

Jenkins Herbert George

Malcolm Sage, Detective



Herbert Jenkins

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Jenkins Herbert George Malcolm Sage, Detective

CHAPTER I SIR JOHN DENE RECEIVES HIS ORDERS

I

"John!"

"Yeh!"

"Don't say 'yeh,' say 'yes,' Dorothy dear."

"Yes, Dorothy de – "

Sir John Dene was interrupted in his apology by a napkin-ringwhizzing past his left ear.

"What's wrong?" he enquired, laying aside his paper and picking up the napkin-ring.

"I'm trying to attract your attention," replied Lady Dene, slipping from her place at the breakfast-table and perching herself upon the arm of her husband's chair. She ran her fingers lightly through his hair. "Are you listening?"

"Sure!"

"Well, what are you going to do for Mr. Sage?"

In his surprise at the question, Sir John Dene jerked up his head to look at her, and Dorothy's forefinger managed to find the corner of his eye.

He blinked vigorously, whilst she, crooning apologies into his ear, dabbed his eye with her handkerchief.

"Now," she said, when the damage had been repaired, "I'll go and sit down like a proper, respectable wife of a D.S.O.," and she returned to her seat. "Well?" she demanded, as he did not speak. "Yes, dear."

"What are you going to do for Mr. Sage, now that Department Z is being demobbed? You know you like him, because you didn't want to ginger him up, and you mustn't forget that he saved your life," she added.

"Sure!"

"Don't say 'sure,' John," she cried. "You're a British baronet, and British baronets don't say 'sure,' 'shucks' or 'vamoose.' Do you understand?"

He nodded thoughtfully;

"I like Mr. Sage," announced Dorothy. Then a moment later she added, "He always reminds me of the superintendent of a Sunday-school, with his conical bald head and gold spectacles. He's not a bit like a detective, is he?"

"Sure!"

"If you say it again, John, I shall scream," she cried.

For some seconds there was silence, broken at length by Dorothy.

"I like his wonderful hands, too," she continued. "I'm sure he's proud of them, because he can never keep them still. If you say 'sure,' I'll divorce you," she added hastily.

He smiled, that sudden, sunny smile she had learned to look for and love.

"Then again I like him because he's always courteous and kind. At Department Z they'd have had their appendixes out if Mr. Sage wanted them. Now have you made up your mind?"

"Made it up to what?" he asked, lighting a cigar.

"That you're going to set him up as a private detective," she said coolly. "I don't want him to come here and not find everything planned out."

"He won't do that," said Sir John Dene with conviction. "He's not a dog."

"I wrote and asked him to call at ten to-day," she said coolly.

"Snakes, you did!" he cried, sitting up in his chair.

"Alligators, I did!" she mocked.

"You're sure some wife," he looked at her admiringly.

"I sure am," she laughed lightly, "but I'm only just beginning, John dear. By the way, I asked Sir James Walton to come too," she added casually.

"You – " he began, when the door opened and a little, silver-haired lady entered. Sir John Dene jumped to his feet.

"Behold the mother of the bride," cried Dorothy gaily.

"Good morning, John," said Mrs. West as he bent and kissed her cheek.

She always breakfasted in her room; she abounded in tact.

"Now we'll get away from the eggs and bacon," cried Dorothy. "In the language of the woolly West, we'll vamoose," and she led the way out of the dining-room along the corridor to Sir John Dene's den.

"Come along, mother-mine," she cried over her shoulder. "We've got a lot to discuss before ten o'clock."

Sir John Dene's "den" was a room of untidiness and comfort. As Dorothy said, he was responsible for the untidiness and she the comfort.

"Heigh-ho!" she sighed, as she sank down into a comfortable chair. "I wonder what Whitehall would have done without Mr. Sage," she smiled reminiscently. "He was the source of half its gossip."

"He was very kind to you, Dorothy, when John was – was lost," said Mrs. West gently, referring to the time when Sir John Dene had disappeared and a reward of 20,000 pounds had been offered for news of him.

"Sure!" Sir John Dene acquiesced. "He's a white man, clean to the bone."

"It was very wonderful that an accountant should become such a clever detective," said Mrs. West. "It shows – " she paused.

"You see, he wasn't a success as an accountant," said Dorothy. "He was always finding out little wangles that he wasn't supposed to see. So when they wouldn't have him in the army, he went to the Ministry of Supply and found out a great, big wangle, and Mr. Llewellyn John was very pleased. You get me, Honest John?" she demanded, turning to her husband.

Sir John Dene nodded and blew clouds of cigar smoke from his lips. He liked nothing better than to sit listening to his wife's reminiscences of Whitehall, despite the fact that he had heard most of them before.

"Poor Mr. Sage," continued Dorothy, "nobody liked him, and he's got such a lovely down on his head, just like a baby," she added, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"Perhaps no one understood him," suggested Mrs. West, with instinctive charity for the Ishmaels of the world.

"Isn't that like her," cried Dorothy, "but this time she's right," she smiled across at her mother. "When a few thousand tons of copper went astray, or someone ordered millions of shells the wrong size, Mr. Sage got the wind up, and tried to find out all about it, and in Whitehall such things weren't done."

"They tried to put it up on me," grumbled Sir John Dene, twirling his cigar with his lips, "but I soon stopped their funny work."

"Everybody was too busy winning the war to bother about trifles," Dorothy continued. "The poor dears who looked after such things found life quite difficult enough, with only two hours for lunch and pretty secretaries to be – "

"Dorothy!" cried Mrs. West reproachfully.

"Well, it's true, mother," she protested.

It was true, as Malcolm Sage had discovered. "Let us concentrate on what we know we *have* got," one of his chiefs had once gravely said to him. "Something is sure to be swallowed up in the fog of war," he had added. Pleased with the phrase, which he conceived to be original, he had used it as some men do a titled relative, with the result that Whitehall had clutched at it gratefully.

"The fog of war," General Conyers Bardolph had muttered when, for the life of him, he could not find a division that was due upon the Western Front and which it was his duty to see was sent out.

"The fog of war," murmured spiteful Anita McGowan, when the pretty little widow, Mrs. Sleyton, was being interrogated as to the whereabouts of her husband.

"The fog of war," laughed the girls in Department J.P.Q., when at half-past four one afternoon neither its chief nor his dark-eyed secretary had returned from lunch.

"But when he went to Department Z he was wonderful," said Mrs. West, still clinging tenderly to her Ishmael.

"He was," said Sir John Dene. "He was the plumb best man at his job I ever came across."

"Yes, John dear, that's all very well," said Dorothy, her eyes dancing, "but suppose you had been the War Cabinet and you had sent for Mr. Sage;" she paused.

"Well?" he demanded.

"And he had come in a cap and a red tie," she proceeded, "and had resigned within five minutes, saying that you were talking of things you didn't know anything about." She laughed at the recollection.

"He was right," said Sir John Dene with conviction. "I've come across some fools; but –"

"There, there, dear," said Dorothy, "remember there are ladies present. In Whitehall we all loved Mr. Sage because he snubbed Ministers, and we hadn't the pluck to do it ourselves," she added.

Sir John Dene snorted. His mind travelled back to the time when he had been "up against the whole sunflower-patch," as he had once expressed it.

"But why did they keep him if they didn't like him?" enquired Mrs. West.

"When you don't like anyone in Whitehall," Dorothy continued, "you don't give him the push, mother dear, you just transfer him to another department."

"Like circulating bad money," grumbled Sir John Dene.

"It sure was, John," she agreed. "Poor Mr. Sage soon became the most transferred man in Whitehall. They used to say, 'Uneasy lies the head that has a Sage.'" She laughed at the recollection.

"But wasn't it rather unkind?" said Mrs. West gently.

"It was, mother-mine; but Whitehall was a funny place. One of Mr. Sage's chiefs went about for months trying to get rid of him. He offered to give a motor-cycle to anyone who would take him, it was a Government cycle," she added; "but there was nothing doing. We called him Henry the Second and Mr. Sage Becket, the archbishop not the boxer," she explained. "You know," she added, "there was once an English king who wanted to get rid of –"

"We'll have it the sort of concern that insurance companies can look to," Sir John Dene broke in.

"What on earth are you talking about, John?" cried Dorothy.

Whilst his wife talked Sir John Dene had been busy planning Malcolm Sage's future, and he had uttered his thoughts aloud. He proceeded to explain. When he had finished, Dorothy clapped her hands.

"Hurrah! for Malcolm Sage, Detective," she cried and, jumping up, she perched herself upon the arm of her husband's chair, and rumbled the fair hair, which with her was always a sign of approval. "That's his ring, or Sir James's," she added as the bell sounded.

"Now we'll leave you lords of creation to carry out my idea," she said as she followed Mrs. West to the door.

And Sir John Dene smiled.

II

"In the States they've got Pinkerton's," said Sir John Dene, twirling with astonishing rapidity an unlit cigar between his lips. "If you've lost anything, from a stick-pin to a mountain, you just blow in there, tell them all about it, and go away and don't worry. Here you've got nothing."

"We have Scotland Yard," remarked Malcolm Sage quietly, without looking up from the contemplation of his hands, which, with fingers wide apart, rested upon the table before him.

His bald, conical head seemed to contradict the determined set of his jaw and the steel-coloured eyes that gazed keenly through large gold-rimmed spectacles. Even his ears, that stood squarely out from his head, appeared to emphasise by their aggressiveness that they had nothing to do with the benevolent shape of the head above.

"Yes, and you've got Cleopatra's Needle, and the pelicans in St. James's Park," Sir John Dene retorted scornfully. He had never forgotten the occasion when, at a critical moment in the country's history, the First Lord of the Admiralty had casually enquired if he had seen the pelicans.

For the last half-hour Sir John Dene, with characteristic impulsiveness, had been engaged in brushing aside all Malcolm Sage's "cons" with his almighty "Pro."

"We'll have a Pinkerton's in England," he resumed, as neither of his listeners took up his challenge, "and we'll call it Sage's."

"I shall in all probability receive quite a number of orders for shop-fronts," murmured Malcolm Sage, with a slight fluttering at the corners of his mouth, which those who knew him understood how to interpret.

"Shop-fronts!" repeated Sir John Dene, looking from one to the other,

"I don't get you."

"There is already a well-known firm of shop-furnishers called Sage's," explained Sir James, who throughout the battle had been an amused listener.

"Well, we'll call it the Malcolm Sage Detective Bureau," replied Sir John Dene, "and we'll have it a concern that insurance companies can look to." He proceeded to light his cigar, with him always a sign that something of importance had been settled.

Sir John Dene liked getting his own way. That morning he had resolutely brushed aside every objection, ethical or material, that had been advanced. To Malcolm Sage he considered that he owed a lot,¹ and with all the aggressiveness of his nature, he overwhelmed and engulfed objection and protest alike. To this was added the fact that the idea was his wife's, and in his own phraseology, "that goes."

Passive and attentive, his long shapely hands seldom still, Malcolm Sage had listened. From time to time he ventured some objection, only to have it brushed aside by Sir John Dene's overwhelming determination.

For some minutes Malcolm Sage had been stroking the back of his head with the palm of his right hand, a habit of his when thoughtful. Suddenly he raised his eyes and looked across at his would-be benefactor.

"Why should you want to do this for me, Sir John?" he asked.

"If you're going to put up a barrage of whys," was the irascible retort, "you'll never cut any ice."

"I fully appreciate the subtlety of the metaphor," said Malcolm Sage, the corners of his mouth twitching; "but still why?"

"Well, for one thing I owe you something," barked Sir John Dene, "and remembering's my long suit. For another, Lady Dene –"

¹ See John Dene of Toronto for the story of how Malcolm Sage frustrated the enemies of Sir John Dene.

"That is what I wanted to know," said Malcolm Sage, as he drew his briar from his pocket and proceeded to fill it. "Will you thank Lady Dene and tell her that I am proud to be under an obligation to her – and to you, Sir John," he added.

"Say, that's fine," cried Sir John Dene, jumping to his feet and extending his hand, which Malcolm Sage took, an odd, quizzical expression in his eyes. "This Detective Bureau notion is a whale."

"The zoological allusion, I'm afraid, is beyond me," said Malcolm Sage as he struck a match, "but no doubt you are right," and he looked across at Sir James Walton, whose eyes smiled his approval.

"It's all fixed up," cried Sir John Dene to his wife as she came out into the hall as the visitors were departing.

"I'm so glad," she cried, giving her hand to Malcolm Sage. "You'll be such a success, Mr. Sage," and she smiled confidently up into his eyes.

"With such friends," he replied, "failure would be an impertinence," and he and Sir James Walton passed out of the flat to return to what was left of the rapidly demobilising Department Z, which had made history by its Secret Service work.

In a few days the news leaked out that "M.S.," as Malcolm Sage was called by the staff, was to start a private-detective agency. The whole staff promptly offered its services, and there was much speculation and heart-burning as to who would be selected.

On hearing that she was to continue to act as Malcolm Sage's secretary, Miss Gladys Norman had done a barn-dance across the room, her arrival at the door synchronising with the appearance of Malcolm Sage from without. It had become a tradition at Department Z that "M.S." could always be depended upon to arrive at the most embarrassing moment of any little dramatic episode; but it was equally well-known that he possessed a "blind-side" to his vision. They called it "the Nelson touch."

James Thompson, Malcolm Sage's principal assistant, and William Johnson, the office junior, had also been engaged, and their enthusiasm has been as great as that of their colleague, although less dramatically expressed.

A battle royal was fought over the body of Arthur Tims, Malcolm Sage's chauffeur. Sir John Dene had insisted that a car and a chauffeur were indispensable to a man who was to rival Pinkerton's. Malcolm Sage, on the other hand, had protested that it was an unnecessary expense in the early days of a concern that had yet to justify itself. To this Sir John Dene had replied, "Shucks!" at the same time notifying Tims that he was engaged for a year, and authorising him to select a car, find a garage, and wait instructions.

Tims did not do a barn-dance. He contented himself for the time being with ruffling William Johnson's dark, knot-like hair, a thing to which he was much addicted. Returning home on the evening of his engagement he had bewildered Mrs. Tims by seizing her as she stood in front of the kitchen-stove, a frying-pan full of sausages in her hand, and waltzing her round the kitchen, frying-pan and all.

Subsequently five of the six sausages had been recovered; but the sixth was not retrieved until the next morning when, in dusting, Mrs. Tims discovered it on the mantelpiece.

CHAPTER II THE STRANGE CASE OF MR. CHALLONER

I

"Please, sir, Miss Norman's fainted." William Johnson, known to his colleagues as the innocent, stood at Malcolm Sage's door, with widened eyes and a general air that bespoke helplessness.

Without a word Malcolm Sage rose from his table, as if accustomed all his life to the fainting of secretaries. William Johnson stood aside, with the air of one who has rung a fire-alarm and now feels he is at liberty to enjoy the fire itself.

Entering her room, Malcolm Sage found Gladys Norman lying in a heap beside her typewriter. Picking her up he carried her into his own room, placed her in an arm-chair, fetched some brandy from a small cupboard and, still watched by the wide-eyed William Johnson, proceeded to force a little between her teeth.

Presently her lids flickered and, a moment later, she opened her eyes. For a second there was in them a look of uncertainty, then suddenly they opened to their fullest extent and became fixed upon the door beyond. Malcolm Sage glanced over his shoulder and saw framed in the doorway Sir James Walton.

"Sit down, Chief," he said quietly, his gaze returning to the girl sitting limply in the large leather-covered arm-chair. "I shall be free in a moment."

It was characteristic of him to attempt no explanation. To his mind the situation explained itself.

As Miss Norman made an effort to rise, he placed a detaining hand upon her arm.

"Send Mr. Thompson."

With a motion of his hand Malcolm Sage indicated to William Johnson that the dramatic possibilities of the situation were exhausted, at least as far as he was concerned. With reluctant steps the lad left the room and, having told Thompson he was wanted, returned to his seat in the outer office, where it was his mission to sit in preliminary judgment upon callers.

When Thompson entered, Malcolm Sage instructed him to move the leather-covered chair into Miss Norman's room and, when she was rested, to take her home in the car.

Thompson's face beamed. His devotion to Gladys Norman was notorious.

The girl rose and raised to Malcolm Sage a pair of dark eyes from which tears were not far distant.

"I'm so ashamed, Mr. Sage," she began, her lower lip trembling ominously. "I've never done such a thing before."

"I've been working you too hard," he said, as he held back the door.

"You must go home and rest."

She shook her head and passed out, whilst Malcolm Sage returned to his seat at the table.

"Working till two o'clock this morning," he remarked as he resumed his seat. "She won't have assistance. Strange creatures, women," he added musingly, "but beautifully loyal."

Sir James had dropped into a chair on the opposite side of Malcolm Sage's table. Having selected a cigar from the box his late chief-of-staff pushed across to him, he cut off the end and proceeded to light it.

"Good cigars these," he remarked, as he critically examined the lighted end.

"They're your own brand, Chief," was the reply.

Malcolm Sage always used the old name of "Chief" when addressing Sir James Walton. It seemed to constitute a link with the old days when they had worked together with a harmony that had bewildered those heads of departments who had regarded Malcolm Sage as something between a punishment and a misfortune.

"Busy?"

"Very."

For some seconds they were silent. It was like old times to be seated one on each side of a table, and both seemed to realise the fact.

"I've just motored up from Hurstchurch," began Sir James at length, having assured himself that his cigar was drawing as a good cigar should draw. "Been staying with an old friend of mine, Geoffrey Challoner."

Malcolm Sage nodded.

"He was shot last night. That's why I'm here." He paused; but Malcolm Sage made no comment. His whole attention was absorbed in an ivory paper-knife, which he was endeavouring to balance upon the handle of the silver inkstand. More than one client had been disconcerted by Malcolm Sage's restless hands, which they interpreted as a lack of interest in their affairs.

"At half-past seven this morning," continued Sir James, "Peters, the butler, knocked at Challoner's door with his shaving-water. As there was no reply he entered and found, not only that Challoner was not there, but that the bed had not been slept in over night."

Malcolm lifted his hands from the paper-knife. It balanced.

"He thought Challoner had fallen asleep in the library," continued Sir James, "which he sometimes did, he is rather a night-owl. Peter then went downstairs, but found the library door locked on the inside. As there was no response to his knocking, he went round to the French-windows that open from the library on to the lawn at the back of the house. The curtains were drawn, however, and he could see nothing."

"Is it usual to draw the curtains?" enquired Malcolm Sage, regarding with satisfaction the paper-knife as it gently swayed up and down upon the inkstand.

"Yes, except in the summer, when the windows are generally kept open."

Malcolm Sage nodded, and Sir James resumed his story.

"Peters then went upstairs to young Dane's room; Dane is Challoner's nephew, who lives with him. While he dressed he sent Peters to tell me."

"A few minutes later we all went down to the library and tried to attract Challoner's attention; but without result. I then suggested forcing an entry from the garden, which was done by breaking the glass of one of the French-windows."

"We found Challoner seated at his table dead, shot through the head. He had an automatic pistol in his hand." Sir James paused; his voice had become husky with emotion. Presently he resumed.

"We telephoned for the police and a doctor, and I spent the time until they came in a thorough examination of the room. The French-windows had been securely bolted top and bottom from within, by means of a central handle. All the panes of glass were intact, with the exception of that we had broken. The door had been locked *on the inside*, and the key was in position. It was unlocked by Peters when he went into the hall to telephone. It has a strong mortice-lock and the key did not protrude through to the outer side, so that there was no chance of manipulating the lock from without. In the fireplace there was an electric stove, and from the shower of soot that fell when I raised the trap, it was clear that this had not been touched for some weeks at least."

"The doctor was the first to arrive. At my urgent request he refrained from touching the body. He said death had taken place from seven to ten hours previously as the result of the bullet wound in the temple. He had scarcely finished his examination when an inspector of police, who had motored over from Lewes, joined us."

"It took him very few minutes to decide that poor Challoner had shot himself. In this he was confirmed by the doctor. Still, I insisted that the body should not be removed."

"Why did you do that, Chief?" enquired Malcolm Sage, who had discarded the paper-knife and was now busy drawing geometrical figures with the thumb-nail of his right hand upon the blotting pad before him.

"Because I was not satisfied," was the reply. "There was absolutely no motive for suicide. Challoner was in good health and, if I know anything about men, determined to live as long as the gods give."

Again Malcolm Sage nodded his head meditatively.

"The jumping to hasty conclusions," he remarked, "has saved many a man his neck. Whom did you leave in charge?" he queried.

"The inspector. I locked the door; here is the key," he said, producing it from his jacket pocket. "I told him to allow no one into the room."

"Why were you there?" Malcolm Sage suddenly looked up, flashing that keen, steely look through his gold-rimmed spectacles that many men had found so disconcerting. "Ordinary visit?" he queried.

"No." Sir James paused, apparently deliberating something in his own mind. He was well acquainted with Malcolm Sage's habit of asking apparently irrelevant questions.

"There's been a little difficulty between Challoner and his nephew," he said slowly. "Some days back the boy announced his determination of marrying a girl he had met in London, a typist or secretary. Challoner was greatly upset, and threatened to cut him out of his will if he persisted. There was a scene, several scenes in fact, and eventually I was sent for as Challoner's oldest friend."

"To bring the nephew to reason," suggested Malcolm Sage.

"To give advice ostensibly; but in reality to talk things over," was the reply.

"You advised?" When keenly interested, Malcolm Sage's questions were like pistol-shots.

"That Challoner should wait and see the girl."

"Did he?"

Malcolm Sage was intent upon outlining his hand with the point of the paper-knife upon the blotting pad.

Again Sir James hesitated, only for a fraction of a second, however.

"Yes; but unfortunately with the object of endeavouring to buy her off. Yesterday afternoon Dane brought her over. Challoner saw her alone. She didn't stay more than a quarter of an hour. Then she and Dane left the house together, he to see her to the station. An hour later he returned. I was in the hall at the time. He was in a very excited state. He pushed past me, burst into the library, banging the door behind him.

"That evening at dinner Challoner told me there had been a very unpleasant scene. He had warned the boy that unless he apologised to-day he would telephone to London for his lawyer, and make a fresh will entirely disinheriting him. Soon after the interview Dane went out of the house, and apparently did not return until late – as a matter of fact, after I had gone to bed. I was feeling tired and said 'good night' to Challoner about half-past ten in the library."

For some time Malcolm Sage gazed upon the outline he had completed, as if in it lay the solution of the mystery.

"It's a pity you let the butler unlock the door," he remarked regretfully.

Sir James looked across at his late chief-of-staff keenly. He detected something of reproach in his tone.

"Did you happen to notice if the electric light was on when you entered the library?"

"No," said Sir James, after a slight pause; "it was not."

Malcolm Sage reached across to the private telephone and gave the "three on the buzzer" that always galvanised Miss Gladys Norman into instant vitality.

"Miss Norman," said Sage as she entered, "can you lend me the small mirror I have seen you use occasionally?"

"Yes, Mr. Sage," and she disappeared, returning a moment later with the mirror from her handbag. She was accustomed to Malcolm Sage's strange requests.

"Feeling better?" he enquired as she turned to go.

"I'm all right now," she smiled, "and please don't send me home, Mr.

Sage," she added, and she went out before he had time to reply.

A quarter of an hour later the two men entered Sir James's car, whilst Thompson and Dawkins, the official photographer to the Bureau, followed in that driven by Tims. Malcolm Sage would cheerfully have sacrificed anybody and anything to serve his late chief.

"And how am I to keep the shine off my nose without a looking-glass, Johnny?" asked Miss Norman of William Johnson, as she turned to resume her work.

"He won't mind if it shines," said the youth seriously; and Miss Norman gave him a look, which only his years prevented him from interpreting.

II

As the car drew up, the hall-door of "The Cedars" was thrown open by the butler, a fair-haired clean-shaven man of about forty-five, with grave, impassive face, and eyes that gave the impression of allowing little to escape them.

As he descended the flight of stone-steps to open the door of the car, a young man appeared behind him. A moment later Sir James was introducing him to Malcolm Sage as "Mr. Richard Dane."

Dark, with smoothly-brushed hair and a toothbrush moustache, he might easily have been passed over in a crowd without a second glance. He was obviously and acutely nervous. His fingers moved jerkily, and there were twitchings at the corners of his mouth that he seemed unable to control. It was not a good-tempered mouth. He appeared unconscious of the presence of Malcolm Sage. His eyes were fixed upon the second car, which had just drawn up, and from which Thompson and Dawkins were removing the photographic paraphernalia.

Peters conducted Sir James and Malcolm Sage to the dining-room, where luncheon was laid.

"Shall I serve luncheon, Sir James?" he enquired, ignoring Dane, who was clearly unequal to the strain of the duties of host.

Sir James looked across at Malcolm Sage, who shook his head.

"I'll see the library first," he said. "Sir James will show me. Fetch Dawkins," he said to Thompson, and he followed Sir James through the house out on to the lawn.

As they entered the library by the French-windows, a tall, sandy man rose from the armchair in which he was seated. He was Inspector Gorton of the Sussex County Constabulary. Malcolm Sage nodded a little absently. His eyes were keenly taking in every detail of the figure sprawling across the writing-table. The head rested on the left cheek, and there was an ugly wound in the right temple from which blood had dripped and congealed upon the table. In the right hand was clutched a small, automatic pistol. The arm was slightly curved, the weapon pointing to the left.

Having concluded his examination of the wound, Malcolm Sage drew a silk-handkerchief from his pocket, shook out its folds and spread it carefully over the blood-stained head of Mr. Challoner.

Sir James looked across at him, appreciation in his eyes. It was one of those little human touches, of which he had discovered so many in Malcolm Sage, and the heads of government departments in Whitehall so few.

Malcolm Sage next proceeded to regard the body from every angle, even going down on his knees to see the position of the legs beneath the table. He then walked round the room and examined everything with minute attention, particularly the key of the door, which Sir James had replaced in its position on the inside. The keyhole on both sides of the door came in for careful scrutiny.

He tried the door of a small safe at the far-end of the room; it was locked. He then examined the fastenings of the French-windows.

Finally he returned to the table, where, dropping on one knee on the left-hand side of the body, he drew a penknife from his pocket, and proceeded with great care and deliberation to slit up the outer seam of the trousers so that the pocket lay exposed.

This in turn he cut open, taking care not to disturb the bunch of keys, which, attached to a chain, lay on the thigh, a little to the left.

The others watched him with wide-eyed interest, the inspector breathing heavily.

Having assured himself that the keys would not slide off, Malcolm

Sage rose and turned to Dawkins:

"I want a plate from the right, the left, the front, and from behind and above. Also an exposure showing the position of the legs, and another of the keys."

Dawkins inclined his head. He was a grey, bald-headed little man who had only one thought in life, his profession. He seldom spoke, and when he did his lips seemed scarcely to part, the words slipping out as best they could.

Happy in the knowledge that his beloved camera was once more to be one of the principal witnesses in the detection of a crime, Dawkins set himself to his task.

"When Dawkins has finished," said Malcolm Sage, turning to the inspector, who had been watching the proceedings with ill-disguised impatience, "you can remove the body; but leave the pistol. Give Mr. Challoner's keys to Sir James. And now I think we might lunch," he said, turning to Sir James.

Malcolm Sage's attitude towards the official police was generally determined by their attitude towards him. In the Department Z days, he had been known at Scotland Yard as "Sage & Onions." What the phrase lacked in wit was compensated for by the feeling with which it was frequently uttered. The police officers made no effort to dissemble the contempt they felt for a department in which they saw a direct rebuke to themselves. Later, however, their attitude changed, and Malcolm Sage was brought into close personal touch with many of the best-known officers of the Criminal Investigation Department.

He had never been known to speak disparagingly, or patronisingly, of Scotland Yard. On the other hand, he lost no opportunity of emphasising the fact that it was the head-quarters of the most efficient police force in the world. He did not always agree with its methods, which in many ways he regarded as out-of-date.

As Malcolm Sage left the room, the inspector shrugged his shoulders.

The whole thing was so obvious that, but for the presence of Sir James Walton, he would have refused to delay the removal of the body.

The doctor had pronounced the wound self-inflicted, and even if he had not done so, the circumstantial evidence was conclusive.

Luncheon was eaten in silence, a constrained and uncomfortable meal. Malcolm Sage ate as he always ate when his mind was occupied, with tire indifference as to what was on the plate, from which his eyes never lifted.

Sir James made several ineffectual efforts to draw Dane into conversation; but at each remark the young man started violently, as if suddenly recalled to his surroundings. Finally Sir James desisted, and the meal concluded in abysmal silence.

Malcolm Sage then announced that he would examine the various members of the household, and Dane and Peters left the room.

One by one the servants entered, were interrogated, and departed. Even the gardener and his wife, who lived at the lodge by the main-gates, were cross-questioned.

Mrs. Trennett, the housekeeper, was incoherent in her voluble anxiety to give information. The maids were almost too frightened to speak, and from none was anything tangible extracted.

No one had any reason for being near the library late at night.

When Peters' turn came, he told his story with a clearness and economy of words that caused Malcolm Sage mentally to register him as a good witness. He was a superior kind of man, who had been in his present position only some six months; but during that time he had given every satisfaction, so much so that Mr. Challoner had remarked to Sir James that he believed he had found a treasure.

According to Peters' account, at a quarter-past eleven on the previous evening he had gone to the library, as was his custom, to see if there were anything else that Mr. Challoner required before he locked up for the night. On being told there was nothing, he had accordingly seen to the fastenings of doors and windows and gone to bed.

"What was Mr. Challoner doing when you entered the room?" enquired Malcolm Sage, intent upon a design he was drawing upon the surface of the salt.

"He was sitting at the table where I found him this morning."

"What was he actually doing?"

"I think he was checking his bankbook, sir."

"Did you notice anything strange about his manner?"

"No, sir."

"When you found that his bed had not been slept in were you surprised?"

"Not greatly, sir," was the response. "Once before a similar thing happened, and I heard from the other servants that on several occasions Mr. Challoner had spent the night in the library, having fallen asleep there."

"When you told Mr. Dane that his uncle had not slept in his room, and that the library door was locked on the inside, what did he say?"

"He said, 'Good Lord! Peters, something must have happened.'"

"Mr. Dane knew that on previous occasions his uncle had spent the night in his study?" enquired Malcolm Sage, smoothing out the design upon which he had been engaged and beginning another.

"I think so, sir," was the response.

"The pistol was the one he used at target-practice?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did he keep it?"

"In the third right-hand drawer of his table, sir."

"He was a good shot, I think you said?" Malcolm Sage turned to Sir James.

"Magnificent," he said warmly. "I have often shot with him."

"Do you know of any reason why Mr. Challoner should commit suicide?"

Malcolm Sage enquired of Peters.

"None whatever, sir; he always seemed very happy."

"He had no domestic worries?"

Peters hesitated for a moment.

"He never mentioned any to me, sir."

"You have in mind certain events that occurred during the last few days, I take it?" said Malcolm Sage.

"That was in my mind, sir," was the response.

"You know of no way by which anyone could have got into the library and then out again, other than through the door or the window?"

Malcolm Sage had relinquished the salt-spoon and was now meditatively twirling a wineglass by its stem between his thumb and first finger.

"There is no other way, sir."

"Who has access to the library in the ordinary way? Tell me the names of everybody who is likely to go in at any time."

"Outside Mr. Challoner and Mr. Dane, there is myself, Mrs. Trennett, the housekeeper, and Meston, the housemaid."

"No one else?"

"No one, sir, except, of course, the guests who might be staying in the house."

"I shall want the finger-prints of all those you have named, including yours, Sir James." Malcolm Sage looked across at Sir James

Walton. "I can then identify those of any stranger that I may find."

Sir James nodded.

"It would be quite easy for Mr. Challoner to let anyone in through the French-windows?" enquired Malcolm Sage, turning once more to Peters.

"Quite, sir."

"What time did Mr. Dane return last evening?"

"I think about a quarter to eleven, sir. He went straight to his room."

"That will be all now. Tell Mr. Dane I should like to see him."

Peters noiselessly withdrew.

A few minutes later Dane entered the room. Malcolm Sage gave him a keen, appraising look, then dropped his eyes. Dane was still acutely nervous. His fingers moved jerkily and the corners of his mouth twitched.

"Will you tell me what took place yesterday between you and your uncle?" said Malcolm Sage.

Dane looked about him nervously, as an animal might who has been trapped and seeks some means of escape.

"We had a row," he began, then paused; "a terrible row," he added, as if to emphasise the nature of the quarrel.

"So I understand," said Malcolm Sage. "I know what it was about. Just tell me what actually took place. In as few words as possible, please."

"A week ago I told my uncle of my engagement, and he was very angry when he knew that my fiancée was — was —"

"A secretary," suggested Malcolm Sage, without looking up.

"Yes. He ordered me to break off the engagement at once, no matter what it might cost."

"He referred to his pocket rather than to your feelings, I take it?" said Malcolm Sage.

"Yes." There was a world of bitterness in the tone in which the word was uttered. "I refused. Four days ago Sir James came and, I think, talked things over with my uncle, who said he would see Enid, that is, my fiancée. She came yesterday afternoon. My uncle insisted on seeing her alone. She stayed only a few minutes."

His voice broke. He swallowed rapidly several times in succession, struggling to regain control of himself.

"You walked back to the station with her," remarked Malcolm Sage, "and she told you what had taken place. Your uncle had offered to buy her off. You were furious. You said many wild and extravagant things. Then you came back and went immediately into the library. What took place there?"

"I don't remember what I said. I think for the time I was insane. He had actually offered her money, notes. He had drawn them out of the bank on purpose." Again he stopped, as if the memory of the insult were too much for him.

"And you said?" suggested Malcolm Sage, twirling the wine glass slowly between his thumb and finger.

"I probably said what any other man would have said under similar circumstances." There was a quiet dignity about the way in which he uttered these words, although his fingers still continued to twitch.

"Did he threaten you, or you him?"

"I don't remember what I said; but my uncle told me that, unless I wrote to Enid to-day giving her up and apologised to him, he would telephone for his lawyer and make a fresh will, cutting me out of it entirely. I was to have until the next morning to decide, that is, to-day."

Malcolm Sage still kept his eyes averted. He contended that to look fixedly into the eyes of anyone undergoing interrogation was calculated to confuse him and render the replies less helpful.

"And what would your decision have been?" he asked.

"I told him that if he gave me ten years it would be the same."

"That you would not do as he wished?"

"Certainly not."

"Until this episode you were on good terms with each other?" Malcolm Sage had got a dessert spoon and fork to balance on the blade of a knife.

"Yes."

"You know of no reason why your uncle should take his life?"

"None whatever."

"This episode in itself would not be sufficient to cause him to commit suicide?"

"Certainly not. Sir James will tell you that he was a man of strong character."

"Do you believe he shot himself?" Malcolm Sage seemed absorbed in the rise and fall of the balancing silver.

"But for the locked door I should have said 'no.'"

"What were you proposing to do in the light of your refusal to break the engagement?"

"I had everything packed up ready. I meant to go away this morning."

"By the way, where did your uncle bank?" enquired Malcolm Sage casually.

"At the Southern Counties and Brown's Bank, Lewes," was the reply.

"Thank you. That will do, I think, for the present. You had better run round to your doctor and get him to give you something to steady your nerves," said Malcolm Sage, with eyes that had lost their professional glint. "They are all on edge."

Dane glanced at him in surprise; but there was only a cone of baldness visible.

"Thank you," he said. "I think I will," and he turned and left the room. He still seemed dazed and incapable of realising what was taking place.

Malcolm Sage rose and, walking over to the door, removed the key, examined the wards intently, then replaced it and, opening the door, walked across to the library.

CHAPTER III MALCOLM SAGE'S MYSTERIOUS MOVEMENTS

I

Malcolm Sage found that Dawkins had completed his work, and the body of Mr. Challoner had been removed.

Seating himself at the table, he took the automatic pistol in his hand and deliberately removed the cartridges. Then placing the muzzle against his right temple he turned his eyes momentarily on Dawkins, who, having anticipated his wishes, had already adjusted the camera. He removed the cap, replaced it, and then quickly reversed the plate.

Pulling the trigger, Malcolm Sage allowed his head to fall forward, his right hand, which held the pistol, dropping on the table before him. Dawkins took another photograph.

"Now," said Malcolm Sage to Sir James. "You shoot me through the right temple, approaching from behind. Grip my head as if you expected me to resist."

Sir James did as he was requested, Dawkins making another exposure.

Malcolm Sage motioned Thompson to draw the curtains. Then dropping on to his knees by the library door, he took the small mirror he had borrowed from Miss Norman and, placing it partly beneath the door, carefully examined the reflection by the aid of an electric torch.

When he rose it was with the air of a man who had satisfied himself upon some important point. He then turned to Sir James.

"You might get those finger-prints," he said casually. "Get everyone together in the dining-room. See that no one leaves it for at least a quarter of an hour. Thompson will go with you."

"Then you think it was murder?" questioned Sir James.

"I would sooner say nothing just at the moment," was the reply.

Whilst Sir James Walton and Thompson were occupied with a room-ful of domestics, talking in whispers as if in the presence of death, Malcolm Sage was engaged in a careful examination of the bottoms of all the doors in the house by means of a mirror placed upwards beneath each. He also removed the keys and gave a swift look at the wards of each.

He moved quickly; yet without haste, as if his brain had entire control of the situation.

One door in particular appeared to interest him, so much so that he entered the room and proceeded to examine it with great thoroughness, taking the utmost care to replace everything as he found it.

From the middle-drawer of the chest-of-drawers, he extracted from under a pile of clothes a thin steel object, some five or six inches in length, wound round with a fine, strong twine. This he slipped into his pocket and, going down into the hall, rang up the manager of the Lewes branch of the Southern Counties and Brown's Bank.

Passing into the library, he searched the drawers of the table at which Mr. Challoner had been found. In one of them he discovered the pass-book. Seating himself at the table, he proceeded to examine it carefully. Turning to the pockets at either end, where cancelled cheques are usually placed, he found both were empty.

When a few minutes later Sir James and Thompson entered with the finger-prints, Malcolm Sage was seated at the table smoking, his gaze concentrated upon the nail of the fourth finger of his right hand. With him a contemplation of his finger-nails in general indicated thoughtful attention; when, however, he raised the hand and began to subject some particular finger-nail to a thorough and elaborate examination, it generally meant the germination of some constructive thesis.

Taking the sheets of paper from Thompson, he went through them rapidly, then drawing a sheet of note-paper from the rack before him he scribbled a hasty note, enclosed it with one of the fingerprints in an envelope, which he sealed, addressed, and handed to Thompson with instructions to see that it was delivered without delay. He also told him to send Peters and Dane to the library.

Three minutes later Tims swung down the drive, his face beaming. He was to drive to Scotland Yard and "never mind the poultry on the road," as Thompson had phrased it.

"Have you the key of the safe, Mr. Dane?" enquired Malcolm Sage as the young man entered, followed by Peters. Dane shook his head and looked at Peters.

"Mr. Challoner always wore it on his key-chain, sir," said the butler.

"Have you any objection to the safe being opened?" enquired Malcolm Sage to Dane.

"None whatever."

"Then perhaps you will open it?" said Malcolm Sage, turning to Sir James.

In the safe were found several bundles of letters and share-certificates, and an old cash-box containing some loose stamps; but nothing else.

Malcolm Sage dismissed Peters and Dane, saying that he would be returning to town after dinner. In the meantime he and Sir James strolled about the grounds, discussing the remarkable rise in the chess-world of Capablanca, whilst Dawkins was busily occupied in a darkened bath-room.

Dinner proved a far less sombre meal than luncheon. Malcolm Sage and Sir James between them succeeded in placing young Dane more at ease. The haunted, shell-shock look left his eyes, and the twitching disappeared from the corners of his mouth.

It was nearly nine o'clock when the distant moan of a hooter announced to Malcolm Sage's alert ears the return of Tims. He rose from the table and walked slowly to the door, where for some seconds he stood with his hand upon the knob.

As the car drew up he slipped into the hall, just as Peters opened the door.

A moment later the butler started back, his right hand seemed to fly to his left breast pocket. At the same moment Malcolm Sage sprang forward. There was a flash, a report, and two bodies fell at the feet of Inspector Wensdale, of Scotland Yard, and another man standing beside him.

In a second, however, they had thrown themselves upon the struggling heap, and when Malcolm Sage rose to his feet it was to look down upon Peters pinned to the floor by the inspector, with the strangeman sitting on his legs.

II

"There is no witness so sure as the camera," remarked Malcolm Sage as he gazed from one to the other of two photographs before him, one representing him holding an automatic pistol to his own head, and the other in which Sir James was posing as a murderer.

"It is strange that it should be so neglected at Scotland Yard," he added.

Silent and absorbed when engaged upon a problem, Malcolm Sage resented speech as a sick man resents arrowroot. At other times he seemed to find pleasure in lengthy monologues, invariably of a professional nature.

"But we use it a lot, Mr. Sage," protested Inspector Wensdale.

"For recording the features of criminals," was the retort. "No, Wensdale, you are obsessed by the finger-print heresy, quite regardless of the fact that none but an amateur ever leaves such a thing behind him, and the amateur is never difficult to trace."

He paused for a moment; but the inspector made no comment.

"The two greatest factors in the suppression of crime," continued Malcolm Sage, "are photography and finger-prints. Both are in use at Scotland Yard; but each in place of the other. Finger-prints are regarded as clues, and photography is a means of identification, whereas finger-prints are of little use except to identify past offenders, and photography is the greatest aid to the actual tracing of the criminal."

Malcolm Sage never failed to emphasise the importance of photography in the detection of crime. He probably used it more than all other investigators put together. He contended that a photographic print established for all time what the eye could only dimly register for the moment, with the consequent danger of forgetfulness.

As the links in a chain multiplied, it was frequently necessary to refer to the scene of a crime, or tragedy, and then probably some important point would crop up, which the eye had not considered of sufficient importance to dwell upon. By then, in the case of a murder, the body would have been removed, and everything about it either re-ordered or obliterated.

Malcolm Sage proceeded to stuff his pipe with tobacco which he drew from the left-hand pocket of his jacket. He had discovered that a rubber-lined pocket was the best and safest pouch.

He picked up a third photograph and laid it beside the others. It was a print of Mr. Challoner's head, showing, marked in ink, the course of the bullet towards the left of the frontal bone.

"A man shooting himself," began Malcolm Sage, "places the pistol in a position so that the muzzle is directed towards the back of the head. On the other hand, anyone approaching his victim from behind would have a tendency to direct the muzzle towards the front of the head. That is why I got Dawkins to take a photograph of me holding the pistol to my head and of you holding it from behind. These photographs will constitute the principal evidence at the trial."

Sir James nodded. He was too interested to interrupt.

"On this enlargement of the wound," continued Malcolm Sage, "you will see an abrasion on the side nearer the ear, as if the head had suddenly been jerked backwards between the time of the muzzle being placed against the temple and the actual firing of the shot."

Thompson leaned across to examine the photograph.

"If the eyes of someone sitting at a table are suddenly and unexpectedly covered from behind, the natural instinct is to jerk backwards so that the head may be turned to see who it is. That is exactly what occurred with Challoner. He jerked backwards, and the barrel of the pistol grazed the skin and was deflected still more towards the frontal bone."

Sir James and Thompson exchanged glances. Dawkins stood by, a look of happiness in his eyes. His beloved camera was justifying itself once more. Inspector Wensdale breathed heavily.

"Apart from all this, the position of the head on the table, and the way in which the hand was holding the pistol, not to speak of the curve of the arm, were unnatural. You get some idea of this from the photograph that Dawkins took of me, although I could only simulate death by relaxing the muscles. Again, the head would hardly be likely to twist on to its side."

"The doctor ought to have seen that," said the inspector.

Another thing against the theory of suicide was that the second joint of the first finger was pressing against the trigger. Mr. Challoner was an expert shot, and would instinctively have used the pad of the finger, not the second joint.

"The next step," continued Malcolm Sage, "was how could anyone get into the room and approach Challoner without being heard or sensed."

"He must have been very much absorbed in what he was doing," suggested Sir James.

Malcolm Sage shook his head, and for a few seconds gazed at the photographs before him.

"You will remember there was nothing on the table in front of him. I shall come to that presently. It is very unlikely that a man sitting at a table would not be conscious of someone approaching him from behind, no matter how quietly he stepped, *unless that man's presence in the room were quite a normal and natural thing*. That gave me the clue to Peters. He is the only person who could be in the library without Challoner taking any notice of him. Consequently it was easy for him to approach his master and shoot him."

"But the locked door, sir," said Thompson.

"That is a very simple matter. An ordinary lead-pencil, with a piece of string tied to one end, put through the ring of the key to act as a lever, the cord being passed beneath the door, will lock any door in existence. The pencil can then be drawn under the door. This will show how it's done." Malcolm Sage reached across for a sheet of paper, and drew a rough sketch.

[Illustration]

"That is why you examined the under-edge of the door?" suggested Sir James.

Malcolm Sage nodded. "The marks of the cord were clearly defined and reflected in the mirror. Had the key not been touched, it would have helped."

"How?" asked Inspector Wensdale.

"By means of the string the key is turned only just to the point where the lever falls through the hole to the floor. The fingers would turn beyond that point, not being so delicate."

"Mr. Sage, you're a wonder," burst out the inspector.

"I then," proceeded Malcolm Sage, "examined all the other doors in the house, and I found that of one room, which I after discovered to be Peters', was heavily scored at the bottom. He had evidently practised fairly extensively before putting the plan into operation. He had also done the same thing with the library door, as there were marks of more than one operation. Furthermore, he was wiser than to take the risk of so clumsy a tool as a lead-pencil. He used this."

Malcolm Sage drew from his pocket the roll of twine with the thin steel instrument down the centre. It was a canvas-needle, to the eye of which the cord was attached.

"This was absolutely safe," he remarked. "Another thing I discovered was that one lock, and only one lock in the house, had recently been oiled – that of the library-door."

Sir James nodded his head several times. There was something of self-reproach in the motion.

"Now," continued Malcolm Sage, "we come back to why a man should be sitting at a table absorbed in gazing at nothing, and at a time when most of the household are either in bed or preparing for bed."

"Peters said that he was checking his pass-book," suggested Sir James.

"That is undoubtedly what he *was* doing," continued Malcolm Sage, "and Peters removed the passbook, put it in a drawer, first destroying the cancelled cheques. He made a blunder in not replacing the pass-book with something else. That was the last link in the chain," he added.

"I don't quite see –" began Sir James.

"Perhaps you did not read of a case that was reported from New York some eighteen months ago. It was very similar to that of Mr. Challoner. A man was found shot through the head, the door being locked on the inside, and a verdict of suicide was returned; but there was absolutely no reason why he should have taken his life.

"What actually happened was that Mr. Challoner went to his bank to draw five hundred pounds with which he hoped to bribe his nephew's fiancée. He trusted to the temptation of the actual money rather than a cheque. When he was at the bank the manager once more asked him to return his pass-book, which had not been balanced for several months. He was very dilatory in such matters."

"That is true," said Dane, speaking for the first time.

"That evening he proceeded to compare it with his cheque-book. I suspect that Peters had been forging cheques and he saw here what would lead to discovery. Furthermore, there was a considerable sum of money in the safe, and the quarrel between uncle and nephew to divert suspicion. This, however, was mere conjecture – that trouser-pocket photo, Dawkins," said Malcolm Sage, turning to the photographer, who handed it across to him.

"Now notice the position of those keys. They are put in head foremost, and do not reach the bottom of the pocket. They had obviously been taken away and replaced in the pocket as Challoner sat there. Had he gone to the safe himself and walked back to his chair, the position of the keys would have been quite different."

Instinctively each man felt in his trousers pocket, and found in his own bunch of keys a verification of the statement.

"The whole scheme was too calculated and deliberate for an amateur," said Malcolm Sage, knocking the ashes out of his pipe on to a brass ashtray. "That is what prompted me to get the fingerprints of Peters, so that I might send them to Scotland Yard to see if anything was known of him there. The result you have seen."

"We've been on the look-out for him for more than a year," said Inspector Wensdale. "The New York police are rather interested in him about a forgery stunt that took place there some time ago."

"I am confident that when Challoner's affairs are gone into there will be certain cheques which it will be difficult to explain.

"Then, again, there was the electric light," proceeded Malcolm Sage. "A man about to blow out his brains would certainly not walk across the room, switch off the light, and then find his way back to the table."

"That's true enough," said Inspector Wensdale.

"On the other hand, a murderer, who has to stand at a door for at least some seconds, would not risk leaving on the light, which would attract the attention of anyone who might by chance be in the hall, or on the stairs."

Inspector Wensdale caught Thompson's left eye, which deliberately closed and then reopened. There was a world of meaning in the movement.

"Well, I'm glad I didn't get you down on a fool's errand, Sage," said Sir James, rising. "I wonder what the local inspector will think."

"He won't," remarked Malcolm Sage; "that is why he assumed it was suicide."

"Did you suspect Peters was armed?" enquired Sir James.

"I saw the pistol under his left armpit," said Malcolm Sage. "It's well known with American gunmen as a most convenient place for quick drawing."

"If it hadn't been for you, Mr. Sage, he'd have got me," said Inspector Wensdale.

"There'll be a heavy car-full for Tims," remarked Malcolm Sage, as he walked towards the door.

CHAPTER IV THE SURREY CATTLE-MAIMING MYSTERY

I

"Disguise," Malcolm Sage had once re-marked, "is the chief characteristic of the detective of fiction. In actual practise it is rarely possible. I am a case in point. No one but a builder, or an engineer, could disguise the shape of a head like mine;" as he spoke he had stroked the top of his head, which rose above his strongly-marked brows like a down-covered cone.

He maintained that a disguise can always be identified, although not necessarily penetrated. This in itself would be sufficient to defeat the end of the disguised man by rendering him an object of suspicion. Few men can disguise their walk or bearing, no matter how clever they might be with false beards, grease-paint and wigs.

In this Malcolm Sage was a bitter disappointment to William Johnson, the office junior. His conception of the sleuth-hound had been tainted by the vivid fiction with which he beguiled his spare time.

In the heart of William Johnson there were three great emotions: his hero-worship of Malcolm Sage, his romantic devotion to Gladys Norman, and his wholesome fear of the robustious humour of Tims.

In his more imaginative moments he would create a world in which he was the recognised colleague of Malcolm Sage, the avowed admirer of Miss Norman, and the austere employer of Tims – chauffeurs never took liberties with the hair of their employers, no matter how knut-like it might be worn.

It was with the object of making sure of the first turret of his castle in Spain, that William Johnson devoted himself to the earnest study of what he conceived to be his future profession.

He read voraciously all the detective stories and police-reports he came across. Every moment he could snatch from his official duties he devoted to some scrap of paper, booklet, or magazine. He strove to cultivate his reasoning powers. Never did a prospective client enter the Malcolm Sage Bureau without automatically setting into operation William Johnson's mental induction-coil. With eyes that were covertly keen, he would examine the visitor as he sat waiting for the two sharp buzzes on the private telephone which indicated that Malcolm Sage was at liberty.

It mattered little to William Johnson that error seemed to dog his footsteps; that he had "deduced" a famous pussyfoot admiral as a comedian addicted to drink; a lord, with a ten century lineage, as a man selling something or other; a Cabinet Minister as a company promoter in the worst sense of the term; nothing could damp his zeal.

Malcolm Sage's "cases" he studied as intimately as he could from his position as junior; but they disappointed him. They seemed lacking in that element of drama he found so enthralling in the literature he read and the films he saw.

Malcolm Sage would enter the office as Malcolm Sage, and leave it as

Malcolm Sage, as obvious and as easily recognisable as St. Paul's

Cathedral. He seemed indifferent to the dramatic possibilities of disguise.

William Johnson longed for some decrepit and dirty old man or woman to enter the Bureau, selling boot-laces or bananas and, on being peremptorily ordered out, to see the figure suddenly straighten itself, and hear his Chief's well-known voice remark, "So you don't recognise me, Johnson – good." There was romance.

He yearned for a "property-room," where executive members of the staff would disguise themselves beyond recognition. In his more imaginative moments he saw come out from that mysterious room a full-blooded Kaffir, whereas he knew that only Thompson had entered.

He would have liked to see Miss Norman shed her pretty brunetteness and reappear as an old apple-woman, who besought him to buy of her wares. He even saw himself being transformed into a hooligan, or a smart R.A.F. officer, complete with a toothbrush moustache and "swish."

In his own mind he was convinced that, given the opportunity, he could achieve greatness as a master of disguise, rivalling the highly-coloured stories of Charles Peace. He had even put his theories to the test.

One evening as Miss Norman, who had been working late, was on her way to Charing Cross Underground Station, she was accosted by a youth with upturned collar, wearing a shabby cap and a queer Charlie Chaplain moustache that was not on straight. In a husky voice he enquired his way to the Strand.

"Good gracious, Johnnie!" she cried involuntarily. "What on earth's the matter?"

A moment later, as she regarded the vanishing form of William Johnson, she wanted to kill herself for her lack of tact.

"Poor little Innocent!" she had murmured as she continued down Villiers Street, and there was in her eyes a reflection of the tears she had seen spring to those of William Johnson, whose first attempt at disguise had proved so tragic a failure.

Neither ever referred to the incident subsequently – although for days William Johnson experienced all the unenviable sensations of Damocles.

From that moment his devotion to Gladys Norman had become almost worship.

But William Johnson was not deterred, either by his own initial failure or his chief's opinion. He resolutely stuck to his own ideas, and continued to expend his pocket-money upon tinted glasses, false-moustaches and grease paint; for hidden away in the inner recesses of his mind was the conviction that it was not quite playing the game, as the game should be played, to solve a mystery or bring a criminal to justice without having recourse to disguise.

It was to him as if Nelson had won the Battle of Trafalgar in a soft hat and a burberry, or Wellington had met Blücher in flannels and silk socks.

Somewhere in the future he saw himself the head of a "William Johnson Bureau," and in the illustrated papers a portrait of "Mr.

William Johnson as he is," and beneath it a series of characters that would rival a Dickens novel, with another legend reading, "Mr.

William Johnson as he appears."

With these day-dreams, the junior at the Malcolm Sage Bureau would occupy the time when not actually engaged either in the performance of his by no means arduous duties, or in reading the highly-coloured detective stories from which he drew his inspiration.

From behind the glass-panelled door would come the tick-tack of Miss

Norman's typewriter, whilst outside droned the great symphony of

London, growing into a crescendo as the door was opened, dying away again as it fell to once more, guided by an automatic self-closer.

From these reveries William Johnson would be aroused either by peremptory blasts upon the buzzer of the private-telephone, or by the entry of a client.

One morning, as he was hesitating between assuming the disguise of a naval commander and a street-hawker, a florid little man with purple jowl and a white, bristling moustache hurtled through the swing-door, followed by a tall, spare man, whose clothing indicated his clerical calling.

"Mr. Sage in?" demanded the little man fiercely.

"Mr. Sage is engaged, sir," said the junior, his eyes upon the clergyman, in whose appearance there was something that caused William Johnson to like him on the spot.

"Take my card in to him," said the little, bristly man. "Tell him that General Sir John Hackblock wishes to see him immediately." The tone was suggestive of the parade-ground rather than a London office.

At that moment Gladys Norman appeared through the glass-panelled door. The clergyman immediately removed his hat, the general merely turned as if changing front to receive a new foe.

"Mr. Sage will be engaged for about a quarter of an hour. I am his secretary," she explained. She, also, looked at the general's companion, wondering what sort of teeth were behind that gentle, yet firm mouth. "Perhaps you will take a seat," she added.

This time the clergyman smiled, and Gladys Norman knew that she too liked him. Sir John looked about him aggressively, blew out his cheeks several times, then flopped into a chair. His companion also seated himself, and appeared to become lost in a fit of abstraction.

William Johnson returned to his table and became engrossed, ostensibly in the exploits of an indestructible trailer of men; but really in a surreptitious examination of the two callers.

He had just succeeded in deducing from their manner that they were father and son, and from the boots of the younger that he was low church and a bad walker, when two sharp blasts on the telephone-buzzer brought him to his feet and half-way across the office in what was practically one movement. With Malcolm Sage there were two things to be avoided, delay in answering a summons, and unnecessary words.

"This way, sir," he said, and led them through the glass-panelled door to Malcolm Sage's private room.

With a short, jerky movement of his head Malcolm Sage motioned his visitors to be seated. In that one movement his steel-coloured eyes had registered a mental photograph of the two men. That glance embraced all the details; the dark hair of the younger, greying at the temples, the dreamy grey eyes, the gentle curves of a mouth that was, nevertheless, capable of great sternness, and the spare, almost lean frame; then the self-important, overbearing manner of the older man. "High Anglican, ascetic, out-of-doors," was Malcolm Sage's mental classification of the one, thus unconsciously reversing the William Johnson's verdict. The other he dismissed as a pompous ass.

"You Mr. Sage?" Sir John regarded the bald conical head and gold-rimmed spectacles as if they had been unpolished buttons on parade.

Malcolm Sage inclined his head slightly, and proceeded to gaze down at his fingers spread out on the table before him. After the first appraising glance he rarely looked at a client.

"I am Sir John Hackblock; this is my friend, the Rev. Geoffrey Callice."

Again a slight inclination of the head indicated that Malcolm Sage had heard.

Mr. Llewellyn John would have recognised in Sir John Hackblock the last man in the world who should have been brought into contact with Malcolm Sage. The Prime Minister's own policy had been to keep Malcolm Sage from contact with other Ministers, and thus reduce the number of his embarrassing resignations.

"I want to consult you about a most damnable outrage," exploded the general. "It's inconceivable that in this –"

"Will you kindly be as brief as possible?" said Malcolm Sage, fondling the lobe of his left ear. "I can spare only a few minutes."

Sir John gasped, glared across at him angrily; then, seeming to take himself in hand, continued:

"You've heard of the Surrey cattle-maiming outrages?" he enquired.

Malcolm Sage nodded.

"Well, this morning a brood-mare of mine was found hacked about in an unspeakable manner. Oh, the damn scoundrels!" he burst out as he jumped from his chair and began pacing up and down the room.

"I think it will be better if Mr. Callice tells me the details," said Malcolm Sage, evenly. "You seem a little over-wrought."

"Over-wrought!" cried Sir John. "Over-wrought! Dammit, so would you be if you had lost over a dozen beasts." In the army he was known as "Dammit Hackblock."

Mr. Callice looked across to the general, who, nodding acquiescence, proceeded to blow his nose violently, as if to bid Malcolm Sage defiance.

"This morning a favourite mare belonging to Sir John was found mutilated in a terrible manner – " Mr. Callice paused; there was something in his voice that caused Malcolm Sage to look up. The gentle look had gone from his face, his eyes flashed, and his mouth was set in a stern, severe line.

"Good preacher," Malcolm Sage decided as he dropped his eyes once more, and upon his blotting pad proceeded to develop the Pons Asinorum into a church.

In a voice that vibrated with feeling and suggested great self-restraint, Mr. Callice proceeded to tell the story of the latest outrage. How when found that morning the mare was still alive, of the terrible nature of her injuries, and that the perpetrator had disappeared, leaving no trace.

"Her look, sir! Dammit!" the general broke in. "Her eyes have haunted me ever since. They – " His voice broke, and he proceeded once more to blow his nose violently.

Mr. Callice went on to explain that after having seen the mare put out of her misery, Sir John had motored over to his lodgings and insisted that they should go together to Scotland Yard and demand that something be done.

"Callice is Chairman of the Watchers' Committee," broke in Sir John.

"I should explain," proceeded Mr. Callice, "that some time ago we formed ourselves into a committee to patrol the neighbourhood at night in the hope of tracing the criminal. On the way up Sir John remembered hearing of you in connection with Department Z and, as he was not satisfied with his call at Scotland Yard, he decided to come on here and place the matter in your hands."

"This is the twenty-ninth maiming?" Malcolm Sage remarked, as he proceeded to add a graveyard to the church.

"Yes, the first occurred some two years ago." Then, as if suddenly realising what Malcolm Sage's question implied, he added: "You have interested yourself in the affair?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Tell me what has been done."

"The police seem utterly at fault," continued Mr. Callice. "Locally we have organised watch-parties. My boys and I have been out night after night; but without result. I am a scout-master," he explained.

"The poor beasts' sufferings are terrible," he continued after a slight pause. "It is a return to barbarism;" again there was the throb of indignation in his voice.

"You have discovered nothing?"

"Nothing," was the response, uttered in a tone of deep despondency.

"We have even tried bloodhounds; but without result."

"And now I want you to take up the matter, and don't spare expense," burst out Sir John, unable to contain himself longer.

"I will consider the proposal and let you know," said Malcolm Sage, evenly. "As it is, my time is fully occupied at present; but later – " He never lost an opportunity of resenting aggression by emphasising the democratic tendency of the times. Mr. Llewellyn John had called it "incipient Bolshevism."

"Later!" cried Sir John in consternation. "Why, dammit, sir! there won't be an animal left in the county. This thing has been going on for two years now, and those damn fools at Scotland Yard – "

"If it were not for Scotland Yard," said Malcolm Sage quietly, as he proceeded to shingle the roof of the church, the graveyard having proved a failure, "we should probably have to sleep at night with pistols under our pillows."

"Eh!" Sir John looked across at him with a startled expression.

"Scotland Yard is the head-quarters of the most efficient and highly-organised police force in the world," was the quiet reply.

"But, dammit! if they're so clever why don't they put a stop to this torturing of poor dumb beasts?" cried the general indignantly. "I've shown them the man. It's Hinds; I know it. I've just been to see that fellow Wensdale. Why, dammit! he ought to be cashiered, and I told him so."

"Who is Hinds?" Malcolm Sage addressed the question to Mr. Callice.

"He used to be Sir John's head gamekeeper –"

"And I discharged him," exploded the general. "I'll shoot a poacher or his dog; but, dammit! I won't set traps for them," and he puffed out his cheeks aggressively.

"Hinds used to set traps to save himself the trouble of patrolling the preserves," explained Mr. Callice, "and one day Sir John discovered him actually watching the agonies of a dog caught across the hind-quarters in a man-trap." Again there was the wave of feeling in the voice, and a stern set about the mouth.

"It's Hinds right enough," cried the general with conviction. "The man's a brute. Now will you –?"

"I will let you know as soon as possible whether or no I can take up the enquiry," said Malcolm Sage, rising. "I fear that is the best I can promise."

"But –" began Sir John; then he stopped and stared at Malcolm Sage as he moved towards the door.

"Dammit! I don't care what it costs," he spluttered explosively. "It'll be worth five hundred pounds to the man who catches the scoundrel. Poor Betty," he added in a softer tone.

"I will write to you shortly," said Malcolm Sage. There was dismissal in his tone.

With darkened jowl and bristling moustache Sir John strutted towards the door. Mr. Callice paused to shake hands with Malcolm Sage, and then followed the general, who, with a final glare at William Johnson, as he held open the swing-door, passed out into the street, convinced that now the country was no longer subject to conscription it would go rapidly to the devil.

For the next half-hour Malcolm Sage pored over a volume of press-cuttings containing accounts of previous cattle-maimings.

Following his usual custom in such matters, he had caused the newspaper accounts of the various mutilations to be collected and pasted in a press-cutting book. Sooner or later he had determined to devote time to the affair.

Without looking up from the book he pressed three times in rapid succession a button of the private-telephone. Instantly Gladys Norman appeared, note-book in hand. She had been heard to remark that if she were dead "three on the buzzer" would bring her to life again.

"Whitaker and Inspector Wensdale," said Malcolm Sage, his eyes still on the book before him.

When deep in a problem Malcolm Sage's economy in words made it difficult for anyone but his own staff to understand his requirements.

Without a word the girl vanished and, a moment later, William Johnson placed *Whitaker's Almanack* on the table, then he in turn disappeared as silently as Gladys Norman.

Malcolm Sage turned to the calendar, and for some time studied the pages devoted to the current month (June) and July. As he closed the book there were three buzzes from the house-telephone, the signal that he was through to the number required. Drawing the pedestal-instrument towards him, he put the receiver to his ear.

"That Inspector Wensdale? – Yes! Mr. Sage speaking. It's about the cattle-maiming business. – I've just heard of it. – I've not decided yet. I want a large-scale map of the district, with the exact spot of each outrage indicated, and the date. – To-morrow will do. – Yes, come round. Give me half an hour with the map first."

Malcolm Sage replaced the receiver as the buzzer sounded, announcing another client.

II

"So there is nothing?" Malcolm Sage looked up enquiringly from the map before him.

"Nothing that even a stage detective could turn into a clue," said

Inspector Wensdale, a big, clean-shaven man with hard, alert eyes.

Malcolm Sage continued his study of the map.

"Confound those magazine detectives!" the inspector burst out explosively. "They've always got a dust-pan full of clues ready made for 'em."

"To say nothing of finger-prints," said Malcolm Sage dryly. He never could resist a sly dig at Scotland Yard's faith in finger-prints as clues instead of means of identification.

"It's a bit awkward for me, too, Mr. Sage," continued the inspector, confidentially. "Last time *The Daily Telegram* went for us because –"

"You haven't found a dust-pan full of clues?" suggested Malcolm Sage, who was engaged in forming geometrical designs with spent matches.

"They're getting a bit restive, too, at the Yard," he continued. He was too disturbed in mind for flippancy. "It was this cattle-maiming business that sent poor old Scott's number up," he added, referring to Detective Inspector Scott's failure to solve the mystery. "Now the general's making a terrible row. Threatens me with the Commissioner."

For some seconds Malcolm Sage devoted himself to his designs.

"Any theory?" he enquired at length, without looking up.

"I've given up theorising," was the dour reply.

In response to a further question as to what had been done, the inspector proceeded to detail how the whole neighbourhood had been scoured after each maiming, and how, night after night, watchers had been posted throughout the district, but without result.

"I have had men out night and day," continued the inspector gloomily. "He's a clever devil whoever he is. It's my opinion the man's a lunatic," he added.

Malcolm Sage looked up slowly.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"His cunning, for one thing," was the reply. "Then it's so senseless.

No," he added with conviction, "he's no more an ordinary man than

Jack-the-Ripper was."

He went on to give details of his enquiries among those living in the district. There was absolutely nothing to attach even the remotest suspicion to any particular person. Rewards had been offered for information; but all without producing the slightest evidence or clue.

"This man Hinds?" enquired Malcolm Sage, looking about for more matches.

"Oh! the general's got him on the brain. Absolutely nothing in it. I've turned him inside out. Why, even the Deputy Commissioner had ago at him, and if he can get nothing out of a man, there's nothing to get out."

"Well," said Malcolm Sage rising, "keep the fact to yourself that I am interested. I suppose, if necessary, you could arrange for twenty or thirty men to run down there?" he queried.

"The whole blessed Yard if you like, Mr. Sage," was the feeling reply.

"We'll leave it at that for the present then. By the way, if you happen to think you see me in the neighbourhood you needn't remember that we are acquainted."

The inspector nodded comprehendingly and, with a heart lightened somewhat of its burden, he departed. He had an almost child-like faith in Malcolm Sage.

For half an hour Malcolm Sage sat engrossed in the map of the scene of the maimings. On it were a number of red-ink crosses with figures beneath. In the left-hand bottom corner was a list of the various outrages, with the date and the time, as near as could be approximated, against each.

The numbers in the bottom corner corresponded with those beneath the crosses.

From time to time he referred to the two copies of *Whitaker's Almanack* open before him, and made notes upon the writing-pad at his side. Finally he ruled a square upon the map in red ink, and then drew two lines diagonally from corner to corner. Then without looking up from the map, he pressed one of the buttons of the private-telephone. "Tims," he said through the mouthpiece.

Five minutes later Malcolm Sage's chauffeur was standing opposite his Chief's table, ready to go anywhere and do anything.

"To-morrow will be Sunday, Tims."

"Yessir."

"A day of rest."

"Yessir!"

"We are going out to Hempdon, near Selford," Malcolm Sage continued, pointing to the map. Tims stepped forward and bent over to identify the spot. "The car will break down. It will take you or any other mechanic two hours to put it right."

"Yessir," said Tims, straightening himself.

"You understand," said Malcolm Sage, looking at him sharply, "you or *any other mechanic*?"

"Yessir," repeated Tims, his face sphinx-like in its lack of expression.

He was a clean-shaven, fleshless little man who, had he not been a chauffeur, would probably have spent his life with a straw between his teeth, hissing lullabies to horses.

"I shall be ready at nine," said Malcolm Sage, and with another

"Yessir" Tims turned to go.

"And Tims."

"Yessir." He about-faced smartly on his right heel. "You might apologise for me to Mrs. Tims for depriving her of you on Sunday. Take her out to dinner on Monday and charge it to me."

"Thank you, sir, very much, sir," said Tims, his face expressionless.

"That is all, Tims, thank you."

Tims turned once more and left the room. As he walked towards the outer door he winked at Gladys Norman and, with a sudden dive, made a frightful riot of William Johnson's knut-like hair. Then, without change of expression, he passed out to tune up the car for its run on the morrow.

Malcolm Sage's staff knew that when "the Chief" was what Tims called "chatty" he was beginning to see light, so Tims whistled loudly at his work: for he, like all his colleagues, was pleased when "the Chief" saw reason to be pleased.

The following morning, as they trooped out of church, the inhabitants of Hempdon were greatly interested in the break-down of a large car, which seemed to defy the best efforts of the chauffeur to coax into movement. The owner drank cider at the Spotted Woodpigeon and talked pleasantly with the villagers, who, on learning that he had never even heard of the Surrey cattle-maimings, were at great pains to pour information and theories into his receptive ear.

The episode quite dwarfed the remarkable sermon preached by Mr. Callice, in which he exhorted his congregation to band themselves together to track down him who was maiming and torturing God's creatures, and defying the Master's merciful teaching.

It was Tom Hinds, assisted by a boy scout, who conducted Malcolm Sage to the scene of the latest outrage. It was Hinds who described the position of the mare when she was discovered, and it was he who pocketed two half-crowns as the car moved off Londonwards.

That evening Malcolm Sage sat long and late at his table, engrossed in the map that Inspector Wensdale had sent him.

Finally he subjected to a thorough and exhaustive examination the thumb-nail of his right hand. It was as if he saw in its polished surface the tablets of destiny.

The next morning he wrote a letter that subsequently caused Sir John Hackblock to explode into a torrent of abuse of detectives in general and one investigator in particular. It stated in a few

wordsthat, owing to circumstances over which he had no control, MalcolmSage would not be able to undertake the enquiry with which Sir JohnHackblock had honoured him until the end of the month following. Hehoped, however, to communicate further with his client soon afterthe 23rd of that month.

CHAPTER V INSPECTOR WENSDALE IS SURPRISED

I

Nearly a month had elapsed, and the cattle-maiming mystery seemed as far off solution as ever. The neighbourhood in which the crimes had been committed had once more settled down to its usual occupations, and Scotland Yard had followed suit.

Sir John Hackblock had written to the Chief Commissioner and a question had been asked in the House.

Inspector Wensdale's colleagues had learned that it was dangerous to mention in his presence the words "cattle" or "maiming." The inspector knew that the affair was referred to as "Wensdale's Waterloo," and his failure to throw light on the mystery was beginning to tell upon his nerves.

For three weeks he had received no word from Malcolm Sage. One morning on his arrival at Scotland Yard he was given a telephone message asking him to call round at the Bureau during the day.

"Nothing new?" queried Malcolm Sage ten minutes later, as the inspector was shown into his room by Thompson.

The inspector shook a gloomy head and dropped his heavy frame into a chair.

Malcolm Sage indicated with a nod that Thompson was to remain.

"Can you borrow a couple of covered government lorries?" queried

Malcolm Sage.

"A couple of hundred if necessary," said the inspector dully.

"Two will be enough," was the dry rejoinder. "Now listen carefully, Wensdale. I want you to have fifty men housed some ten miles away from Hempdon on the afternoon of the 22nd. Select men who have done scouting, ex-boy scouts, for preference. Don't choose any with bald heads or with very light hair. See that they are wearing dark clothes and dark shirts and, above all, no white collars. Take with you a good supply of burnt cork such as is used by nigger minstrels."

Malcolm Sage paused, and for the fraction of a second there was a curious fluttering at the corners of his mouth.

Inspector Wensdale was sitting bolt upright in his chair, gazing at Malcolm Sage as if he had been requested to supply two lorry-loads of archangels.

"It will be moonlight, and caps might fall off," explained Malcolm Sage. "You cannot very well ask a man to black his head. Above all," he continued evenly, "be sure you give no indication to anyone why you want the men, and tell them not to talk. You follow me?" he queried.

"Yes," said the inspector, "I – I follow."

"Don't go down Hempdon way again, and tell no one in the neighbourhood; *no one*, you understand, is to know anything about it. Don't tell the general, for instance."

"Him!" There was a world of hatred and contempt in the inspector's voice. Then he glanced a little oddly at Malcolm Sage.

Malcolm Sage went on to elaborate his instructions. The men were to be divided into two parties, one to form a line north of the scene of the last outrage, and the other to be spread over a particular zone some three miles the other side of Hempdon. They were to blacken their faces and hands, and observe great care to show no light colouring in connection with their clothing. Thus they would be indistinguishable from their surroundings.

"You will go with one lot," said Malcolm Sage to the inspector, "and my man Finlay with the other. Thompson and I will be somewhere in the neighbourhood. You will be given a pass-word for purposes of identification. You understand?"

"I think so," said the inspector, in a tone which was suggestive that he was very far from understanding.

"I'll have everything typed out for you, and scale-plans of where you are to post your men. Above all, don't take anyone into your confidence."

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