must have been purposely scattered on the tablecloth.

This was the story I told to Professor Quarles and his granddaughter. I went to him at once, feeling that the case was just one of those in which his theoretical method was likely to be useful. By doing so I certainly saved one valuable life, possibly more than one.

That he was interested was shown by our adjournment to the empty room, and he did not ask a question until I had finished my story.

"What is the opinion you have formed about it, Wigan?" he said.

"I think there was only one burglar, but for some reason he thought it important that it should be believed there were more."

"A very important point, and a reasonable conclusion, I fancy," said Quarles. "If you are right, it narrows the sphere of inquiry – narrows it very much, taken with the other facts of the case."

"Exactly," I answered. "There is a suggestion to my mind of amateurishness in the affair. I grant the safe was not a difficult one to break open, but it had not been done in a very expert manner. The cigarette-ends, the dirty glasses, and the biscuit crumbs seem to me rather gratuitous deceptions, and – "

"Wait," said Quarles. "You assume a little too much. They would have deceived nine men out of ten – you happen to be the tenth man. Amateur or not, we have to deal with a very smart man, so don't underestimate the enemy, Wigan. Assuming this to be the work of an amateur, to what definite point does it lead you?"

"To this question," I replied. "Did Sir Joseph Maynard burgle his own house?"

"Why should you think so?"

"His manner was curious. Then there is only his own statement that nothing has been taken. But supposing he wished to get rid of papers, or of something else which was in his possession and for which he was responsible to others, a burglary would be an easy way out of the difficulty."

"Would he not have robbed himself of something to make the affair more plausible?" said Quarles.

"The amateur constantly overlooks the obvious," I answered.

The professor shook his head.

"Besides, Wigan, if he wanted to suggest that some important document had been stolen, that is just the one thing he would mention."

"I think that would entirely depend on the man's temperament, professor."

"That may be true, but we have also got to consider the man's character. Sir Joseph's standing is very high."

"Sudden temptation or necessity may subvert the highest character," I answered. "You know that as well as I do. When I questioned Sir Joseph about his papers his manner seemed curious, as I have said. He at once declared that he had no part in any Government secret or mysterious society, gratuitous information, you understand, not in answer to any direct question of mine, showing that the ideas were in his mind. Why? The explanation would be simple if he were the burglar of his own papers."

"I admit the argument is sound, Wigan, but it does not creep into my brain with any compelling influence. There is a link missing in the chain somewhere," and he looked at Zena.

His often-repeated statement that she helped him by her questions had never impressed me very greatly. When a mystery was cleared up, it was easy to say that Zena had put him on the right road, and I considered it a whim of his more than anything else. Still I am bound to say that her seemingly irrelevant questions often had a curious bearing on the problem. It was so now.

"You do not seem interested in the broken box of counters?" she said, turning toward her grandfather.

"I wonder, Wigan – is that the clew?" Quarles said quickly. "It creeps into my brain."

"The counters were in a heap," I said.

"As if they had fallen out of the box when it was broken?" asked Quarles.

"No, that would have scattered them more. They were round, and might have fallen over after having been put one upon another as one gathers coppers together when counting a number of them. Sir Joseph picked them up and put them on the writing-table while he was talking to me."

"Did that strike you as significant?" asked Quarles.

"I cannot say it did. The floor was covered with things, and I fancy they happened to be in his way, that was all."

"They are significant, Wigan, but I cannot see yet in which direction they lead us. We must wait; for the moment there is nothing to be done."

I had become so accustomed to Quarles jumping to some sudden conclusion that I was disappointed. I think I was prepared to find him a failure in this case. Naturally I was not idle during the next few days, but at the end of them I had learnt nothing.

Then the unexpected happened. On consecutive nights two doctors' houses were burgled. The first was in Kensington. Dr. Wheatley had taken some part in local politics which had made him unpopular with certain people, and he was inclined to consider the burglary one of revenge rather than intended robbery. Nothing had been stolen, but everything in his room was in disorder, and a small and unique inlaid cabinet with a secret spring lock had been smashed to pieces. Several cigarette-ends were on the floor.

The second was at Dr. Wood's in Ebury Street, an eminent surgeon, and the author of one or two textbooks. He had several cabinets in his room containing specimens, and everything had been turned on to the floor and damaged more or less. In fact, although nothing had been taken, the damage was considerable. On the night of the burglary Dr. Wood was away from home, only servants being in the house. The cook, suffering from faceache, had been restless all night, but had heard nothing. It seemed, however, that the burglar must have heard her moving about and had been prepared to defend himself, for a revolver, loaded in every chamber, was found on one of the cabinets. Apparently, having put it ready for use, he had forgotten to take it away.

The doctor was furious at the wanton destruction of his specimens, and, being irascible and suspicious, fancied the revolver was merely a blind and that the culprit was some jealous medical man. Again there were cigarette-ends among the débris.

As soon as possible I went to Quarles and was shown into the empty room.

"The unexpected has happened," I said.

"No, no; the expected," he said impatiently, and he pointed to a heap of newspapers. "I've read every report, but tell me yourself – every detail."

I did so.

"The same brand of cigarettes?" he asked.

"No, but all cheap American ones."

"One man trying to give the impression that he is several. You still think that? Nothing has happened to make you change that opinion?"

"No, I hold to the one man theory."

"And you are right," he snapped. "I admit I might not have got upon the right track had you not made that discovery. It was clever, Wigan."

"It did not seem to help you to a theory," I answered.

"True. But it made me ask myself a question. Had the thief found what he was looking for? Much depended upon the answer. If he had, I saw small chance of elucidating the mystery. I might have propounded a theory, but I should have had no facts to support it.

"Indeed, had I theorized, then my theory would have been wrong. If the thief had not found what he wanted, he would continue his search, I argued. For some reason he connected Sir Joseph Maynard with the object of his search, and, when he tried again, we stood a chance of finding the link in the chain we wanted. It might implicate Sir Joseph, it might not. That is why I said we must wait. The thief has tried again – twice. Now, what is he looking for?"

"Presumably something a doctor is likely to have," I said.

"And not silver, nor money, nor papers, nor – "

"Nor counters, I suppose," I interrupted.

"Not precisely," said Quarles. "But those counters have inspired me. They crept into my brain, Wigan, and remained there. Whatever it is the thief is seeking for, he is desperately anxious to obtain it – witness his two attempts on consecutive nights."

"You forget that days have elapsed since Sir Joseph's was broken into."

"Forget? Nonsense!" said the professor sharply. "Should I be likely to forget so important a point? It means that opportunity has been lacking. More, it means that any doctor would not do, only certain medical practitioners. And that is where the counters help me – or I think they do."

"How?"

"Call for me to-morrow morning; we are going to pay a visit together. We may be too late, but I hope not. That revolver left in Dr. Wood's house rather frightens me."

"Why, particularly?"

"It proves that the thief will use violence if he is disturbed, and that he is a desperate man. I should say he will grow more dangerous with every failure."

It was like Christopher Quarles to raise my curiosity, and then to leave it unsatisfied. It was his way of showing that he was my superior – at least, it always impressed me like this. No man has ever made me more angry than he has done. Yet I owe him much, and there is no gainsaying his marvelous deductions.

He made me angry now, first by his refusal to tell me more, and then by his patronizing air when I left the house.

"You are clever, Wigan, very clever. You have shown it in this case. But you lack imagination to step out as far as you ought to do. Cultivate imagination, and don't be too bound up by common sense. Common sense is merely the knowledge with which fools on the dead level are content. Imagination carries one to the hills, and shows something of that truth which lies behind what we call truth."

I found him ready and waiting for me next morning, as eager to be on the trail as a dog in leash.

"We are going to call on Dr. Tresman, in Montagu Street," he said, stopping a taxi. "You will tell him that you have reason to believe that his house is being watched, and will be burgled on the first opportunity. If the opportunity is given, it may happen to-night, which will suit us admirably, because we have got to keep watch every night in his room until it is burgled. Of course, you will tell him who you are, and get his permission. We don't want to have to commit burglary ourselves in order to catch the thief."

"Why do you expect this particular doctor will be visited?" I asked.

"It is part of my theory," was all the explanation I could get out of him.

Dr. Tresman was a man in the prime of life, and evidently believed himself capable of dealing with any thieves who visited him. I told him that the man we expected was no ordinary thief.

"A gang at work, eh? I have been out of town for a little while holiday-making, and part of my holiday consists in not reading the papers. Of course you may keep watch, and I shall be within call should you want help."

"You had better leave it to us, doctor," said Quarles, who, for the purpose of this interview, posed as my assistant.

"Come, now, if it means a rough-and-tumble, I should back myself against you," laughed Tresman, drawing himself up to his full inches.

"No lack of muscle, I can see, doctor, but then there is my experience."

"For all that, you may be glad of my muscle when it comes to the point," was the answer.

At nine o'clock that night Quarles and I were concealed in the doctor's room, Quarles behind a chesterfield sofa in a corner, while I crouched close to the wall behind one of the window curtains.

We had decided that the most likely means of entry was by a window at the end of the hall, and we expected our prey to enter the room by the door. We had got the doctor to put a spirit tantalus on the sideboard, also some biscuits and a box of cigarettes. We were anxious to reproduce the circumstances of the burglary at Sir Joseph Maynard's as nearly as possible, for Quarles declared it was impossible to say what significance there might be in the man's every action.

So we waited – waited all night, in fact. Nothing happened.

"Something alarmed him," was all Quarles said when we left the house in the morning.

He showed no disappointment, nor any sign that his theory had received a shock.

The next night we were on the watch again, concealed as before.

By arrangement, the house retired to rest early. So slowly did time go that half the night seemed to have passed when I heard a neighboring church clock strike one, and almost directly afterward the door of the room was opened stealthily and was shut again.

Until that moment I had not heard a sound in the house, and I was not certain that anyone had entered the room even now, until I saw a tiny disk, the end of a ray of light, on the wall. The disk moved, so the man holding the lantern was moving. The next moment he almost trod upon me. His first care was to see that the curtains covered the windows securely, and it evidently never occurred to him that there might be watchers in the room. It was discovery from without that he was afraid of. The ray from his lantern swung about the room for a moment, then he switched on the electric light.

As he had drawn the curtain closer across the window, I had arranged the folds so that no scrap of my clothing should show beneath them. Now I made a slit in the fabric with my penknife so that I could watch him through it. He was middle-aged, well groomed, decently dressed. Having glanced round the room, he placed a bag and the lantern on the floor and went to the sideboard. He put a little spirit into one of the tumblers and added a little water – a very modest dose, indeed – and, having just sipped it, he poured some of the contents into two other glasses, and placed the three glasses on a small table near the door, so that no one could fail to see them on entering. Then he broke off a piece of biscuit, crumbled it in his hands, and scattered the crumbs beside the glasses. The cigarette box he did not touch, but he took some cigarette-ends from his pocket and threw them on the floor. These preliminaries seemed stereotyped ones, and he appeared glad to be done with them.

There was a curious eagerness in his face as he bent down and opened his bag, taking a thin chisel from it, and from his hip pocket he took a revolver. His method was systematic. He began at one corner of the room, and opened every drawer and box he could find. If a drawer were locked, he pried it open. He laid the revolver ready to his hand upon the piece of furniture he was examining. Every drawer he emptied on to the floor. Some of the contents he hardly looked at. Indeed, most of the contents did not interest him. But now and then his attention was closer, and at intervals he seemed puzzled, standing quite still, his hands raised, a finger touching his head, almost as a low comedian does when he wishes the audience to realize that he is in deep thought.

For some time I could not make out what kind of article it was to which he gave special attention, but presently noticed that anything in ivory or bone interested him, especially if it were circular. I remembered the counters in Sir Joseph's room, and wished we had thought to place some in here to see what he would have done with them.

Watching him closely, I was aware that he became more irritable as he proceeded. One small cabinet, which might possess a secret hiding-place, he broke with the chisel, and I noticed that whenever a drawer was locked his scrutiny of the contents was more careful. He evidently expected that the man he was robbing would value the thing he was looking for, and would be likely to hide it securely.

He had worked round half the room when he suddenly stopped, and, with a quick movement, took up the revolver. I had not heard a sound in the house, but he had. There was no sign of doubt in his attitude, which was of a most uncompromising character. He did not make any movement to switch off the light, he did not attempt to conceal himself. He just raised his arm and pointed the revolver toward the door, on a level at which the bullet would strike the head of a man of average height.

The handle was turned, and the door began to open. The next five seconds were full of happenings. For just a fraction of time I realized that the burglar meant to shoot the intruder without a word of warning, and for a moment I seemed unable to utter a sound. Then I shouted:

"Back for your life!"

Immediately there was a sharp report. Quarles had fired from behind the Chesterfield, and the burglar's arm dropped like a dead thing to his side, his revolver falling to the floor.

"Quickly, Wigan!" Quarles cried.

I had dashed aside the curtain, and I threw myself upon the burglar just in time to prevent his picking up his weapon with his left hand. He struggled fiercely, and I was glad of Tresman's help in securing him, although the doctor had come perilously near to losing his life by his unexpected intrusion. But for Christopher Quarles he would have been a dead man.

We called in the police, and, when our prisoner had been conveyed to the station, the professor and I went back to Chelsea.

"Do you know what he was looking for, Wigan?" Quarles asked.

"Something in bone or ivory."

"Bone," answered Quarles. "Thank heaven that fool Tresman didn't come sooner! We might have missed much that was interesting. You noted how keen he was with every piece of bone he could find, how irritable he was growing. The counters, Wigan, they were the clew. But I did not understand their significance at first."

"I do not understand the case now," I confessed, "except that we have caught a mad burglar."

"Yes, it's an asylum case, not a prison one," said Quarles. "What was the man looking for? That was my first question, as I told you. If he had not found it at Sir Joseph's he would look again. He did, and visited two other doctors. Round counters – doctors. There was the link. I daresay you know, Wigan, there is an annual published giving particulars of all the hospitals, with the names of the medical staff, consulting surgeons and physicians, and so forth. In the paragraph concerning St. James's Hospital you will find that the first three names mentioned are Sir Joseph Maynard, Dr. Wheatley, and Dr. Wood. The fourth is Dr. Tresman. It could not be chance that the burglar had visited these men in exact order, so I argued that he would next go to Dr. Tresman. The man had had something to do with St. James's Hospital, and, since he was acting like a madman, yet with method, I judged he had been a patient who had undergone an operation, outwardly successful, really a failure. He was looking for something of which a doctor at this hospital had robbed him, as he imagined, and, not knowing which doctor, looked at this annual and began at the first name. I have no doubt he was conscious of the loss of some sense or faculty, and believed that if he could get back the something that was missing he would recover this sense. Moreover, he was exceedingly

anxious that no one should guess what he was looking for, so he attempted to suggest that a gang was at work – the glasses, the crumbs, the cigarette-ends, all placed where they would be certain to attract notice. Did you see how he touched his head several times to-night?"

"Yes."

"That gives the explanation, I think," said Quarles. "To relieve some injury to his head, he was trepanned at St. James's Hospital, and he was looking for the bone which the little circular trephine had cut from his head. I have no doubt he examined Sir Joseph's round counters very carefully to make sure that what he wanted was not among them, and he would naturally damage Dr. Wood's specimens. Probably the original pressure was relieved by the operation, but in some other way the brain was injured. We have seen the result."

Subsequent inquiry at St. James's Hospital proved that Quarles was right. The man was a gentleman of small independent means, a bachelor, and practically alone in the world. There was no one to watch his goings and comings, no one to take note of his growing peculiarities. His madness was intermittent, but the doctors said he would probably become worse, as, indeed, he did, poor fellow!

"Ah, it is wonderful what surgery can do," said Quarles afterward. "But there are limitations, Wigan, great limitations. And when we come to the brain, great heavens! We are mere babies playing with a mechanism of which we know practically nothing. No wonder we so often make a mess of it."

CHAPTER IV
THE STRANGE CASE OF MICHAEL HALL

Quarles was professedly a theorist, and I admit that he often outraged my practical mind. I believe the practical people govern the affairs of the world, but occasionally one is brought face to face with such strange occurrences that it is impossible not to speculate what would happen had not the world its theorists and dreamers too.

Early one morning about a week after the mad burglar's case, I received a wire from Zena Quarles, asking me to go to Chelsea as soon as possible. A request from her was a command to me, and, dispensing with breakfast, except for a hasty cup of coffee, I started at once. She came to the door herself.

"Come in here for a minute," she said, leading the way into the dining-room and closing the door. "Grandfather does not know I have sent for you. I am troubled about him. For the last three days he has not left his room. He will not let me go to him. His door is not locked, but he commanded me, quite irritably, not to come until he called for me. For three days he has not wanted my companionship, and never before do I remember so long an isolation."

"What is he doing?" I asked.

She did not answer at once, and when she did the words came with some hesitation.

"Of course, he is an extraordinary man, with powers which one cannot exactly define, powers which – don't think me foolish – powers which might prove dangerous. In a way, you and I understand him, but I think there is a region beyond into which we are not able to follow him. I admit there have been times when I have been tempted to think that some of his philosophical reasonings and fantastic statements were merely the eccentricities of a clever man – intentional mystifications, a kind of deceptive paraphernalia."

"I have thought so too," I said.

"We are wrong," she said decisively. "He wanders into regions into which we cannot follow – where he touches something which is outside ordinary understanding, and when he is only dimly conscious of the actualities about him. Don't you remember his saying once that we ought to strive toward the heights, and see the truth which lies behind what we call truth? He does climb there, I believe, and, in order that he may do so, his empty room and isolation are necessary. I wonder whether there is any peril in such a journey?"

I did not venture to answer. Being a practical man, a discussion on these lines was beyond me.

As I went to the professor's room I framed a knotty, if unnecessary, problem out of a case upon which I was engaged; but I was not to propound it.

I was suddenly plunged into a mystery which led to one of the most curious investigations I have ever undertaken, and showed a new phase of the professor's powers.

Christopher Quarles was sitting limply in the arm-chair, but he started as I entered, and looked at me with blinking eyes, as though he did not recognize me.

Energy returned to him suddenly, and he sat up.

"Paper and pencil," he said, pointing to the writing-table. I handed him a pencil and a writing-block.

By a gesture he intimated that he wanted me to watch him.

Quarles was no draughtsman. He had told me so – quite unnecessarily, because I had often seen him make a rough sketch to illustrate some argument, and he always had to explain what the various parts of the drawing stood for. Yet, as I watched him now, he began to draw with firm, determined fingers – a definite line here, another there, sometimes pausing for a moment as if to remember the relative position of a line or the exact curve in it.

For a time there seemed no connection between the lines, no meaning in the design.

I have seen trick artists at a music-hall draw in this way, beginning with what appeared to be the least essential parts, and then, with two or three touches, causing all the rest to fall into proper perspective and a complete picture. So it was with Quarles. Two or three quick lines, and the puzzle became a man's head and shoulders. No one could doubt that it was a portrait with certain characteristics exaggerated, not into caricature, but enough to make it impossible not to recognize the original from the picture. It was an attractive face, but set and rather tragic in expression.

Quarles did not speak. He surveyed his work for a few moments, slightly corrected the curve of the nostril, and then very swiftly drew a rope round the neck, continuing it in an uncertain line almost to the top of the paper. The sudden stoppage of the pencil give a jagged end to the line. The rope looked as if it had been broken. The effect was startling.

"Three times he has visited me," said Quarles. "First, just as the dusk was falling he stood in the window there, little more than a dark shadow against the light outside. The second time was when the lamp was lighted. I looked up suddenly, and he was standing there by the fireplace gazing at me intently. He was flesh and blood, real, not a ghost, no shape of mist trailing into my vision. An hour ago, at least it seems only an hour ago, he came again. The door opened, and he entered. He stood there just in front of me, as clearly visible in the daylight as you are, and as real. When you opened the door, I thought my visitor had come a fourth time."

"And what is the meaning of this – this broken rope?" I said, pointing to the drawing.

"Broken?" and he looked at the paper closely. "My hand stopped involuntarily. It is a good sign – encouraging – but the rope is not really broken yet. That is for us to accomplish."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that in one of His Majesty's prisons this man lies under sentence of death, that he is innocent of the crime, that he has been permitted to come to me for help."

"But – ?"

Quarles sprang from his chair.

"Ah, leave questioning alone. I do not know how much time we have to prevent injustice being done. Take this drawing, Wigan, find out where the man is, work night and day to get the whole history, and then come to me. We must not lose a moment. Providence must have sent you to Chelsea this morning – another sign of encouragement."

I did not explain how I came to be there, nor say there was no foundation for encouragement in my unexpected arrival. Indeed, but for my talk with Zena that morning, I should have been inclined to argue with him. As it was, I left Chelsea only half convinced that I was not being misled by the fantastic dream of a man not in his usual state of health.

I was soon convinced of my error.

Quarles's drawing was the portrait of a real man. He was lying under sentence of death in Worcestershire, the case against him so clear that there seemed to be no doubt about his guilt. The story was a sordid one, had created no sensation, had presented no difficult problem. But, under the peculiar circumstances, it was only natural that I should work with feverish haste to learn all the details of the crime, and I intimated to the authorities that facts had come to my knowledge which threw a doubt on the justice of the sentence, and that a postponement at least of the last penalty of the law would be advisable. This advice was not the outcome of anything I discovered; it was given entirely on my faith in Christopher Quarles.

Later I told the following story to the professor and Zena in the empty room.

"Michael Hall, the condemned man, is an artist," I said. "The portrait of him, Professor, is a good one. I have seen him, and he impresses you at once as possessing the artistic temperament. Whether he has anything beyond the temperament, I cannot judge, but the fact remains that he has had little success. He is a gentleman, and there is something convincing in the manner in which he protests his innocence. Yet I am bound to say that every circumstance points to his guilt. Possessed

of two or three hundred pounds, and an unlimited faith in himself, he married. There is one child, three years old. The money dwindled rapidly, and a year ago, to cut down expenses, he went to live at Thornfield, a village near Pershore, in Worcestershire. At Thornfield he became acquainted with an elderly gentleman named Parrish, a bookworm, something of a recluse, and an eccentric. For no particular reason, and apparently without any foundation, Mr. Parrish had the reputation of being a rich man. Generally speaking, the inhabitants of Thornfield are humble people, and the fact that Parrish had a little old silver may have given rise to the idea of his wealth. He does not appear to have had even a banking account.

"The old gentleman welcomed a neighbor of his own class, and Hall was constantly in his house. That Hall should come to Thornfield and live in a tiny cottage might suggest to anyone that he was not overburdened with this world's goods, but Hall declares that Parrish had no knowledge of his circumstances. Only on one occasion was Parrish in his cottage, and money was never mentioned between them. Yet Hall was in difficulties. He pawned several things in Pershore – small articles of jewelry belonging to his wife – giving his name as George Cross, and an address in Pershore. One evening – a Sunday evening – Hall was with Parrish. The housekeeper – Mrs. Ashworth, an elderly woman – the only servant living in the house, said in her evidence that Hall came at seven o'clock. The church clock struck as he came in. Her master expected him to supper. Hall says that he left at half-past nine, but Mrs. Ashworth said it was midnight when he went. She had gone to bed at nine – early hours are the rule in Thornfield – and had been asleep. She was always a light sleeper. She was roused by the stealthy closing of the front door, and just then midnight struck. Early next morning – they rise early in Thornfield – Mrs. Ashworth came down and found her master upon the floor of his study – dead. He had been struck down with a life-preserver, which was found in the room and belonged to Hall. The housekeeper ran out into the village street, but it seems there was nobody about, and some twenty minutes elapsed before anyone came to whom she could give the alarm.

"Hall's arrest followed. From the first he protested his innocence, but the only point in his favor appears to be the fact that he was found at his cottage, and had not attempted to run away. Everything else seems to point to his guilt. Although he says he left Parrish's house at half-past nine, he did not arrive home until after midnight. His wife innocently gave this information, and Hall, who had not volunteered it, explained his late return by saying that he was worried financially, and had gone for a lonely walk to think matters over. He admits that the life-preserver belonged to him. Mr. Parrish had spoken once or twice of the possibility of his being robbed, and that evening Hall had made him a present of the weapon, but had not told his wife that he was going to do so. The police discovered that two days before the murder a valuable silver salver belonging to Parrish had been pawned in Pershore in the name of M. Hall, and the pawnbroker's assistant identified Hall. A search among Parrish's papers after the murder resulted in the discovery of a recent will, under which all the property was left to Hall. The condemned man declared he was ignorant of this fact, but the prosecution suggested that his knowledge of it and the straits he was in for money were the motive for the crime. Except on the assumption that Hall is guilty there appears to be no motive for the murder. Nothing but this silver salver was missing."

Quarles had not interrupted me. He had listened to my narrative, his features set, his eyes closed, the whole of his mind evidently concentrated on the story. As I stopped I looked at Zena.

"I wonder the housekeeper did not look out of her bedroom window to see that it was Michael Hall who left the house," Zena said slowly.

"She slept at the back of the house," I returned.

"I had not thought of that." And then, after a pause, during which her grandfather's eyes remained fixed upon her as though he would compel her to say more, she went on: "How was it, since they are early risers in Thornfield, that Mrs. Ashworth had to wait twenty minutes before anyone came? The house isn't isolated, is it?"

"No. I understand it is in the middle of the village street."

"There may be something in that question, Wigan," said Quarles, becoming alert. "Tell me, are the house and its contents still untouched?"

"I believe so. According to Mrs. Ashworth, Mr. Parrish appears to have had only one relation living – a nephew, named Charles Eade. He lives in Birmingham, and at the trial said he knew nothing whatever about his uncle, and had not seen him for years."

"Any reason?"

"No; the family had drifted apart. I am simply stating what came out in the evidence."

"About the will," said Quarles. "Was any provision made for Mrs. Ashworth in it?"

"No; it leaves everything to Hall, and there is a recommendation to sell the books in London, except a few which are specially mentioned as being of no value intrinsically, and which Hall is advised to read. According to Hall, the old gentleman talked much about literature, and declared that the whole philosophy of life was contained in about a score of books. I have a copy of the list given in the will."

"Who witnessed the signature to the will?" Quarles asked.

"A lawyer in Pershore and his clerk. This was the only business transaction the lawyer had had with Mr. Parrish, and he knew little about him."

"I think we must go to Birmingham," said Quarles. "Sometimes there is only one particular standpoint from which the real facts can be seen, and I fancy Birmingham represents that standpoint for us. I suppose you can arrange for us to have access to Mr. Parrish's house at Thornfield, Wigan?"

"I will see about that," I answered.

"Are you sure Michael Hall is not guilty?" asked Zena.

"Were he guilty I should not have seen him," answered Quarles decidedly.

"His poor wife!" said Zena.

"Pray, dear, that we may carry sunlight to her again," said the professor solemnly.

I thought that our journey to Birmingham was for the purpose of interviewing Parrish's nephew, but it was not. Quarles got a list of the leading secondhand booksellers there.

"A bookworm, Wigan, remains a bookworm to the end of his days. Although nothing has been said about it, I warrant Mr. Parrish bought books and had them sent to Thornfield."

"He might have bought them in London," I said.

"I think it was Birmingham," said Quarles.

So far he was right. It was the third place we visited. Baines and Son was the firm, and we saw old Mr. Baines. He had constantly sold books to Mr. Parrish, of Thornfield, who had been to his shop several times, but their intercourse was chiefly by correspondence. Good books! Certainly. Mr. Parrish knew what he was doing, and never bought rubbish.

"His purchases might be expected to increase in value?" asked Quarles.

"Yes; but, forgive me, why these questions?"

"Ah! I supposed you would have heard. Mr. Parrish is dead."

"Indeed! I am very sorry to hear it."

"We are looking into his affairs," Quarles went on. "Is there any money owing to you?"

"No."

"The fact is, Mr. Parrish was murdered."

"Murdered!" exclaimed Baines, starting from his chair. "Do you mean for some treasured volume he possessed? Do you mean by some bibliomaniac?"

"You think he may have had such a treasure, then?"

"I know he had many rare and valuable books," Baines answered.

"You don't happen to know a bibliomaniac who might commit murder?" said Quarles.

"No."

"Such information would help us, because a young man has been condemned for the murder, a man named Hall – Michael Hall."

"I never heard of him," said Baines. "I wonder I did not see the case in the paper."

"It caused little sensation," said Quarles. "At present it seems one of those crimes committed for small gain."

"Mr. Parrish must have been a man of considerable means," said the bookseller; "considerable means, although he was eccentric about money. He always sent me cash, or some check he had received, with a request that I would return him the balance in cash. Indeed, I have constantly acted as his banker. He has sent me checks and asked me to send him notes for them."

"Where did those checks come from – I mean whose were they? Were they for dividends?"

"Possibly, one or two of them, I do not remember; but I fancy he sold books sometimes, and the checks represented the purchase money."

We thanked Mr. Baines, and then, just as we were leaving, Quarles said:

"By the way, do you happen to know a Mr. Charles Eade?"

"A solicitor?" queried the bookseller.

"I didn't know he was a solicitor, but he is a relation of Mr. Parrish's, I believe," Quarles answered.

"I was not aware of that," Baines returned. "Mr. Eade's office is in West Street – No. 40, I think. He comes in here occasionally to make small purchases."

"Not a bookworm like his uncle, eh?"

"Neither the taste nor the money, I should imagine," said Baines.

As soon as we were in the street the professor turned to me.

"That has been an interesting interview, Wigan. What do you think of the bibliomaniac idea?"

"I suppose it goes to confirm your theory?" I said.

"On the contrary, it was a new idea to me. It would be an idea well worth following if we found that one or two of Parrish's valuable books were missing; but we'll try another trail first. I think we will go to Pershore next."

"How about Charles Eade?"

"I expect he is in his office in West Street. I don't want to see him. Do you?"

"We might call upon him so as to leave no stone unturned. I don't think you quite appreciate the difficulty of this case. The man may be innocent, but we have got to prove it."

"My dear Wigan, if Baines had said that Eade was a bibliomaniac I should have gone to West Street at once. Since he is only a lawyer, I am convinced we should get no useful information out of him. Besides, he might very reasonably resent our interference in his uncle's affairs. It will be time enough to communicate with him when we have made some discovery which will help Michael Hall."

Next morning we journeyed to Pershore.

"Yesterday you suggested that I had a theory, Wigan," said Quarles, who had been leaning back in the corner of the railway carriage apparently asleep, but now became mentally energetic. "As a fact, my theory went no further than this: A bookworm in all probability buys books; to buy books requires money; therefore he must have money. In Thornfield Mr. Parrish was considered a man of means; our friend Baines confirms that belief. My theory is established."

"It doesn't carry us very far," I said.

"It provides another motive for the murder – robbery. The bookseller's story suggests that Parrish must have kept a considerable sum of money in the house. It is said nothing was taken, but a large amount in notes may be stolen without leaving any noticeable space vacant. Just one step forward we may take. If such a sum existed, as is probable, remember Parrish might at times think of burglars, might have mentioned his fears, without giving a reason, to Hall, and Hall, having a life-preserver, might make a present of it to his friend."

I did not contradict him, but, personally, I was not at all convinced.

From the station we went straight to the pawnbroker's and had an interview with the assistant who had identified Hall as the man who pawned the salver. We arranged that I was a detective helping the professor, who was interested in Hall, and could not believe that he was guilty. It proved an excellent line to adopt, for it brought out the young fellow's sympathy. I asked questions, after stating our position, and for a time Quarles remained an interested listener. The assistant described Hall fairly accurately.

"He had pawned things before, hadn't he?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You recognized Hall at once?"

"Yes – "

"There is one very curious point," I said: "so long as the articles were his own, and he had a right to pawn them, he gave a false name; yet, when he pawns an article he had stolen, he gave his own name."

"I think it seems more curious than it is," was the answer. "My experience is that whenever an important article is pawned the correct name is given. The affair becomes a financial transaction which there is no reason to be ashamed of."

"I understood that Hall had pawned things of some value before this salver," said Quarles; "jewelry belonging to his wife, for instance. Why didn't he give his own name then?"

"It is rather the importance of the article which counts than its actual value," said the assistant. "In this case I have no doubt the prisoner would have said that he had temporarily borrowed the salver. He must redeem it presently; it was an important matter, and by giving his own name the transaction seemed almost honest."

Quarles nodded, as though this argument impressed him; then he said suddenly:

"What is George Cross like?"

"That was the false name Hall used."

"Did you comment upon the fact when he pawned the salver in his own name?"

"No."

"It would have been natural to do so, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps; but we were busy at the time, and – "

"And it didn't occur to you," said Quarles. "Now I suggest that when you picked out Hall you were really identifying the man you knew as George Cross, and that the man who pawned the salver and gave the name Hall was a different person altogether."

"No."

"Are you sure the salver was not pawned by a woman?"

"Certain."

"But you might reconsider your original statement if I produced another man?"

"If such a person exists, why has it not been suggested to me, say, by a photograph?"

The professor nodded and smiled, but I could get nothing out of him that evening, not even whether he was hopeful or not.

Next morning we went to Thornfield. I had arranged that we should be allowed to visit the house. For the time being, the local constable had the keys, and we went to his house first. Quarles set him talking about the crime at once.

"Is Mrs. Hall still in the village?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. That's her cottage yonder," and he pointed down the village street. "Poor thing, we all sympathize with her."

"And Mrs. Ashworth, is she still here?"

"No, sir. She was willing, I believe, to remain in charge of Mr. Parrish's house, but it was decided that I should have the keys and look after it. She took a room in the village until after the trial; then she left."

"How long had she been with Mr. Parrish, constable?"

"About a year, sir. You're not thinking she had anything to do with the murder, are you? She wasn't equal to it. She is a little bit of a woman, and it was a tremendous blow which killed Mr. Parrish."

"It was quite early in the morning when she discovered the dead man, wasn't it?"

"Yes; before the village was awake."

"What do you know about Mr. Parrish's nephew?"

"I understand he claims the property as next-of-kin," said the constable; "but he hasn't been near the place, so I don't suppose he expects to be much richer for his uncle's death."

Quarles and I went through the village to Parrish's house, which was the most important in the street, but was of no great size. The room in which the dead man had been found was lined with books, and, with some excitement manifest in his face, Quarles took several volumes from the shelves and examined them.

"Value here, Wigan. The old gentleman knew what he was buying. These shelves represent a lot of money, even if he had no other investments. Have you the list of the books Hall was recommended to keep?"

I had. There were eighteen books in all, such classics as "Lamb's Essays," "Reynold's Discourses," and "Pope's Homer." We found only ten of them, and careful search convinced us that the others were not on the shelves.

"If you are looking for a cryptogram – a key to the hiding place of a fortune – the missing books spoil it," I said.

"I confess that something of the kind was in my mind," said Quarks excitedly, "but the missing books are going to help us. The old gentleman had not read these books himself. See, Wigan, uncut pages; at least" – he took out a penknife – "not uncut, but carefully gummed together. I hadn't thought of this."

He slit the pages apart, and from between them took a ten-pound note. Other pages, when unfastened, yielded other notes – five pounds, twenty pounds, and one was for fifty pounds.

"Enough, Wigan!" he exclaimed. "We've something better to do than find bank-notes. You must see the constable at once, and tell him there is treasure in this house which requires special protection. Then communicate with the Birmingham police, and tell them not to lose sight of Charles Eade, and let them also have a description of Mrs. Ashworth. I expect she is lying low in Birmingham."

"I don't follow your line of reasoning, professor."

"I had no very definite theory beyond thinking that Mr. Parrish must be a man of considerable means," said Quarles. "That fact once established, we had a motive for the murder, which did not seem applicable to Michael Hall. It was said that nothing beyond the salver was missing. Only Mrs. Ashworth could establish that fact. You remember Zena's question: 'How was it, since people were such early risers in Thornfield, that Mrs. Ashworth had to wait so long before anyone came?' There was one obvious answer. She was up much earlier than usual that morning, perhaps had not been to bed that night. The constable had said that the village was not awake. Again, it was Mrs. Ashworth who gave information about the nephew in Birmingham. It is possible Parrish may have mentioned him to his housekeeper, but, since she had only been with him a year, and the old gentleman held no communication with his nephew, it is unlikely. Once more, the housekeeper was a little too definite about the time. She had a story to tell. The precision might be the result of careful rehearsal. These points were in my mind from the first, but they were too slight for evidence. Now the missing volumes give us the link we want. Who could have taken them? Either

Mrs. Ashworth, or someone with her connivance. I don't think it was Mrs. Ashworth. I believe it was the man who murdered Mr. Parrish."

"His nephew?"

"Charles Eade; but I do not think he is his nephew. Let me reconstruct the plot. Supposing Eade, either from Mr. Baines or from some assistant in his shop, heard of Parrish and his eccentricities, he would naturally assume that a lot of money was kept in this house. When, a year ago, Mr. Parrish wanted a housekeeper the opportunity came to establish a footing here; so Mrs. Ashworth, the accomplice, came to Thornfield. A man like Parrish would be secretive, not easy to watch; but in time the housekeeper would find out where he hid his money, and would note the books. She would only be able to note those used during the past year – the eight books which are missing, Wigan. Now the robbery had to be carefully arranged, suspicion must be thrown upon someone, and Hall was at hand. To emphasize his need of money, the salver was pawned, I thought by Mrs. Ashworth, but doubtless Eade did it himself, choosing a busy time. The scoundrels chose the night when Hall was having supper with the old man, and whether the original intention was robbery only or murder, everything worked in their favor. Eade took the eight books away that night, and the housekeeper stayed to give the alarm and tell her story. Now, mark what happens. After the murder a will is found in which eighteen books are mentioned, and immediately we hear through Mrs. Ashworth that Mr. Parrish has a nephew living, who, as the constable tells us, had laid claim to the property. The villains are greedy, and want the other ten volumes."

"Is there any real evidence to support the story, professor?"

"Yes; those eight missing books, which will be found in the possession of Charles Eade."

Few men have received less sympathy than Charles Eade when he paid the last penalty of the law. He was not only a murderer, but had intended to let an innocent man suffer. The missing volumes were found, and some of the money saved; and it was a satisfaction that Mrs. Ashworth, who was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, confessed. Her story agreed with Quarles's theory in almost every particular, even to the fact that Eade was no relation to the dead man.

Quarles and I visited the Halls afterward, and the professor very simply told them of his experience, offering no explanation, expressing no opinion.

But as we traveled back to London, he said to me:

"If men were ready to receive them, such manifestations of mercy would be constant experiences. Is it not only natural they should be? Take a child; he is only happy and secure because every moment of his life his parents help him, protect him, think for him. Without such care and thought, would he live to become a man? It is a marvelous thing that, whereas a child learns to lean wholly on the wisdom of his parents, man, as a rule, seems incapable of wholly trusting an Almighty wisdom; and, when he is forced to realize it, calls it miraculous. The miracle would be if these things did not happen."

I did not answer. We were both silent until the train ran into Paddington.

CHAPTER V
THE EVIDENCE OF THE CIGARETTE-END

I suppose I have my fair share of self-confidence, but there have been occasions when I have felt intuitively that the only chance of success was to have Quarles with me from the beginning. The Kew mystery was a case in point.

It was half-past nine when the telephone bell rang. At first the inspector on duty at the station could only hear a buzzing sound, followed by a murmur of voices, which might have come from the exchange; then came the single word, "Police!" As soon as he had answered in the affirmative the message came in quick gasps in a woman's voice:

"Hambledon Road – fourteen – come – it's murder! Quick, I'm being – "

There was a faint cry, as though the woman had been suddenly dragged from the instrument.

The inspector at once sent off a constable, who, with Constable Baker, the man on the Hambledon Road beat at the time, went to No. 14. Their knock was not answered very promptly. A servant came to the door, still fidgeting with her cap and apron, as though she had put them on hastily, and she gave a start when she saw the policeman. She said her mistress – a Mrs. Fitzroy – was at home, but she seemed a little reluctant to let the officers walk into the dining-room without a preliminary announcement, which was only natural, perhaps. They entered to find the room empty. Mrs. Fitzroy was not in the house. The servant knew nothing about the telephone call. She said it was her night out, that she had come in by the back door, as usual, and was upstairs taking off her hat and jacket when the policeman knocked.

This was the outline of the mystery which I gave to Christopher Quarles as we walked from Kew Gardens Railway Station to Hambledon Road. The investigation had only been placed in my hands that morning, and I knew no details myself.

"Shall we find Constable Baker at the house?" he asked presently.

"Yes; I have arranged that," I answered.

The house was a fair size, semi-detached, with half a dozen steps up to the front door, and it had a basement. There was a small window on the right of the door which gave light to a wide passage hall, and on the other side was the large window of the dining-room.

Baker opened the door for us.

"No news of Mrs. Fitzroy?" I asked.

"None, sir." He was a smart man. I had worked with him before.

"What time was it when you entered the house last night?" asked Quarles.

"Ten o'clock, sir. A clock struck while we were standing on the steps."

"Was the light burning in the hall and in the dining-room?"

"Yes, sir; full on."

"And the dining-room door was shut?"

"Yes, sir."

"You searched the house for Mrs. Fitzroy?"

"We did. Have you just come from the police station?"

"No."

"I have reported one or two points," said Baker. "The gardens of these houses all have a door opening onto a footpath, on the other side of which there is a tennis club ground.

"The path ends in a blank wall at one end; the other end comes out into Melbury Avenue, a road running at right angles to Hambledon Road. I found the garden gate here unbolted, and the servant, Emma Lewis, says she has never known it to be unfastened before. Also in Melbury Avenue last evening I saw a taxi waiting. I saw it first at about eight o'clock, and it was still there at

a quarter past nine, when I spoke to the driver. He said he had brought a gentleman down, who had told him to wait there, and had then walked up Melbury Avenue. It was not the first time he had driven him to the avenue, and the driver supposed it was a clandestine love affair. After we found that Mrs. Fitzroy was missing, I went to look for the taxi. It had gone. I had noticed the number, however, and they are making inquiries at the police station."

"Good," said Quarles. "Now let us look at the dining-room. Nothing has been moved, I suppose."

"It's just as we found it last night," Baker returned.

It was a well-furnished room. An easy chair was close to the hearth, and an ordinary chair was turned sideways to the table. A swivel-chair was pushed back from the writing-table, which was in the window, and the telephone, which evidently stood on this table as a rule, was hanging over it, suspended by the cord, the receiver being upon its hook. The telephone directory lay open on the blotting-pad. For some time Quarles was interested in the telephone, the directory, and the pad, then he turned to take in the general aspect of the room.

"Some man was here, evidently," I said, pointing to the ashes on the tiled hearth, "and was smoking. It looks as if he had smoked at his ease for some time."

"Seated in one of those chairs probably," said Quarles. "Some ash is on the writing-table, too."

He took up a sheet of paper and scooped up a little of the ash from the hearth and examined it under his lens; and, having done this, he raked about in the cinders, but found nothing to interest him.

"I want a cigarette-end," he said, looking first in the coal-box, then along the mantelpiece and in the little ornaments there, and, finally, in the paper basket. "Ah, here is one. Thrown here, it suggests that the smoker might have been seated at the table, doesn't it? We progress, Wigan; we progress."

It was always impossible to tell whether the professor's remarks expressed his real opinion, or whether they were merely careless words spoken while his mind was busy in an altogether different direction. I hardly saw where our progression came in. I examined the carpet. If anyone had entered in a hurry to kidnap Mrs. Fitzroy he would not have spent much time in wiping his boots. I found a little soil on the hearthrug and by the writing-table. I pointed it out to the professor, who was still looking at the cigarette which lay in the palm of his hand.

"Yes, very interesting," said Quarles. "I expect the man came by way of the garden and brought a little earth from that pathway with him. What do you make of this cigarette?"

"A cheap kind. Perhaps the lady smokes."

"We'll ask the servant. By the way, Baker, do you happen to know Mrs. Fitzroy?"

"I've seen a lady come out of this house on one or two occasions," answered the constable. "I described her to the servant, and have no doubt it was Mrs. Fitzroy. She is rather good-looking, fifty or thereabouts, but takes some pains to appear younger, I fancy."

"You are observant," Quarles remarked. "Shall we have the servant in, Wigan?"

Emma Lewin told us that she had been with Mrs. Fitzroy for over three years. Last night she had gone out as usual about six o'clock. She had left by the back door and had taken the key with her. She always did so. She returned just before ten, and had gone straight upstairs to take off her hat and jacket. She always did this before going in to see whether her mistress required anything.

"Was the dining-room door shut when you went upstairs?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You did not go by the garden gate last night?"

"No. I never go that way. The gate is never used."

"Did Mrs. Fitzroy have many visitors?"

"None to speak of. Not half a dozen people have called upon her since I have been here. I believe she had no relations. Once or twice a week she would be out all day, and occasionally she has been away for a night or two."

"Where has she gone on these occasions?" I asked.

"I do not know."

"And her correspondence – was it large?"

"She received very few letters," the servant answered; "whether she wrote many, I cannot say. I certainly didn't post them."

"Did she use the telephone much?"

"She gave orders to the tradesmen sometimes, and I have heard the bell ringing occasionally. You see, the kitchen is a basement one, and the bell might often ring without my hearing it."

"Did your mistress smoke?" Quarles asked suddenly.

"No, sir."

"How do you know she didn't?"

"I have heard her say she didn't agree with women smoking. Besides, when doing the rooms I should have found cigarette-ends."

"That seems conclusive," said Quarles. "Yesterday was Wednesday, your night out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is Wednesday always your night out?"

"It is."

"From six to ten?"

"Yes; it is a standing arrangement; nothing ever interferes with it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.