OUR NEW STORY.

THE SHOT IN THE DARK.

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NEW READERS BEGIN HERE:

Leaving Hoffgang's house, Rentmain and Winford go to their club, while Sir Richard spends the evening at the house of a Miss Vian, aunt to his fiancee, Eva Desborough. Manuel Gourley flees from the scene of the murder. Rentmain tells Winford that he saw the letter of invitation which Hoffgang sent to Sir Richard lying on a chair in the dead man's room, and he fears that the police will get it. Sir Richard is horrified to find that he has left the letter somewhere. Rentmain stays at Eva Desborough's house, which is situated opposite to Hoffgang's. Later Eva sees several people enter the house of the dead man. Suddenly her vigil is interrupted by the girl Marna, who rushes into the room in an agitated condition.

CHAPTER V.

MARNA.

During the few days since Marna and I had parted at Brindisi, my imagination had been constantly picturing the possible circumstances in which we should meet again. But my wildest thoughts had not conceived any conditions so strange and embarrassing as these; and for the moment I was too stunned by the amazing coincidence to understand why she had come.

I saw that Marna had come to Eva as a friend, and that she was almost beside herself with trouble of some sort; I noticed that Eva took her outstretched hands and returned her kiss warmly; and I gathered that Miss Vian was none too pleased by the incident, although her kindly heart was moved by Marna's evident distress as she went to her from Eva.

"Forgive my coming like this, Miss Vian; but I am in such trouble, and I haven't a friend in all London." The old lady was touched by the appeal, her look softened, and she kissed Marna tenderly.

"You did right to come, my dear," she replied.

I could have blessed her for the words and the caress.

"What is the matter, dear?" asked Eva.

"Mr. Hoffgang has been murdered, Eva!"

"Murdered?" This was from Gourley, in tone of amazement which drew the eyes of the rest upon him, as he reeled back and leant against the window frame.

I had felt very ill at ease, and had just resolved to slip quietly out of the room. But this stopped me. That that should be the cause of Marna's trouble, and that she should be in any way connected with Hoffgang, astounded me, and increased my anxiety to get away, for I felt how embarrassing it would be to her to meet me at such a moment. But I dared not go. I dared not leave Gourley, when his condition of chaotic agitation might lead him to betray himself at any instant. I felt that I must not only remain, but must force myself to take a part in the proceedings, regardless of both Marna's feelings and my own embarrassment.

Moreover, I must force myself to appear calm and to keep a level head. The crisis was too acute for any other considerations than those of guarding jealously the fatal secret on which the safety of us all might depend. In the pause that followed Gourley's exclamation, therefore, I took two or three steps towards the others.

Eva was obviously at a loss what to do. "Sir Richard Gourley," she murmured to Marna; and then to him, "Mr. Hoffgang's daughter."

I stepped forward then. "We have met before, Miss Hoffgang," I said.

She had not seen that anyone was in the room except the other three, and she turned with a start at hearing my voice. "Mr. Rentmain," she stammered, as she laid her hot, feverish hand in mine, her great eyes eloquent of wondering amazement.

I had myself well in hand by that time, and turned to Miss Vian and Eva. "We met recently on the 'Euthasia' on a voyage in the Mediterranean. Miss Hoffgang was travelling with Mrs. Beresford." I spoke very deliberately, in order to give Marna time to recover from her astonishment. "You are in desperate trouble, Miss Hoffgang, and, if there is any way in which I can be of the least assistance, I trust you will allow me to help you."

Eva appeared to understand then that if we spoke for a time on other matters than the tragedy it would be a great relief to Marna and to us all. "I had no idea that you two knew one another. Marna and I are old schoolfellows."

"Indeed," I replied, as if that were the only surprise I had experienced that night, and we continued to speak in that way until Marna had recovered some measure of composure.

"And now, dear," said Eva to her then, "what is this terrible thing? We saw that something had occurred, but never thought it was anything so awful."

"Perhaps Miss Hoffgang would rather not speak about it now, Eva," suggested Miss Vian very kindly.

"I came to tell you, Miss Vian. I do not know what to do or where to go. I felt stunned for the time."

"The second difficulty is easily got over, child. You can stay here with us, if you will, of course. I'll have a room got ready for you at once."

"Marna will sleep with me, aunt," declared Eva instantly, and the relief in Marna's eyes was eloquent of her gratitude for the offer.

"Then, if you take my advice, you'll go straight to bed," said Miss Vian. "And in the morning you will be able to think of everything so much more calmly."

Knowing how acute the good lady's curiosity was, I was astonished by her suggesting a course which would leave it unsatisfied so long.

"I am much better now that I have found friends, and I would rather tell you to-night," said Marna wistfully.

"Just as you wish, child."

"I can speak of it calmly, and think of it, too, now that the first effects of the shock have passed off. Mr. Hoffgang was found shot in his study, and there is no doubt that he was murdered by thieves."

Then I had cause to be glad that I had remained. Gourley had listened to Marna with a look of growing terror in his eyes, and he made a blunder which might have had disastrous consequences. "Do you mean that no revolver was found?" he asked, his voice shaking, and his lips quivering in his panic.

Marna turned sharply upon him in manifest wonder at this, his second outburst. Indeed, his tone was by itself enough to have roused a suspicion that he knew something about the affair.

"You said that he was shot, you know," I interposed, speaking in a level explanatory tone, "and I was going to put the same question, because of your suggestion that it was a case of murder."

"That was of course why I asked it," said Gourley with less agitation, having realised his blunder.

"It was murder, Mr. Rentmain. There is no doubt of it. We found no weapon of any sort in the room. It was I who, with Mr. Aranak, his secretary, first discovered it. I had had a very painful scene with Mr. Hoffgang two or three hours earlier, and had been intensely troubled by something he had told me. I don't mind telling you, Eva, for it must soon be general knowledge."

She sighed, and put her hand to her head in evident distress.

"My dear child, haven't you been tried enough for one night?" asked Miss Vian gently.

"No, indeed not. I—I want to tell someone, it is such a relief," she said. "You have all spoken to me as Miss Hoffgang, and I have always believed that I was his daughter, but to-night he told me the truth. I was not even a relation. My name is really Clifford; both my parents died when I was a baby, and he let everybody believe that I was his child. I think it had something to do with the money my parents left me, for to-night he admitted that he had lost nearly all of it."

"Oh, Marna, my dear, how terrible!" exclaimed Eva.

"It is not the loss of the money that I care so much about, Eva; but he said things which maddened me, and we had a bitter, bitter quarrel. He taunted me with being a burden and an expense, and told me to get out of the house and earn my living, and it was in connection with this that the admission slipped from him that he had speculated with my money and lost it."

She paused, but none of us spoke.

"But when my anger had cooled, I recalled many acts of kindness, and I was sore in heart and sorry for the bitter reproaches I had heaped on him, and I went down to his study more than once to make peace with him. But the door was locked, and I did not see him alive again."

This, then, was the explanation of the attempt to enter the room which had so alarmed us in the first moments after Hoffgang's death.

"Did you hear anyone in the room at either of your visits?" I asked, and was surprised at the easy level tone in which I was able to put a question of such vital importance to us.

"I thought once that I heard some voices, but I cannot be sure. The study is so apart from the house; there are double doors, with a space of several feet between them, so that scarcely any sound would be likely to be heard in the house. Mr. Hoffgang was extremely particular about this."

"I see," I answered, with a feeling of intense relief.

"The last time I went down I not only knocked, but called to him, begging him to let me speak to him, and when I got no answer I began to fear that something was wrong. I had a reason for the fear, and it was confirmed when I could not hear him speaking to himself. He had a habit of doing that, speaking so loudly at times that anyone, not knowing, might have thought he was quarrelling with someone. He was a very violent-tempered man, you know."

"But I know he had some people in the room with him," declared Eva.

"Don't interrupt, Eva, dear," said Miss Vian quickly. "We can talk about that afterwards, if it's necessary, as I do not think it will be."

Marna looked in perplexity from one to the other, and then resumed. "I have not much more to tell," she said. "Oppressed by the feeling of presentiment or what it may have been, I went up to Mr. Aranak's room—my fa—Mr. Hoffgang's secretary, you know. It was nearly ten o'clock then, but he always works late, and I asked him to come down with me to the study. We went down, and I told him of my fears that something was wrong. He said that Mr. Hoffgang had probably gone out, as he frequently did, using the French window to get out and in again. "But we can easily see," he explained, and we went out of the front door and round into Bromley-street. As we reached the window he uttered an exclamation of alarm. "I'm afraid you're right," he said, and drew my attention to the fact that, although the window was shut, a pane of the glass had been cut, just where a hand could be inserted to reach the fastening."

Gourley was in the act of saying something then, but I caught his eye just in time to prevent him.

"He opened the window then, and we both went in. The room was in darkness, and as Mr. Aranak went to find the switch by the door I called twice to Mr. Hoffgang; but, of course, without getting any reply, and as soon as the lights went up we saw the reason, and I cried out in horror. He was lying with his head between his arms outstretched on the table, and I was rushing forward to him when Mr. Aranak stopped me, telling me not to look at the table, and that I had better go into the house and send for a doctor and the police."

"What a blessing that he was with you, child," said Miss Vian, who had been listening breathlessly like the rest of us.

"Yes," agreed Marna. "He is a man who never seems to lose his self command for a moment. But I could not leave the room. I dropped helplessly in a chair staring at the ghastly sight, as if fascinated by it, not even seeing, until Mr. Aranak pointed it out to me, that there had evidently been a struggle in the room. The furniture had been overthrown, and the deed must have been the work of thieves, for a number of valuables had been put together ready to be carried away when, as he suggested the wretches had been disturbed. Probably by me, of course, when I had gone down to the room."

"What a truly awful moment for you, Marna," said Eva.

"Yes, but what a mercy that you couldn't get into the room while the miscreants were still there," added Miss Vian.

What Gourley and I were thinking may be imagined. The affair was a deeper mystery than ever. And while I was forcing myself to play the part of a merely interested outsider my mind was in a whirl of perplexed speculation as to the inner meaning of Marna's story.

I recalled Eva's description of the point of light which she had seen as someone had been moving about the room after we had left it, and now this description of the condition of the room sufficed to fill the details of what that someone had been doing, and explained what had so puzzled us—the absence of the revolver. Then the thought of the incriminating letter flashed into my thoughts, and, as Marna continued, I waited with suspense which was all but intolerable for her to describe its discovery.

"Yes, it was perhaps a merciful escape, Miss Vian," she said in reply to the elder lady's remark; "but that was not my thought. At that moment I could only tell myself that if I had insisted upon the door being opened when I had gone to the room earlier, I should have probably prevented everything. That thought stabbed me like a sword thrust. Seeing that I could not tear myself away, Mr. Aranak did everything himself. He called the servants and sent one to fetch the nearest doctor, and then telephoned to the police, first to the nearest station and afterwards to Scotland Yard, saying that murder had been done by thieves, and asking that an experienced detective should come to the house immediately. And all the time I sat there, numbed, overwhelmed by the shock of it all, a prey to feelings of remorse and mingled alarm and terror which baffle description."

"It was Dr. Hammond who was fetched, wasn't it?" asked Eva.

"Yes, and a very short examination proved that Mr. Hoffgang was dead. He had been dead at least an hour, and perhaps two, he declared."

"Yes, that agrees with——" broke in Eva, when her aunt stopped her.

"Before you say anything more I want to speak to you Eva," and while Marna was continuing, I saw Miss Vian write a few lines in pencil and pass them to her niece, who read them with puckered brow, glanced across at Gourley, and then nodded to her aunt.

"I thought I could guess their purport. Miss Vian was unwilling that Eva should speak of anything she had seen for fear of being drawn into the subsequent proceedings, a result which a man in Gourley's position might be reasonably expected to dislike. The good lady little guessed that unconsciously she was rendering him a service which might prove to be of literally critical importance.

"Dr. Hammond was kindness itself," resumed Marna, who had paused at Eva's interruption, "and urged me to leave the room. But I waited until the arrival of the police and, having told them all I knew, I left Mr. Aranak to explain everything else. The doctor asked me at once if there was any friend to whose house I could go for the night, and, when I could not think of any one, he suggested that I should go to his. I said I should prefer to remain at home, however; and intended to do so. But when he went back to the police, and I was alone, all the shock and horror of the affair seemed to overwhelm me suddenly, and then I thought of you, Eva, and came here."

"You did quite right, child," said Miss Vian. "And you must stay here until after the funeral, at least, and until you are able to make your plans. And now that you have told us everything, I insist upon your going to bed."

The kindly tone in which this was said had a deep effect upon Marna, who burst into tears as she clung to Miss Vian, and kissed her passionately.

There were many questions I should have liked to ask, but it was impracticable to ask them then, so I rose at once to leave, signing to Gourley to come with me. Eva was still concerned about his looks and fussed over him, plying him with many questions about his health, and precautions he was to take, until he found it difficult to suppress his irritation.

"Don't worry, Eva. There is nothing the matter," he said testily. "Nothing, that is, which a night's rest will not set right."

"But I'm really afraid there is. You have been looking abominably ill ever since you came, pale and worried, and not a bit like yourself. You must let me know the first thing in the morning how you are. Promise me that. I shall be all anxiety until I hear; and if you don't feel quite yourself, you must see a doctor."

"You must not forget, Miss Desbrough, that Gourley has a whole heap of parliamentary worries just now," I put in to check the nervously sharp reply which was hovering on his lips. "Good-night." And we shook hands.

Then I turned to Marna, and as our eyes met I saw that the tears were still glistening in hers. "I cannot tell you what it is to me to have found such friends at this moment, and I count you among them."

"I trust you will put that friendship to the test," I replied earnestly.

"I am going to. You offered to help me. Will you?"

"By every means in my power," I assured her, deeply moved by her appeal.

"I mean in this matter of Mr. Hoffgang's death. I am resolved that the truth shall be discovered, and that whoever killed him shall be brought to answer for the wickedness. You can help me in that, indeed. You will?" And impulsively she thrust out her hand as if seeking a pledge from me. "I was sure I could count upon you," she added with a wan smile, as we clasped hands, and she pressed mine warmly.

In this way I left the house, pledged by the woman I loved to unearth a mystery of which I already had so fatal a knowledge, and to punish the perpetrators, of whom I myself was one.

Truly a strange turn of Fortune's wheel.

CHAPTER VI.

SIMEON ARANAK.

It would have been difficult to find a more dismal trio in all London than we three, as we sat in Gourley's chambers smoking in gloomy silence after I had described to Winford all that had transpired at Miss Vian's.

Gourley was the worst. His nerves had gone all to pieces. In the taxi on our way to pick up Winford, I told him the latter's suggestion—that we should go to the police and make a clean breast of everything; and his reply indicated his state of mind.

"There's an easier way than that, Rentmain, and I shall take it. The way that Hoffgang chose. You can call it cowardice if you like; but I declare to Heaven that, if I had had poison with me to-night, I'd have taken it."

Winford was differently affected. He was in a veritable fever of impatience; the hour or two of suspense had racked him intolerably, and his temper had suffered in proportion. Impetuous by nature, and accustomed to a life of action and prompt decision, suspense galled and chafed him beyond endurance; and his one thought now was to go to the police and face the consequences, which, as he admitted, would probably be that we should stand our trial on a charge of murder.

I had agreed with his suggestion when he had first proposed it; but I shrank from it now. A good deal had happened since. I had met Marna, and was eager to find some other way out of the trouble. But I did not wish to acknowledge that this was the reason for my change of front. Moreover, I was no longer convinced of the necessity for so drastic a step.

"This won't do," exclaimed Winford at length, breaking the long silence. "We must decide on some definite course. I'm not going to sit still and twiddle my thumbs in this feckless fashion. You both know what I think we ought to do—go straight off to the police, tell 'em all we know, and stand the racket."

Gourley and I received this without comment, and our silence irritated him.

"I can't understand you two," he continued. "We should probably be charged with the murder, of course, but they couldn't possibly convict us. And anything's better than sitting still in this wringing-of-hands sort of attitude. You agreed with me before, Rentmain; why don't you say so now?"

"I'm waiting for Gourley," I replied evasively.

"Does that mean you've changed your opinion?" he asked, with a sharp look.

"If he meant what he said in the taxi, it must make a big difference, of course."

"I shan't go," declared Gourley sullenly, without shifting his eyes from the fire into which he was staring in blank despair.

"You'd rather have them come to you, you mean?"

"Yes. If they have to come; but I don't see the need yet. And if they do come, I shall be prepared."

"What does that mean?" rapped Winford.

"What I told Rentmain."

"That's the act of a coward."

"I can't help it Winford. I won't stand in the dock on a charge of murder which I can't disprove."

"It would be accepted as a proof of guilt not only on your part, but ours as well," was the indignant rejoinder.

"I can't help it, Winford," he repeated; but after a moment added: "If it has come to that, however, I'll leave a confession that it was my doing. That'll clear you two."

Winford and I exchanged a rapid glance. "Did you do it, Gourley?" he asked.

Gourley looked up from the fire then. "Are you mad?"

"No. It rests with one of us four, however; and it's a question which we all ought to answer."

"I didn't think you were in earnest; but perhaps you're right. I pledge you my honour that I had nothing to do with Hoffgang's death."

I repeated the words, and Winford followed with an equally definite repudiation. "Then it must have been your brother, Gourley," I added. "Or what he declared—suicide, intentional or accidental."

Gourley shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly; but we can't hope to prove it."

"We should have had a chance, if we hadn't been such fools as to run away out of the house," I retorted. As this was merely a statement of the obvious, there was no reply; and another spell of gloomy silence followed.

I broke it this time. "Let us try to balance our chances. At present no one knows that we were in the house."

"There's the letter that Gourley left behind him," cried Winford.

"Yes, I know; but wait a moment. It's clear that after we left the room someone was in it, and——"

"And that someone found the letter, of course, and knows all about us," broke in Winford. "There's another thing. According to Miss Desbrough's statement, the someone must have been in the room while we were there. Miss Clifford says that she tried the door several times and found it shut—bolted on the inside; not locked, mind you. That makes it virtually impossible for anyone to have entered, except by the French window; and Miss Desbrough was watching that from the moment we left."

"Wait a minute, Winford," I replied. "Let us look at the thing all round. We'll assume that the someone was in the room when we were there, and assume further that he—probably it was a man—found Gourley's letter. Why hasn't he given it to the police? Why, again did he set up the suggestion of robbery as the motive for the deed? And why, to give colour to that motive, did he take away the revolver which we all know was there? That's the point That's the point I wish to make you see. He must have had a motive, and a very strong one; and my opinion is, that he took the letter away because it would have negatived his suggested theory about robbery; since no one would be likely to think we went there to steal something. Now, even if we assume that he has the letter, how is he going to use it against us without giving himself away, and admitting that he deliberately put the police on a false scent? He couldn't without having to explain his own doings."

This had a somewhat cheering effect upon Gourley. "On my soul, I believe you've hit it, Rentmain; and if you have, it will let us out to a certainty."

"There's something in it," allowed Winford. "But who was the man? That's something we shall have to find out."

"Look here," exclaimed Gourley. "If this fellow was in the room all the time, how do we know that he didn't fire the shot?"

"We don't know, of course," said I. "But then, we don't know that he was there That's mere suggestion. That he was there afterwards is proved by the muddle up of the furniture, and the missing revolver, and so on."

A groan from Winford answered me. "Lord, what fools we were not to stay. If he was there, he'd have been discovered, and we should have been clear of the whole mess," he said.

"I don't suppose you're so keen to rush off to the police now," cried Gourley.

"You can scoff at the idea if you like, but in my opinion it is still the safest course to take, if not the only safe one."

"I'm not so sure as I was, Winford," I said.

"No, a man with a new theory never is," he growled in reply.

"Well, my mind's made up more firmly than ever," said Gourley, rising. "I shall hold on as long as possible, and how long that will be, will depend upon what you two do. Rentmain has promised Hoffgang's daughter, who, by the way, isn't his daughter, to do his utmost to unearth the mystery, and he'll have plenty of chances at getting at everthing at first hand; I can keep myself informed of every step the C.I.D. take; and between us, if the truth is to be found out, we ought to find it. And now, I've had about as much as my nerves can stand for one day. And" with that we parted, on the understanding that I was to attend the inquest on the following day.

"What's this about this Miss Clifford, old man?" asked Winford, as we turned from Piccadilly, where Gourley's chambers were, into St. James's-street on the way to the flat.

"Just what I told you. She was on the "Euthasia" with a friend, a Mrs. Beresford, and naturally we saw something of one another."

"Naturally and by mutual desire? But I thought the boat hadn't finished her cruise."

"Mrs. Beresford had a wire at Brindisi which compelled her to leave the boat there."

"And that was just about where you began to get hipped with the trip, eh?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Just about," I admitted.

"Phew! what a kettle of fish! And she's dead set on getting at the truth about this affair, isn't she?"

"Yes, and as you heard, I've promised to help her."

"Great Scot! it would be a comedy if it weren't for the tragedy at the bottom of it. What a devil of a position for you!"

"Pretty thick—yes. But I mean either to find out the truth or own up to all I know."

We walked some distance in silence, and then, as we were parting, he said, "There's one question I want to ask you. Do you believe that Gourley's denial was genuine?"

"Yes, implicitly."

"I wish I could," he replied, not a little to my surprise.

"He pledged his honour."

"I know; but he's a politician in a funk, and you know what that may mean—the stronger the denial the greater the truth."

"You're wrong, Winford," I said earnestly.

"Hope so," and with that we parted.

I could not share his belief; indeed, I scouted the idea altogether, for I still held to my conviction that it was Manuel's work.

I was at breakfast the next morning when Winford arrived with a sheaf of papers under his arm. "Seen any of these?" he asked, as he threw them down on the table. "Going to be a nine days' wonder."

"I feared something of the sort," I said. Most of them had made the case what journalists term the "feature" of the day. There were big flaring headlines, "Engrave Square Mystery!" "Mysterious Affair in the West End," and so on, with many alliterative sub-headings followed by a column or two of details, worked up by ingenious and inventive reporters.

"Nice business," he commented, as I ran my eye over the reports.

"Can't be helped, of course; there'll be a lot more to follow. But there's one consolation for us. If Eva Desbrough hasn't already spoken of what she saw, her aunt will take fright and stop her."

"You'd better take 'em to her, then." I nodded, and went on with my breakfast. "You take things pretty cooly, Rentmain. But don't you think now that we'd better go and say what we know?"

I shook my head. "I'm easier in mind than I was. I've been thinking about that theory of mine, and I don't believe we shall be brought into it after all."

"Ah, that's because of the girl. But don't forget that if we are unearthed the longer our silence lasts the harder it will be to explain away."

"I know all that, but it is the blunder we made in leaving the place that counts, and we can't undo that by talking now, twelve hours afterwards. Twelve days wouldn't make it worse than these twelve hours. Why did we bolt? How would anyone answer that? Why, that we were either scared or guilty, and whether scared or guilty, who would expect us to blurt it all out now? No one, and what good would it do? None. It's the fact that matters."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Do? Nothing, unless a chance comes of finding out the truth. And that's about as probable as that Gourley will be the next Prime Minister."

"And your promise to Miss Clifford?"

I tossed up my hands. "I shall keep it by trying to get at the truth."

"Do you mean that you're really going to mix yourself up in the investigation when the thing may turn dead against you at any moment? Perhaps you're going to tell her what part you played in it?"

"I've thought the whole position out in the night, and I've shaken off the scare I was in yesterday. In my opinion Manuel shot Hoffgang, and if I can in any way get at facts to prove it I shall let things take their course with him. But I'm not such an idiot as to blurt out what I know until I have the proofs. In the meantime, some other solution may come along. But I can keep my word to Marna Clifford without giving any of us away. And now that I've finished breakfast, I'm going to start the campaign by taking these papers to Miss Vian, and open her eyes to the necessity of closing her niece's lips."

"And what am I to do, man?" he asked disconsolately.

"Just what you would have done if all this hadn't occurred."

"But I can't stand an indefinite time of suspense."

"Then go off for a shoot somewhere. School yourself to look on the thing as if it were a bad dream, and to believe that neither you nor I nor Gourley ever went near Hoffgang's house last night."

"I wish to heaven I could," he exclaimed fervently. "I had worries enough before this infernal trouble came along to cap them all."

"I noticed then that he was terribly worried, his face was drawn and haggard, and his whole manner suggestive of suppressed but intense excitement and agitation. But I made no reference to his troubled looks. For one thing, I knew that he would have told me about the cause had he wished to discuss it, and for another, the tragedy of the previous night dwarfed all other matters.

It is difficult to define precisely my mental attitude in regard to it. I had had a night of very strenuous thought, and I had spoken only the truth in telling Winford that I believed we should get out of the mess. I had sedulously nurtured that belief, and had followed my own prescription in schooling myself to look on the affair as a bad dream.

I was resolved to consider it from the point of view of an outsider, to study it as if it were the plot of a story, to put aside the personal element entirely, and to act as far as possible like an unconcerned and irresponsible looker-on.

It was only by some such means that I could hope to play my difficult part with any hope of success, and have any chance of discovering the clue to the mystery and picking out the thread of truth from the tangle in which it was involved.

I kept this resolve closely in mind at Miss Vian's, where I was fortunate enough to find her closeted with her niece, discussing the very subject of my visit. A morning paper lay between them, and Eva began to speak to me about it with an air of grievance.

"I'm so glad you've come, Mr. Rentmain. Aunt Elsie and I have been discussing last night's affair, and she will insist that I ought not to say a word about what I saw—those men leaving the house, you know—and I say I ought."

"Didn't you tell Miss Clifford about it?" I asked, as if quite a neutral.

"I was fortunately in time to stop it. I told Eva that I was sure Sir Richard would not like to be mixed up in such a matter," said Miss Vian.

"But my feeling is that it is my duty to speak, as a mere matter of justice, and you know, aunt, how often he has declared that one always ought to do one's duty regardless of consequences."

That was just the sort of platitude Gourley was in the habit of firing off when the consequences were to fall on someone else. I knew that Eva was burning to tell everything, and that Miss Vian's opposition only fanned the flame of that desire. It was a case for diplomacy.

"I'm inclined to think you're right, Miss Desbrough. After all, it's not so very awful to be a witness in a murder trial. Of course, you'd be a bit badgered in cross-examination, and you'd have the reporters buzzing about, and your portrait in the papers, and so on. Bit of a nuisance, perhaps, to have to explain that you were at the window waiting for Gourley, and have all the facts of your engagement brought out. These things can be made to look so ridiculous. But, as you say, it's all in the cause of duty."

This had much of the effect I wished, and as Miss Vian had the good sense not to urge her opposition, Eva's sense of duty began to waver.

"But surely nothing of that would happen?" she asked.

I smiled indulgently and unfolded the papers I had brought with me. "There're going to make a big thing of it, and I can assure you that every scrap of gossip they can pick up will find its way here with all the embellishments which ingenious invention can suggest. Still, you can go away for six months when it's all over." And in this way I continued to urge her to speak while I painted the unpleasant results in very vivid colours.

"I never thought of all this. Wild horses shan't drag a word from me," she exclaimed at the close, very much to my carefully concealed satisfaction.

Having thus made sure of her silence, I asked for Marna, and learning that she had gone to the house opposite, I followed, as the time for the inquest was getting close. Dr. Bascombe was with her and a man whom she introduced as Mr. Harvey, from the office of Mr. Powell, Hoffgang's solicitor, and I found that she had already spoken of me as a friend who was going to help her in the unearthing the mystery of Mr. Hoffgang's death.

She had quite recovered from the shock of the event, and spoke of it and other matters connected with it without a trace of her distressing agitation.

"This is a very terrible affair, sir," said the lawyer. "My principal will be painfully shocked, most painfully shocked. It is most unfortunate that he should be away at such a time. Did I understand that you are a professional man?"

"I am a member of the bar so far as eating one's dinners and paying the fees are concerned. But that is all," I replied.

Mr. Rentmain is a novelist," said the doctor with a smile.

"Oh, you are the Mr. Rentmain?" cried the lawyer. "I've read your books and am delighted to meet you—at least, I wish it had been in other and less melancholy circumstances," he hastened to add, with an appropriately professional air of decorum. Then he glanced at his watch and declared it was the hour for the inquest.

The two men left the room and Marna turned, with a trustful smile, and put her hands in mine. "I am so glad you have come. I feel that I can go through everything so much more easily now that I have a real friend at my side." And she pressed my hands with a warmth which set my pulse beating rapidly.

"It is time we left the house, Marna," broke in a soft, melodious voice.

She drew her hands away in some confusion and a look of unmistakable repugnance, and I turned in angry surprise to find that it was a slim, dark, handsome young fellow who had uttered her Christian name so glibly. Our eyes met and his, coal black, penetrating and as hard as flints, said as plainly as any words that he regarded me as an interloper and was furious at finding me in this way with Marna.

At the same instant some vague doubts about him which had occurred to me during the night hardened suddenly into a set conviction. I felt as certain as if he himself had admitted the fact, that it was he who had been in the room at the time of Hoffgang's death, and had set up the suggestion of robbery as the cause.

Did he know that I had also been present? If so, his look of unmistakable hostility told me that he would make the worst possible use of the knowledge.

As this flashed upon me I could have smiled at my tattooing resolve to treat the matter as one in which I had no direct concern. He could be trusted to make my share in it as plain and as perilous as malignant hate could devise.

(To be continued next Tuesday.)

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OLD LADY'S ESCAPADE.

At Wednesday's Accrington Police Court an elderly woman named Margaret Ann McLeavey, of Hapton, was charged with drunkenness.

Supt. Garvey said prisoner was admitted to bail and was brought up at the court on Tuesday, but she was in such a condition that the case could not be heard, and she was locked up.

P.C. Clements said on the 5th inst. the prisoner was drunk in a shop in Blackburn-road, and in the street complaints were made of her conduct. She refused to go away and was brought to the police station. She had been previously ejected from two licensed houses.

Prisoner said she came to the town to do some shopping, and meeting friends she got drunk. She was sorry from her heart and was ashamed to face the magistrates that morning. She admitted that she was fined 10, for drunkenness some time ago, but she was teetotal six months afterwards, and she was sure this case would be a warning.

The Mayor said prisoner had pleaded for another chance and the magistrates had decided to give her one by letting her off with payment of costs. They hoped it would be a warning to her, and if she was brought up again she would be severely punished. She was old enough to let drink alone.

Prisoner: Yes, I will. Thank you very much.

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