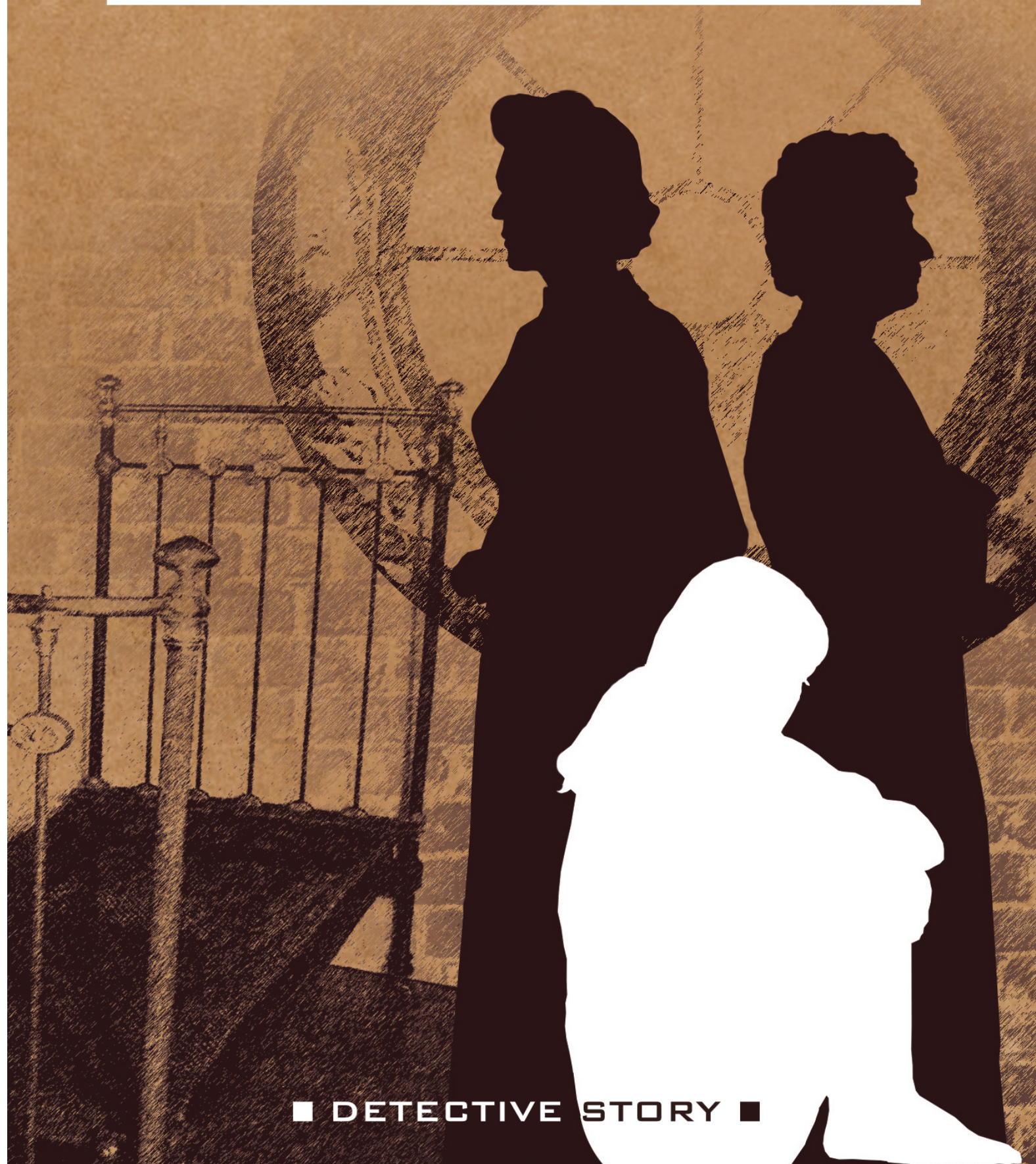


JOSEPHINE TEY

THE FRANCHISE AFFAIR



■ DETECTIVE STORY ■

Чтение в оригинале (Каро)

Josephine Tey

**Загадочные события во
Франчесе / The Franchise Affair**

«КАРО»

1948

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Tey J.

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Джозефина Тэй — псевдоним, под которым работала шотландская писательница Элизабет Макинтош, признанный мастер классического британского детектива. Роман «Загадочные события во Франчесе» (также известный в другом переводе под названием «Дело о похищении Бетти Кейн») занял 11-ю строчку перечня «100 лучших детективных романов всех времен» по версии британской Ассоциации писателей-криминалистов. Сюжет детектива строится вокруг похищения молодой девушки, в котором обвиняются Марион Шарп и ее мать. Жертва якобы смогла сбежать от похитителей и теперь уверяет полицию, что в доме Шарп ее удерживали силой, пытаясь заставить работать в качестве домашней прислуги. Обвиняемые женщины утверждают, что никогда не видели девушку и в их доме ее не было. Откуда же юной Бетти известна внутренняя обстановка жилища, вплоть до деталей: где постелен ковер, из какой посуды едят хозяева? Расследовать дело берется детектив Алан Грант. В книге представлен полный неадаптированный текст произведения на языке оригинала. В формате PDF А4 сохранен издательский макет книги.

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Джозефина Тэй Загадочные события во Франчесе / The Franchise Affair

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Chapter 1

It was four o'clock of a spring evening; and Robert Blair was thinking of going home.

The office would not shut until five, of course. But when you are the only Blair, of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet, you go home when you think you will. And when your business is mostly wills, conveyancing, and investments your services are in small demand in the late afternoon. And when you live in Milford, where the last post goes out at 3.45, the day loses whatever momentum it ever had long before four o'clock.

It was not even likely that his telephone would ring. His golfing cronies would by now be somewhere between the fourteenth and the sixteenth hole. No one would ask him to dinner, because in Milford invitations to dinner are still written by hand and sent through the post. And Aunt Lin would not ring up and ask him to call for the fish on his way home, because this was her bi-weekly afternoon at the cinema, and she would at the moment be only twenty minutes gone with feature, so to speak.

So he sat there, in the lazy atmosphere of a spring evening in a little market town, staring at the last patch of sunlight on his desk (the mahogany desk with the brass inlay that his grandfather had scandalised the family by bringing home from Paris) and thought about going home. In the patch of sunlight was his tea-tray; and it was typical of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet that tea was no affair of a japanned tin tray and a kitchen cup. At 3.50 exactly on every working day Miss Tuff bore into his office a lacquer tray covered with a fair white cloth and bearing a cup of tea in blue-patterned china, and, on a plate to match, two biscuits; petit-beurre Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, digestive Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Looking at it now, idly, he thought how much it represented the continuity of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet. The china he could remember as long as he could remember anything. The tray had been used when he was very small by the cook at home to take the bread in from the baker, and had been rescued by his young mother and brought to the office to bear the blue-patterned cups. The cloth had come years later with the advent of Miss Tuff. Miss Tuff was a war-time product; the first woman who had ever sat at a desk in a respectable solicitor's in Milford. A whole revolution Miss Tuff was in her single gawky thin earnest person. But the firm had survived the revolution with hardly a jolt, and now, nearly a quarter of a century later, it was inconceivable that thin grey dignified Miss Tuff had ever been a sensation. Indeed her only disturbance of the immemorial routine was the introduction of the tray-cloth. In Miss Tuff's home no meal was ever put straight on to a tray; if it comes to that, no cakes were ever put straight on to a plate; a tray-cloth or a doyley must intervene. So Miss Tuff had looked askance at the bare tray. She had, moreover, considered the lacquered pattern distracting, unappetising, and "queer." So one day she had brought a cloth from home; decent, plain, and white, as befitted something that was to be eaten off. And Robert's father, who had liked the lacquer tray, looked at the clean white cloth and was touched by young Miss Tuff's identification of herself with the firm's interests, and the cloth had stayed, and was now as much a part of the firm's life as the deed-boxes, and the brass plate, and Mr. Heseltine's annual cold.

It was when his eyes rested on the blue plate where the biscuits had been that Robert experienced that odd sensation in his chest again. The sensation had nothing to do with the two digestive biscuits; at least, not physically. It had to do with the inevitability of the biscuit routine; the placid certainty that it would be digestive on a Thursday and petit-beurre on a Monday. Until the last year or so, he had found no fault with certainty or placidity. He had never wanted any other life but this: this quiet friendly life in the place where he had grown up. He still did not want any other. But once or twice lately an odd, alien thought had crossed his mind; irrelevant and unbidden. As nearly as it could be put into words it was: "This is all you are ever going to have." And with the thought would

come that moment's constriction in his chest. Almost a panic reaction; like the heart-squeezing that remembering a dentist appointment would cause in his ten-year-old breast.

This annoyed and puzzled Robert; who considered himself a happy and fortunate person, and adult at that. Why should this foreign thought thrust itself on him and cause that dismayed tightening under his ribs? What had his life lacked that a man might be supposed to miss?

A wife?

But he could have married if he had wanted to. At least he supposed he could; there were a great many unattached females in the district, and they showed no signs of disliking him.

A devoted mother?

But what greater devotion could a mother have given him than Aunt Lin provided; dear doting Aunt Lin.

Riches?

What had he ever wanted that he could not buy? And if that wasn't riches he didn't know what was.

An exciting life?

But he had never wanted excitement. No greater excitement, that is, than was provided by a day's hunting or being all-square at the sixteenth.

Then what?

Why the "This is all you are ever going to have" thought?

Perhaps, he thought, sitting staring at the blue plate where the biscuits had been, it was just that Childhood's attitude of something-wonderful-tomorrow persisted subconsciously in a man as long as it was capable of realisation, and it was only after forty, when it became unlikely of fulfilment, that it obtruded itself into conscious thought; a lost piece of childhood crying for attention.

Certainly he, Robert Blair, hoped very heartily that his life would go on being what it was until he died. He had known since his schooldays that he would go into the firm and one day succeed his father; and he had looked with good-natured pity on boys who had no niche in life ready-made for them; who had no Milford, full of friends and memories, waiting for them; no part in English continuity as was provided by Blair, Hayward, and Bennet.

There was no Hayward in the firm nowadays; there had not been one since 1843; but a young sprig of the Bennets was occupying the back room at this moment. Occupying was the operative word, since it was very unlikely that he was doing any work; his chief interest in life being to write poems of an originality so pristine that only Nevil himself could understand them. Robert deplored the poems but condoned the idleness, since he could not forget that when he had occupied that same room he had spent his time practising mashie shots into the leather arm-chair.

The sunlight slipped off the edge of the tray and Robert decided it was time to go. If he went now he could walk home down the High Street before the sunlight was off the east-side pavement; and walking down Milford High Street was still one of the things that gave him conscious pleasure. Not that Milford was a show-place. It could be duplicated a hundred times anywhere south of Trent. But in its unselfconscious fashion it typified the goodness of life in England for the last three hundred years. From the old dwelling-house flush with the pavement that housed Blair, Hayward, and Bennet and had been built in the last years of Charles the Second's reign, the High Street flowed south in a gentle slope – Georgian brick, Elizabethan timber-and-plaster, Victorian stone, Regency stucco – to the Edwardian villas behind their elm trees at the other end. Here and there, among the rose and white and brown, appeared a front of black glass, brazening it out like an overdressed parvenu at a party; but the good manners of the other buildings discounted them. Even the multiple businesses had dealt leniently with Milford. True, the scarlet and gold of an American bazaar flaunted its bright promise down at the south end, and daily offended Miss Truelove who ran the Elizabethan relic opposite as a tea-shop with the aid of her sister's baking and Ann Boleyn's reputation. But the Westminster Bank, with a humility rare since the days of usury, had adapted the Weavers Hall to their needs without so

much as a hint of marble; and Soles, the wholesale chemists, had taken the old Wisdom residence and kept its tall surprised-looking front intact.

It was a fine, gay, busy little street, punctuated with pollarded lime trees growing out of the pavement; and Robert Blair loved it.

He had gathered his feet under him preparatory to getting up, when his telephone rang. In other places in the world, one understands, telephones are made to ring in outer offices, where a minion answers the thing and asks your business and says that if you will be good enough to wait just a moment she will “put you thrrough” and you are then connected with the person you want to speak to. But not in Milford. Nothing like that would be tolerated in Milford. In Milford if you call John Smith on the telephone you expect John Smith to answer in person. So when the telephone rang on that spring evening in Blair, Hayward, and Bennet’s it rang on Robert’s brass-and-mahogany desk.

Always, afterwards, Robert was to wonder what would have happened if that telephone call had been one minute later. In one minute, sixty worthless seconds, he would have taken his coat from the peg in the hall, popped his head into the opposite room to tell Mr. Heseltine that he was departing for the day stepped out into the pale sunlight and been away down the street. Mr. Heseltine would have answered his telephone when it rang and told the woman that he had gone. And she would have hung up and tried someone else. And all that followed would have had only academic interest for him.

But the telephone rang in time; and Robert put out his hand and picked up the receiver.

“Is that Mr. Blair?” a woman’s voice asked; a contralto voice that would normally be a confident one, he felt, but now sounded breathless or hurried. “Oh, I am so glad to have caught you. I was afraid you would have gone for the day. Mr. Blair, you don’t know me. My name is Sharpe, Marion Sharpe. I live with my mother at The Franchise. The house out on the Larborough road, you know.”

“Yes, I know it,” Blair said. He knew Marion Sharpe by sight, as he knew everyone in Milford and the district. A tall, lean, dark woman of forty or so; much given to bright silk kerchiefs which accentuated her gipsy swarthinness. She drove a battered old car, from which she shopped in the mornings while her white-haired old mother sat in the back, upright and delicate and incongruous and somehow silently protesting. In profile old Mrs. Sharpe looked like Whistler’s mother; when she turned full-face and you got the impact of her bright, pale, cold, seagull’s eye, she looked like a sibyl. An uncomfortable old person.

“You don’t know me,” the voice went on, “but I have seen you in Milford, and you look a kind person, and I need a lawyer. I mean, I need one now, this minute. The only lawyer we ever have business with is in London – a London firm, I mean – and they are not actually ours. We just inherited them with a legacy. But now I am in trouble and I need legal backing, and I remembered you and thought that you would—”

“If it is your car—” Robert began. “In trouble” in Milford meant one of two things; an affiliation order, or an offence against the traffic laws. Since the case involved Marion Sharpe, it would be the latter; but it made no difference because in neither case was Blair, Hayward, and Bennet likely to be interested. He would pass her on to Carley, the bright lad at the other end of the street, who revelled in court cases and was popularly credited with the capacity to bail the Devil out of hell. (“Bail him out!” someone said, one night at the Rose and Crown. “He’d do more than that. He’d get all our signatures to a guinea testimonial to the Old Sinner.”)

“If it is your car—”

“Car?” she said, vaguely; as if in her present world it was difficult to remember what a car was. “Oh, I see. No. Oh, no, it isn’t anything like that. It is something much more serious. It’s Scotland Yard.”

“Scotland Yard!”

To that douce country lawyer and gentleman, Robert Blair, Scotland Yard was as exotic as Xanadu, Hollywood, or parachuting. As a good citizen he was on comfortable terms with the local police, and there his connection with crime ended. The nearest he had ever come to Scotland Yard

was to play golf with the local Inspector; a good chap who played a very steady game and occasionally, when it came to the nineteenth, expanded into mild indiscretions about his job.

"I haven't *murdered* anyone, if that is what you are thinking," the voice said hastily.

"The point is: are you *supposed* to have murdered anyone?" Whatever she was supposed to have done this was clearly a case for Carley. He must edge her off on to Carley.

"No; it isn't murder at all. I'm supposed to have kidnapped someone. Or abducted them, or something. I can't explain over the telephone. And anyhow I need someone now, at once, and—"

"But, you know, I don't think it is me you need at all," Robert said. "I know practically nothing about criminal law. My firm is not equipped to deal with a case of that sort. The man you need—"

"I don't want a criminal lawyer. I want a friend. Someone who will stand by me and see that I am not put-upon. I mean, tell me what I need not answer if I don't want to, and that sort of thing. You don't need a training in crime for that, do you?"

"No, but you would be much better served by a firm who were used to police cases. A firm that—"

"What you are trying to tell me is that this is not 'your cup of tea'; that's it, isn't it?"

"No, of course not," Robert said hastily. "I quite honestly feel that you would be wiser—"

"You know what I feel like?" she broke in. "I feel like someone drowning in a river because she can't drag herself up the bank, and instead of giving me a hand you point out that the other bank is much better to crawl out on."

There was a moment's silence.

"But on the contrary," Robert said, "I can provide you with an expert puller-out-of-rivers; a great improvement on my amateur self, I assure you. Benjamin Carley knows more about defending accused persons than anyone between here and—"

"What! That awful little man with the striped suits!" Her deep voice ran up and cracked, and there was another momentary silence. "I am sorry," she said presently in her normal voice. "That was silly. But you see, when I rang you up just now it wasn't because I thought you would be clever about things" ("Wasn't it, indeed," thought Robert) "but because I was in trouble and wanted the advice of someone of my own sort. And you looked my sort. Mr. Blair, do please come. I need you *now*. There are people from Scotland Yard here in the house. And if you feel that it isn't something you want to be mixed up in you could always pass it on to someone else afterwards; couldn't you? But there may be nothing after all to be mixed up in. If you would just come out here and 'watch my interests' or whatever you call it, for an hour, it may all pass over. I'm sure there is a mistake somewhere. Couldn't you please do that for me?"

On the whole Robert Blair thought that he could. He was too good-natured to refuse any reasonable appeal – and she had given him a loophole if things grew difficult. And he did not, after all, now he came to think of it, want to throw her to Ben Carley. In spite of her *bêtise* about striped suits he saw her point of view. If you had done something you wanted to get away with, Carley was no doubt God's gift to you; but if you were bewildered and in trouble and innocent, perhaps Carley's brash personality was not likely to be a very present help.

All the same, he wished as he laid down the receiver that the front he presented to the world was a more forbidding one – Calvin or Caliban, he did not care, so long as strange females were discouraged from flinging themselves on his protection when they were in trouble.

What possible kind of trouble could "kidnapping" be, he wondered as he walked round to the garage in Sin Lane for his car? Was there such an offence in English law? And whom could she possibly be interested in kidnapping? A child? Some child with "expectations"? In spite of the large house out on the Larborough road they gave the impression of having very little money. Or some child that they considered "ill-used" by its natural guardians? That was possible. The old woman had a fanatic's face, if ever he saw one; and Marion Sharpe herself looked as if the stake would be her natural prop if stakes were not out of fashion. Yes, it was probably some ill-judged piece of

philanthropy. Detention “with intent to deprive parent, guardian, etc., of its possession.” He wished he remembered more of his *Harris and Wilshere*. He could not remember off-hand whether that was a felony, with penal servitude in the offing, or a mere misdemeanour. “Abduction and Detention” had not sullied the Blair, Hayward, and Bennet files since December 1798, when the squire of Lessows, much flown with seasonable claret, had taken the young Miss Gretton across his saddle-bow from a ball at the Gretton home and ridden away with her through the floods; and there was no doubt at all, of course, as to the squire’s motive on that occasion.

Ah, well; they would no doubt be open to reason now that they had been startled by the irruption of Scotland Yard into their plans. He was a little startled by Scotland Yard himself. Was the child so important that it was a matter for Headquarters?

Round in Sin Lane he ran into the usual war but extricated himself. (Etymologists, in case you are interested, say that the “Sin” is merely a corruption of “sand,” but the inhabitants of Milford of course know better; before those council houses were built on the low meadows behind the town the lane led direct to the lovers’ walk in High Wood.) Across the narrow lane, face to face in perpetual enmity, stood the local livery stable and the town’s newest garage. The garage frightened the horses (so said the livery stable), and the livery stable blocked up the lane continually with delivery loads of straw and fodder and what not (so the garage said). Moreover the garage was run by Bill Brough, ex-R.E.M.E., and Stanley Peters, ex-Royal Corps of Signals; and old Matt Ellis, ex-King’s Dragoon Guards, looked on them as representatives of a generation which had destroyed the cavalry and an offence to civilisation.

In winter, when he hunted, Robert heard the cavalry side of the story; for the rest of the year he listened to the Royal Corps of Signals while his car was being wiped, oiled, filled, or fetched. Today the Signals wanted to know the difference between libel and slander, and what exactly constituted defamation of character. Was it defamation of character to say that a man was “a tinkerer with tin cans who wouldn’t know a nut from an acorn”?

“Don’t know, Stan. Have to think over it,” Robert said hastily, pressing the starter. He waited while three tired hacks brought back two fat children and a groom from their afternoon ride (“See what I mean?” said Stanley in the background) and then swung the car into the High Street.

Down at the south end of the High Street the shops faded gradually into dwelling houses with doorsteps on the pavement, then to houses set back a pace and with porticos to their doors, and then to villas with trees in their gardens, and then, quite suddenly, to fields and open country.

It was farming country; a land of endless hedged fields and few houses. A rich country, but lonely; one could travel mile after mile without meeting another human being. Quiet and confident and unchanged since the Wars of the Roses, hedged field succeeded hedged field, and skyline faded into skyline, without any break in the pattern. Only the telegraph posts betrayed the century.

Away beyond the horizon was Larborough. Larborough was bicycles, small arms, tin-tacks, Cowan’s Cranberry Sauce, and a million human souls living cheek by jowl in dirty red brick; and periodically it broke bounds in an atavistic longing for grass and earth. But there was nothing in the Milford country to attract a race who demanded with their grass and earth both views and tea-houses; when Larborough went on holiday it went as one man west to the hills and the sea, and the great stretch of country north and east of it stayed lonely and quiet and unlittered as it had been in the days of the Sun in Splendour. It was “dull”; and by that damnation was saved.

Two miles out on the Larborough road stood the house known as The Franchise; set down by the roadside with the inconsequence of a telephone kiosk. In the last days of the Regency someone had bought the field known as The Franchise, built in the middle of it a flat white house, and then surrounded the whole with a high solid wall of brick with a large double gate, of wall height, in the middle of the road frontage. It had no relation with anything in the countryside. No farm buildings in the background; no side-gates, even, into the surrounding fields. Stables were built in accordance with the period at the back of the house, but they were inside the wall. The place was as irrelevant,

as isolated, as a child's toy dropped by the wayside. It had been occupied as long as Robert could remember by an old man; presumably the same old man, but since The Franchise people had always shopped at Ham Green, the village on the Larborough side of them, they had never been seen in Milford. And then Marion Sharpe and her mother had begun to be part of the morning shopping scene in Milford, and it was understood that they had inherited The Franchise when the old man died.

How long had they been there, Robert wondered. Three years? Four years?

That they had not entered Milford socially was nothing to reckon by. Old Mrs. Warren, who had bought the first of the elm-shaded villas at the end of the High Street a small matter of twenty-five years ago in the hope that midland air would be better for her rheumatism than the sea, was still referred to as "that lady from Weymouth." (It was Swanage, incidentally.)

The Sharpes, moreover, might not have sought social contacts. They had an odd air of being self-sufficient. He had seen the daughter once or twice on the golf-course, playing (presumably as a guest) with Dr. Borthwick. She drove a long ball like a man, and used her thin brown wrists like a professional. And that was all Robert knew about her.

As he brought the car to a stop in front of the tall iron gates, he found that two other cars were already there. It needed only one glance at the nearer – so inconspicuous, so well-groomed, so discreet – to identify it. In what other country in this world, he wondered as he got out of his own car, does the police force take pains to be well-mannered and quiet?

His eye lighted on the further car and he saw that it was Hallam's; the local Inspector who played such a steady game on golf-course.

There were three people in the police car: the driver, and, in the back, a middle-aged woman and what seemed to be either a child or a young girl. The driver regarded him with that mild, absent-minded, all-observing police eye, and then withdrew his gaze, but the faces in the back he could not see.

The tall iron gates were shut – Robert could not remember ever seeing them open – and Robert pushed open one heavy half with frank curiosity. The iron lace of the original gates had been lined, in some Victorian desire for privacy, by flat sheets of cast iron; and the wall was too high for anything inside to be visible; so that, except for a distant view of its roof and chimneys, he had never seen The Franchise.

His first feeling was disappointment. It was not the fallen-on-evil-times look of the house – although that was evident; it was the sheer ugliness of it. Either it had been built too late to share in the grace of a graceful period, or the builder had lacked an architect's eye. He had used the idiom of the time, but it had apparently not been native to him. Everything was just a little wrong: the windows the wrong size by half a foot, wrongly placed by not much more; the doorway the wrong width, and the flight of steps the wrong height. The total result was that instead of the bland contentment of its period the house had a hard stare. An antagonistic, questioning stare. As he walked across the courtyard to the unwelcoming door Robert knew what it reminded him of: a dog that has been suddenly wakened from sleep by the advent of a stranger, propped on his forelegs, uncertain for a moment whether to attack or merely bark. It had the same what-are-you-doing-here? expression.

Before he could ring the bell the door was opened; not by a maid but by Marion Sharpe.

"I saw you coming," she said, putting out her hand. "I didn't want you to ring because my mother lies down in the afternoons, and I am hoping that we can get this business over before she wakes up. Then she need never know anything about it. I am more grateful than I can say to you for coming."

Robert murmured something, and noticed that her eyes, which he had expected to be a bright gipsy brown, were actually a grey hazel. She drew him into the hall, and he noticed as he put his hat down on a chest that the rug on the floor was threadbare.

"The Law is in here," she said, pushing open a door and ushering him into a drawing-room. Robert would have liked to talk to her alone for a moment, to orientate himself; but it was too late now to suggest that. This was evidently the way she wanted it.

Sitting on the edge of a bead-work chair was Hallam, looking sheepish. And by the window, entirely at his ease in a very nice piece of Hepplewhite, was Scotland Yard in the person of a youngish spare man in a well-tailored suit.

As they got up, Hallam and Robert nodded to each other.

"You know Inspector Hallam, then?" Marion Sharpe said. "And this is Detective-Inspector Grant, from Headquarters."

Robert noticed the "Headquarters," and wondered. Had she already at some time had dealings with the police, or was it that she just didn't like the slightly sensational sound of "the Yard"?

Grant shook hands, and said:

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Blair. Not only for Miss Sharpe's sake but for my own."

"Yours?"

"I couldn't very well proceed until Miss Sharpe had some kind of support; friendly support if not legal, but if legal so much the better."

"I see. And what are you charging her with?"

"We are not charging her with anything—" Grant began, but Marion interrupted him.

"I am supposed to have kidnapped and beaten up someone."

"*Beaten up?*" Robert said, staggered.

"Yes," she said, with a kind of relish in enormity. "Beaten her black and blue."

"Her?"

"A girl. She is outside the gate in a car now."

"I think we had better begin at the beginning," Robert said, clutching after the normal.

"Perhaps I had better do the explaining," Grant said, mildly.

"Yes," said Miss Sharpe, "do. After all it is your story."

Robert wondered if Grant were aware of the mockery. He wondered a little, too, at the coolness that could afford mockery with Scotland Yard sitting in one of her best chairs. She had not sounded cool over the telephone; she had sounded driven, half-desperate. Perhaps it was the presence of an ally that had heartened her; or perhaps she had just got her second wind.

"Just before Easter," Grant began, in succinct police-fashion, "a girl called Elisabeth Kane, who lived with her guardians near Aylesbury, went to spend a short holiday with a married aunt in Mainshill, the suburb of Larborough. She went by coach, because the London-Larborough coaches pass through Aylesbury, and also pass through Mainshill before reaching Larborough; so that she could get off the coach in Mainshill and be within a three-minute walk of her aunt's house, instead of having to go into Larborough and come all the way out again as she would have to if she travelled by train. At the end of a week her guardians – a Mr. and Mrs. Wynn – had a postcard from her saying that she was enjoying herself very much and was staying on. They took this to mean staying on for the duration of her school holiday, which would mean another three weeks. When she didn't turn up on the day before she was supposed to go back to school, they took it for granted that she was merely playing truant and wrote to her aunt to send her back. The aunt, instead of going to the nearest call-box or telegraph office, broke it to the Wynns in a letter, that her niece had left on her way back to Aylesbury a fortnight previously. The exchange of letters had taken the best part of another week, so that by the time the guardians went to the police about it the girl had been missing for four weeks. The police took all the usual measures but before they could really get going the girl turned up. She walked into her home near Aylesbury late one night wearing only a dress and shoes, and in a state of complete exhaustion."

"How old is the girl?" Robert asked.

"Fifteen. Nearly sixteen." He waited a moment to see if Robert had further questions, and then went on. (As one counsel to another, thought Robert appreciatively; a manner to match the car that stood so unobtrusively at the gate.) "She said she had been 'kidnapped' in a car, but that was all the

information anyone got from her for two days. She lapsed into a semi-conscious condition. When she recovered, about forty-eight hours later, they began to get her story from her.”

“They?”

“The Wynns. The police wanted it, of course, but she grew hysterical at any mention of police, so they had to acquire it second-hand. She said that while she was waiting for her return coach at the cross-roads in Mainshill, a car pulled up at the kerb with two women in it. The younger woman, who was driving, asked her if she was waiting for a bus and if they could give her a lift.”

“Was the girl alone?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Didn’t anyone go to see her off?”

“Her uncle was working, and her aunt had gone to be godmother at a christening.” Again he paused to let Robert put further questions if he was so minded. “The girl said that she was waiting for the London coach, and they told her that it had already gone by. Since she had arrived at the cross-roads with very little time to spare, and her watch was not a particularly accurate one, she believed this. Indeed, she had begun to be afraid, even before the car stopped, that she had missed the coach. She was distressed about it because it was by then four o’clock, beginning to rain, and growing dark. They were very sympathetic, and suggested that they should give her a lift to a place whose name she did not catch, where she could get a different coach to London in half an hour’s time. She accepted this gratefully and got in beside the elder woman in the back of the car.”

A picture swam into Robert’s mind of old Mrs. Sharpe, upright and intimidating, in her usual place in the back of the car. He glanced at Marion Sharpe, but her face was calm. This was a story she had heard already.

“The rain blurred the windows, and she talked to the older woman about herself as they went along, so that she paid little attention to where they were going. When she at last took notice of her surroundings the evening outside the windows had become quite dark and it seemed to her that they had been travelling for a long time. She said something about its being extraordinarily kind of them to take her so far out of their way, and the younger woman, speaking for the first time, said that as it happened it was not out of their way, and that, on the contrary, she would have time to come in and have a cup of something hot with them before they took her on to her new cross-roads. She was doubtful about this, but the younger woman said it would be of no advantage to wait for twenty minutes in the rain when she could be warm and dry and fed in those same twenty minutes; and she agreed that this seemed sensible. Eventually the younger woman got out, opened what appeared to the girl to be drive gates, and the car was driven up to a house which it was too dark to see. She was taken into a large kitchen—”

“A kitchen?” Robert repeated.

“Yes, a kitchen. The older woman put some cold coffee on the stove to heat while the younger one cut sandwiches. ‘Sandwiches without tops,’ the girl called them.”

“Smorgasbord.”

“Yes. While they ate and drank, the younger woman told her that they had no maid at the moment and asked her if she would like to be a maid for them for a little. She said that she wouldn’t. They tried persuasion, but she stuck to it that that was not at all the kind of job she would take. Their faces began to grow blurred as she talked, and when they suggested that she might at least come upstairs and see what a nice bedroom she would have if she stayed she was too fuddled in her mind to do anything but follow their suggestion. She remembers going up a first flight with a carpet, and a second flight with what she calls ‘something hard’ underfoot, and that was all she remembered until she woke in daylight on a truckle bed in a bare little attic. She was wearing only her slip, and there was no sign of the rest of her clothes. The door was locked, and the small round window would not open. In any case—”

“Round window!” said Robert, uncomfortably.

But it was Marion who answered him. “Yes,” she said, meaningly. “A round window up in the roof.”

Since his last thought as he came to her front door a few minutes ago had been how badly placed was the little round window in the roof, there seemed to Robert to be no adequate comment. Grant made his usual pause for courtesy’s sake, and went on.

“Presently the younger woman arrived with a bowl of porridge. The girl refused it and demanded her clothes and her release. The woman said that she would eat it when she was hungry enough and went away, leaving the porridge behind. She was alone till evening, when the same woman brought her tea on a tray with fresh cakes and tried to talk her into giving the maid’s job a trial. The girl again refused, and for days, according to her story, this alternate coaxing and bullying went on, sometimes by one of the women and sometimes by the other. Then she decided that if she could break the small round window she might be able to crawl out of it on to the roof, which was protected by a parapet, and call the attention of some passerby, or some visiting tradesman, to her plight. Unfortunately, her only implement was a chair, and she had managed only to crack the glass before the younger woman interrupted her, in a great passion. She snatched the chair from the girl and belaboured her with it until she was breathless. She went away, taking the chair with her, and the girl thought that was the end of it. But in a few moments the woman came back with what the girl thinks was a dog whip and beat her until she fainted. Next day the older woman appeared with an armful of bed-linen and said that if she would not work she would at least sew. No sewing, no food. She was too stiff to sew and so had no food. The following day she was threatened with another beating if she did not sew. So she mended some of the linen and was given stew for supper. This arrangement lasted for some time, but if her sewing was bad or insufficient, she was either beaten or deprived of food. Then one evening the older woman brought the usual bowl of stew and went away leaving the door unlocked. The girl waited, thinking it was a trap that would end in another beating; but in the end she ventured on to the landing. There was no sound, and she ran down a flight of uncarpeted stairs. Then down a second flight to the first landing. Now she could hear the two women talking in the kitchen. She crept down the last flight and dashed for the door. It was unlocked and she ran out just as she was into the night.”

“In her slip?” Robert asked.

“I forgot to say that the slip had been exchanged for her dress. There was no heating in the attic, and in nothing but a slip she would probably have died.”

“If she ever was in an attic,” Robert said.

“If, as you say, she ever was in an attic,” the Inspector agreed smoothly. And without his customary pause of courtesy went on: “She does not remember much after that. She walked a great distance in the dark, she says. It seemed a highroad but there was no traffic and she met no one. Then, on a main road, some time later, a lorry driver saw her in his headlight and stopped to give her a lift. She was so tired that she fell straight asleep. She woke as she was being set on her feet at the roadside. The lorry driver was laughing at her and saying that she was like a sawdust doll that had lost its stuffing. It seemed to be still night time. The lorry driver said this was where she said she wanted to be put off, and drove away. After a little she recognised the corner. It was less than two miles from her home. She heard a clock strike eleven. And shortly before midnight she arrived home.”

Chapter 2

There was a short silence.

“And this is the girl who is sitting in a car outside the gate of The Franchise at this moment?” said Robert.

“Yes.”

“I take it that you have reasons for bringing her here.”

“Yes. When the girl had recovered sufficiently she was induced to tell her story to the police. It was taken down in shorthand as she told it, and she read the typed version and signed it. In that statement there were two things that helped the police a lot. These are the relevant extracts:

‘When we had been going for some time we passed a bus that had MILFORD in a lighted sign on it. No, I don’t know where Milford is. No, I have never been there.’

“That is one. The other is:

‘From the window of the attic I could see a high brick wall with a big iron gate in the middle of it. There was a road on the further side of the wall, because I could see the telegraph posts. No, I couldn’t see the traffic on it because the wall was too high. Just the tops of lorry loads sometimes. You couldn’t see through the gate because it had sheets of iron on the inside. Inside the gate the carriage way went straight for a little and then divided in two into a circle up to the door. No, it wasn’t a garden, just grass. Yes, lawn, I suppose. No, I don’t remember any shrubs; just the grass and the paths.’”

Grant shut the little notebook he had been quoting from.

“As far as we know – and the search has been thorough – there is no other house between Larborough and Milford which fulfils the girl’s description except The Franchise. The Franchise, moreover, fulfils it in every particular. When the girl saw the wall and the gate today she was sure that this was the place; but she has not so far seen inside the gate, of course. I had first to explain matters to Miss Sharpe, and find out if she was willing to be confronted with the girl. She very rightly suggested that some legal witness should be present.”

“Do you wonder that I wanted help in a hurry?” Marion Sharpe said, turning to Robert. “Can you imagine a more nightmare piece of nonsense?”

“The girl’s story is certainly the oddest mixture of the factual and the absurd. I know that domestic help is scarce,” Robert said, “but would anyone hope to enlist a servant by forcibly detaining her, to say nothing of beating and starving her.”

“No normal person, of course,” Grant agreed, keeping his eye steadily fixed on Robert’s so that it had no tendency to slide over to Marion Sharpe. “But believe me in my first twelve months in the force I had come across a dozen things much more incredible. There is no end to the extravagances of human conduct.”

“I agree; but the extravagance is just as likely to be in the girl’s conduct. After all, the extravagance begins with her. She is the one who has been missing for—” He paused in question.

“A month,” Grant supplied.

“For a month; while there is no suggestion that the household at The Franchise has varied at all from its routine. Would it not be possible for Miss Sharpe to provide an alibi for the day in question?”

“No,” Marion Sharpe said. “The day, according to the Inspector, is the 28th of March. That is a long time ago, and our days here vary very little, if at all. It would be quite impossible for us to remember what we were doing on March the 28th – and most unlikely that anyone would remember for us.”

“Your maid?” Robert suggested. “Servants have ways of marking their domestic life that is often surprising.”

“We have no maid,” she said. “We find it difficult to keep one: The Franchise is so isolated.”

The moment threatened to become awkward and Robert hastened to break it.

"This girl – I don't know her name, by the way."

"Elisabeth Kane; known as Betty Kane."

"Oh, yes; you did tell me. I'm sorry. This girl – may we know something about her? I take it that the police have investigated her before accepting so much of her story. Why guardians and not parents, for instance?"

"She is a war orphan. She was evacuated to the Aylesbury district as a small child. She was an only child, and was billeted with the Wynns, who had a boy four years older. About twelve months later both parents were killed, in the same 'incident,' and the Wynns, who had always wanted a daughter and were very fond of the child, were glad to keep her. She looks on them as her parents, since she can hardly remember the real ones."

"I see. And her record?"

"Excellent. A very quiet girl, by every account. Good at her school work but not brilliant. Has never been in any kind of trouble, in school or out of it. 'Transparently truthful' was the phrase her form mistress used about her."

"When she eventually turned up at her home, after her absence, was there any evidence of the beatings she said she had been given?"

"Oh, yes. Very definitely. The Wynns' own doctor saw her early next morning, and his statement is that she had been very extensively knocked about. Indeed, some of the bruises were still visible much later when she made her statement to us."

"No history of epilepsy?"

"No; we considered that very early in the inquiry. I should like to say that the Wynns are very sensible people. They have been greatly distressed, but they have not tried to dramatise the affair, or allowed the girl to be an object of interest or pity. They have taken the affair admirably."

"And all that remains is for me to take my end of it with the same admirable detachment," Marion Sharpe said.

"You see my position, Miss Sharpe. The girl not only describes the house in which she says she was detained; she describes the two inhabitants – and describes them very accurately. 'A thin, elderly woman with soft white hair and no hat, dressed in black; and a much younger woman, thin and tall and dark like a gipsy, with no hat and a bright silk scarf round her neck.'"

"Oh, yes. I can think of no explanation, but I understand your position. And now I think we had better have the girl in, but before we do I should like to say—"

The door opened noiselessly, and old Mrs. Sharpe appeared on the threshold. The short pieces of white hair round her face stood up on end, as her pillow had left them, and she looked more than ever like a sibyl.

She pushed the door to behind her and surveyed the gathering with a malicious interest.

"Hah!" she said, making a sound like the throaty squawk of a hen. "*Three* strange men!"

"Let me present them, Mother," Marion said, as the three got to their feet.

"This is Mr. Blair, of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet – the firm who have that lovely house at the top of the High Street."

As Robert bowed the old woman fixed him with her seagull's eye.

"Needs re-tiling," she said.

It did, but it was not the greeting he had expected.

It comforted him a little that her greeting to Grant was even more unorthodox. Far from being impressed or agitated by the presence of Scotland Yard in her drawing-room of a spring afternoon, she merely said in her dry voice: "You should not be sitting in that chair; you are much too heavy for it."

When her daughter introduced the local Inspector she cast one glance at him, moved her head an inch, and quite obviously dismissed him from further consideration. This, Hallam, to judge by his expression, found peculiarly shattering.

Grant looked inquiringly at Miss Sharpe.

"I'll tell her," she said. "Mother, the Inspector wants us to see a young girl who is waiting in a car outside the gate. She was missing from her home near Aylesbury for a month, and when she turned up again – in a distressed condition – she said that she had been detained by people who wanted to make a servant of her. They kept her locked up when she refused, and beat and starved her. She described the place and the people minutely, and it so happens that you and I fit the description admirably. So does our house. The suggestion is that she was detained up in our attic with the round window."

"Remarkably interesting," said the old lady, seating herself with deliberation on an Empire sofa. "What did we beat her with?"

"A dog whip, I understand."

"Have we got a dog whip?"

"We have one of those 'lead' things, I think. They make a whip if necessary. But the point is, the Inspector would like us to meet this girl, so that she can say if we are the people who detained her or not."

"Have you any objections, Mrs. Sharpe?" Grant asked.

"On the contrary, Inspector. I look forward to the meeting with impatience. It is not every afternoon, I assure you, that I go to my rest a dull old woman and rise a potential monster."

"Then if you will excuse me, I shall bring—"

Hallam made a motion, offering himself as messenger, but Grant shook his head. It was obvious that he wanted to be present when the girl first saw what was beyond the gate.

As the Inspector went out Marion Sharpe explained Blair's presence to her mother. "It was extraordinarily kind of him to come at such short notice and so quickly," she added, and Robert felt again the impact of that bright pale old eye. For his money, old Mrs. Sharpe was quite capable of beating seven different people between breakfast and lunch, any day of the week.

"You have my sympathy, Mr. Blair," she said, unsympathetically.

"Why, Mrs. Sharpe?"

"I take it that Broadmoor is a little out of your line."

"Broadmoor!"

"Criminal lunacy."

"I find it extraordinarily stimulating," Robert said, refusing to be bullied by her.

This drew a flash of appreciation from her; something that was like the shadow of a smile. Robert had the odd feeling that she suddenly liked him; but if so she was making no verbal confession of it. Her dry voice said tartly: "Yes, I expect the distractions of Milford are scarce and mild. My daughter pursues a piece of gutta-percha round the golf course—"

"It is not gutta-percha any more, Mother," her daughter put in.

"But at my age Milford does not provide even that distraction. I am reduced to pouring weedkiller on weeds – a legitimate form of sadism on a par with drowning fleas. Do you drown your fleas, Mr. Blair?"

"No, I squash them. But I have a sister who used to pursue them with a cake of soap."

"Soap?" said Mrs. Sharpe, with genuine interest.

"I understand that she hit them with the soft side and they stuck to it."

"How *very* interesting. A technique I have not met before. I must try that next time."

With his other ear he heard that Marion was being nice to the snubbed Inspector. "You play a very good game, Inspector," she was saying.

He was conscious of the feeling you get near the end of a dream, when waking is just round the corner, that none of the inconsequence really matters because presently you'll be back in the real world.

This was misleading because the real world came through the door with the return of Inspector Grant. Grant came in first, so that he was in a position to see the expressions on all the faces concerned, and held the door open for a police matron and a girl.

Marion Sharpe stood up slowly, as if the better to face anything that might be coming to her, but her mother remained seated on the sofa as one giving an audience, her Victorian back as flat as it had been as a young girl, her hands lying composedly in her lap. Even her wild hair could not detract from the impression that she was mistress of the situation.

The girl was wearing her school coat, and childish low-heeled clumpish black school shoes; and consequently looked younger than Blair had anticipated. She was not very tall, and certainly not pretty. But she had – what was the word? – appeal. Her eyes, a darkish blue, were set wide apart in a face of the type popularly referred to as heart-shaped. Her hair was mouse-coloured, but grew off her forehead in a good line. Below each cheek-bone a slight hollow, a miracle of delicate modelling, gave the face charm and pathos. Her lower lip was full, but the mouth was too small. So were her ears. Too small and too close to her head.

An ordinary sort of girl, after all. Not the sort you would notice in a crowd. Not at all the type to be the heroine of a sensation. Robert wondered what she would look like in other clothes.

The girl's glance rested first on the old woman, and then went on to Marion. The glance held neither surprise nor triumph, and not much interest.

"Yes, these are the women," she said.

"You have no doubt about it?" Grant asked her, and added: "It is a very grave accusation, you know."

"No, I have no doubt. How could I?"

"These two ladies are the women who detained you, took your clothes from you, forced you to mend linen, and whipped you?"

"Yes, these are the women."

"A remarkable liar," said old Mrs. Sharpe, in the tone in which one says: "A remarkable likeness."

"You say that we took you into the kitchen for coffee," Marion said.

"Yes, you did."

"Can you describe the kitchen?"

"I didn't pay much attention. It was a big one – with a stone floor, I think – and a row of bells."

"What kind of stove?"

"I didn't notice the stove, but the pan the old woman heated the coffee in was a pale blue enamel one with a dark blue edge and a lot of chips off round the bottom edge."

"I doubt if there is any kitchen in England that hasn't a pan exactly like that," Marion said. "We have three of them."

"Is the girl a virgin?" asked Mrs. Sharpe, in the mildly interested tone of a person inquiring: "Is it a Chanel?"

In the startled pause that this produced Robert was aware of Hallam's scandalised face, the hot blood running up into the girl's, and the fact that there was no protesting "Mother!" from the daughter as he unconsciously, but confidently, expected. He wondered whether her silence was tacit approval, or whether after a lifetime with Mrs. Sharpe she was shock-proof.

Grant said in cold reproof that the matter was irrelevant.

"You think so?" said the old lady. "If I had been missing for a month from my home it is the first thing that my mother would have wanted to know about me. However. Now that the girl has identified us, what do you propose to do? Arrest us?"

"Oh, no. Things are a long way from that at the moment. I want to take Miss Kane to the kitchen and the attic, so that her descriptions of them can be verified. If they are, I report on the case to my superior and he decides in conference what further steps to take."

“I see. A most admirable caution, Inspector.” She rose slowly to her feet. “Ah, well, if you will excuse me I shall go back to my interrupted rest.”

“But don’t you want to be present when Miss Kane inspects – to hear the—” blurted Grant, surprised for once out of his composure.

“Oh, dear, no.” She smoothed down her black gown with a slight frown. “They split invisible atoms,” she remarked testily, “but no one so far has invented a material that does not crease. I have not the faintest doubt,” she went on, “that Miss Kane will identify the attic. Indeed I should be surprised beyond belief if she failed to.”

She began to move towards the door, and consequently towards the girl; and for the first time the girl’s eyes lit with expression. A spasm of alarm crossed her face. The police matron came forward a step, protectively. Mrs. Sharpe continued her unhurried progress and came to rest a yard or so from the girl, so that they were face to face. For a full five seconds there was silence while she examined the girl’s face with interest.

“For two people who are on beating terms, we are distressingly ill acquainted,” she said at last. “I hope to know you much better before this affair is finished, Miss Kane.” She turned to Robert and bowed. “Goodbye, Mr. Blair. I hope you will continue to find us stimulating.” And, ignoring the rest of the gathering, she walked out of the door that Hallam held open for her.

There was a distinct feeling of anti-climax now that she was no longer there, and Robert paid her the tribute of a reluctant admiration. It was no small achievement to steal the interest from an outraged heroine.

“You have no objections to letting Miss Kane see the relevant parts of the house, Miss Sharpe?” Grant asked.

“Of course not. But before we go further I should like to say what I was going to say before you brought Miss Kane in. I am glad that Miss Kane is present to hear it now. It is this. I have never to my knowledge seen this girl before. I did not give her a lift anywhere, on any occasion. She was not brought into this house either by me or by my mother, nor was she kept here. I should like that to be clearly understood.”

“Very well, Miss Sharpe. It is understood that your attitude is a complete denial of the girl’s story.”

“A complete denial from beginning to end. And now, will you come and see the kitchen?”

Chapter 3

Grant and the girl accompanied Robert and Marion Sharpe on the inspection of the house, while Hallam and the police matron waited in the drawing-room. As they reached the first-floor landing, after the girl had identified the kitchen, Robert said:

“Miss Kane said that the second flight of stairs was covered in ‘something hard,’ but the same carpet continues up from the first flight.”

“Only to the curve,” Marion said. “The bit that ‘shows.’ Round the corner it is drugget. A Victorian way of economising. Nowadays if you are poor you buy less expensive carpet and use it all the way up. But those were still the days when what the neighbours thought mattered. So the lush stuff went as far as eye could see and no further.”

The girl had been right about the third flight, too. The treads of the short flight to the attic were bare.

The all-important attic was a low square little box of a room, with the ceiling slanting abruptly down on three sides in conformity with the slate roof outside. It was lit only by the round window looking out to the front. A short stretch of slates sloped from below the window to the low white parapet. The window was divided into four panes, one of which showed a badly starred crack. It had never been made to open.

The attic was completely bare of furnishing. Unnaturally bare, Robert thought, for so convenient and accessible a store-room.

“There used to be stuff here when we first came,” Marion said, as if answering him. “But when we found that we should be without help half the time we got rid of it.”

Grant turned to the girl with a questioning air.

“The bed was in that corner,” she said, pointing to the corner away from the window. “And next it was the wooden commode. And in this corner behind the door there were three empty travelling-cases – two suitcases and a trunk with a flat top. There was a chair but she took it away after I tried to break the window.” She referred to Marion without emotion, as if she were not present. “There is where I tried to break the window.”

It seemed to Robert that the crack looked much more than a few weeks old; but there was no denying that the crack was there.

Grant crossed to the far corner and bent to examine the bare floor, but it did not need close examination. Even from where he was standing by the door Robert could see the marks of castors on the floor where the bed had stood.

“There was a bed there,” Marion said. “It was one of the things we got rid of.”

“What did you do with it?”

“Let me think. Oh, we gave it to the cowman’s wife over at Staples Farm. Her eldest boy got too big to share a room with the others any more and she put him up in their loft. We get our dairy stuff from Staples. You can’t see it from here but it is only four fields away over the rise.”

“Where do you keep your spare trunks, Miss Sharpe? Have you another box-room?”

For the first time Marion hesitated. “We do have a large square trunk with a flat top, but my mother uses it to store things in. When we inherited The Franchise there was a very valuable tallboy in the bedroom my mother has, and we sold it, and used the big trunk instead. With a chintz cover on it. My suitcases I keep in the cupboard on the first-floor landing.”

“Miss Kane, do you remember what the cases looked like?”

“Oh, yes. One was a brown leather with those sort-of caps at the corners, and the other was one of those American-looking canvas-covered ones with stripes.”

Well, that was definite enough.

Grant examined the room a little longer, studied the view from the window, and then turned to go.

“May we see the suitcases in the cupboard?” he asked Marion.

“Certainly,” Marion said, but she seemed unhappy.

On the lower landing she opened the cupboard door and stood back to let the Inspector look. As Robert moved out of their way he caught the unguarded flash of triumph on the girl’s face. It so altered her calm, rather childish, face that it shocked him. It was a savage emotion, primitive and cruel. And very startling on the face of a demure schoolgirl who was the pride of her guardians and preceptors.

The cupboard contained shelves bearing household linen, and on the floor four suitcases. Two were expanding ones, one of pressed fibre and one of rawhide; the other two were: a brown cowhide with protected corners, and a square canvas-covered hatbox with a broad band of multi-coloured stripes down the middle.

“Are these the cases?” Grant asked.

“Yes,” the girl said. “Those two.”

“I am not going to disturb my mother again this afternoon,” Marion said, with sudden anger. “I acknowledge that the trunk in her room is large and flat-topped. It has been there without interruption for the last three years.”

“Very good, Miss Sharpe. And now the garage, if you please.”

Down at the back of the house, where the stables had been converted long ago into garage, the little group stood and surveyed the battered old grey car. Grant read out the girl’s untechnical description of it as recorded in her statement. It fitted, but it would fit equally well at least a thousand cars on the roads of Britain today, Blair thought. It was hardly evidence at all. “One of the wheels was painted a different shade from the others and didn’t look as if it belonged. The different wheel was the one in front on my side as it was standing at the pavement,” Grant finished.

In silence the four people looked at the darker grey of the near front wheel. There seemed nothing to say.

“Thank you very much, Miss Sharpe,” Grant said at length, shutting his notebook and putting it away. “You have been very courteous and helpful and I am grateful to you. I shall be able to get you on the telephone any time in the next few days, I suppose, if I want to talk to you further?”

“Oh, yes, Inspector. We have no intention of going anywhere.”

If Grant was aware of her too-ready comprehension he did not show it.

He handed over the girl to the matron and they left without a backward glance. Then he and Hallam took their leave, Hallam still with an air of apologising for trespass.

Marion had gone out into the hall with them, leaving Blair in the drawing-room, and when she came back she was carrying a tray with sherry and glasses.

“I don’t ask you to stay for dinner,” she said, putting down the tray and beginning to pour the wine, “partly because our ‘dinner’ is usually a very scratch supper and not at all what you are used to. (Did you know that your aunt’s meals are famous in Milford? Even I had heard about them.) And partly because – well, because, as my mother said, Broadmoor is a little out of your line, I expect.”

“About that,” Robert said. “You do realise, don’t you, that the girl has an enormous advantage over you. In the matter of evidence, I mean. She is free to describe almost any object she likes as being part of your household. If it happens to be there, that is strong evidence for her. If it happens not to be there, that is not evidence for you; the inference is merely that you have got rid of it. If the suitcases, for instance, had not been there, she could say that you had got rid of them because they had been in the attic and could be described.”

“But she did describe them, without ever having seen them.”

“She described two suitcases, you mean. If your four suitcases had been a matching set she would have only one chance in perhaps five of being right. But because you happened to have one of each of the common kinds her chances worked out at about even.”

He picked up the glass of sherry that she had set down beside him, took a mouthful, and was astonished to find it admirable.

She smiled a little at him and said: “We economise, but not on wine,” and he flushed slightly, wondering if his surprise had been as obvious as that.

“But there was the odd wheel of the car. How did she know about that? The whole set-up is extraordinary. How did she know about my mother and me, and what the house looked like? Our gates are never open. Even if she opened them – though what she could be doing on that lonely road I can’t imagine – even if she opened them and looked inside she would not know about my mother and me.”

“No chance of her having made friends with a maid? Or a gardener?”

“We have never had a gardener, because there is nothing but grass. And we have not had a maid for a year. Just a girl from the farm who comes in once a week and does the rough cleaning.”

Robert said sympathetically that it was a big house to have on her hands unaided.

“Yes; but two things help. I am not a house-proud woman. And it is still so wonderful to have a home of our own that I am willing to put up with the disadvantages. Old Mr. Crowle was my father’s cousin, but we didn’t know him at all. My mother and I had always lived in a Kensington boarding-house.” One corner of her mouth moved up in a wry smile. “You can imagine how popular Mother was with the residents.” The smile faded. “My father died when I was very little. He was one of those optimists who are always going to be rich tomorrow. When he found one day that his speculations had not left even enough for a loaf of bread on the morrow, he committed suicide and left Mother to face things.”

Robert felt that this to some extent explained Mrs. Sharpe.

“I was not trained for a profession, so my life has been spent in odd-jobs. Not domestic ones – I loathe domesticity – but helping in those lady-like businesses that abound in Kensington. Lampshades, or advising on holidays, or flowers, or bric-à-brac. When old Mr. Crowle died I was working in a tea-shop – one of those morning-coffee gossip shops. Yes, it is a little difficult.”

“What is?”

“To imagine me among the tea-cups.”

Robert, unused to having his mind read – Aunt Lin was incapable of following anyone’s mental processes even when they were explained to her – was disconcerted. But she was not thinking of him.

“We had just begun to feel settled down, and at home, and safe, when this happened.”

For the first time since she had asked his help Robert felt the stirring of partisanship. “And all because a slip of a girl needs an alibi,” he said. “We must find out more about Betty Kane.”

“I can tell you one thing about her. She is over-sexed.”

“Is that just feminine intuition?”

“No. I am not very feminine and I have no intuition. But I have never known anyone – man or woman – with that colour of eye who wasn’t. That opaque dark blue, like a very faded navy – it’s infallible.”

Robert smiled at her indulgently. She was very feminine after all.

“And don’t feel superior because it happens not to be lawyers’ logic,” she added. “Have a look round at your own friends, and see.”

Before he could stop himself he thought of Gerald Blunt, the Milford scandal. Assuredly Gerald had slate-blue eyes. So had Arthur Wallis, the potman at The White Hart, who was paying three different monetary levies weekly. So had— Damn the woman, she had no right to make a silly generalisation like that and be right about it.

“It is fascinating to speculate on what she really did during that month,” Marion said. “It affords me intense satisfaction that someone beat her black and blue. At least there is one person in this world who has arrived at a correct estimate of her. I hope I meet him someday, so that I may shake his hand.”

“Him?”

“With those eyes it is bound to be a ‘him’.”

“Well,” Robert said, preparing to go, “I doubt very much whether Grant has a case that he will want to present in court. It would be the girl’s word against yours, with no other backing on either side. Against *you* would be her statement; so detailed, so circumstantial. Against her would be the inherent unlikelihood of the story. I don’t think he could hope to get a verdict.”

“But the thing is there, whether he brings it into court or not. And not only in the files of Scotland Yard. Sooner or later a thing like that begins to be whispered about. It would be no comfort to us not to have the thing cleared up.”

“Oh, it will be cleared up, if I have anything to do with it. But I think we wait for a day or two to see what the Yard mean to do about it. They have far better facilities for arriving at the truth than we are ever likely to have.”

“Coming from a lawyer, that is a touching tribute to the honesty of the police.”

“Believe me, truth may be a virtue, but Scotland Yard discovered long ago that it is a business asset. It doesn’t pay them to be satisfied with anything less.”

“If he *did* bring it to court,” she said, coming to the door with him, “and *did* get a verdict, what would that mean for us?”

“I’m not sure whether it would be two years’ imprisonment or seven years penal servitude. I told you I was a broken reed where criminal procedure is concerned. But I shall look it up.”

“Yes, do,” she said. “There’s quite a difference.”

He decided that he liked her habit of mockery. Especially in the face of a criminal charge.

“Goodbye,” she said. “It was kind of you to come. You have been a great comfort to me.”

And Robert, remembering how nearly he had thrown her to Ben Carley, blushed to himself as he walked to the gate.

Chapter 4

“Have you had a busy day, dear?” Aunt Lin asked, opening her table napkin and arranging it across her plump lap.

This was a sentence that made sense but had no meaning. It was as much an overture to dinner as the spreading of her napkin, and the exploratory movement of her right foot as she located the footstool which compensated for her short legs. She expected no answer; or rather, being unaware that she had asked the question, she did not listen to his answer.

Robert looked up the table at her with a more conscious benevolence than usual. After his uncharted step-picking at The Franchise, the serenity of Aunt Lin’s presence was very comforting, and he looked with a new awareness at the solid little figure with the short neck and the round pink face and the iron-grey hair that frizzed out from its large hairpins. Linda Bennet led a life of recipes, film stars, god-children, and church bazaars, and found it perfect. Well-being and contentment enveloped her like a cloak. She read the Women’s Page of the daily paper (How To Make A Boutonniere From Old Kid Gloves) and nothing else as far as Robert was aware. Occasionally when she tidied away the paper that Robert had left lying about, she would pause to read the headlines and comment on them. (“MAN ENDS EIGHTY-TWO DAY FAST”—Silly creature! “OIL DISCOVERY IN BAHAMAS”—Did I tell you that paraffin is up a penny, dear?) But she gave the impression of never really believing that the world the papers reported did in fact exist. The world for Aunt Lin began with Robert Blair and ended within a ten-mile radius of him.

“What kept you so late tonight, dear?” she asked, having finished her soup.

From long experience Robert recognised this as being in a different category from: “Have you had a busy day, dear?”

“I had to go out to The Franchise – that house on the Larborough road. They wanted some legal advice.”

“Those odd people? I didn’t know you knew them.”

“I didn’t. They just wanted my advice.”

“I hope they pay you for it, dear. They have no money at all, you know. The father was in some kind of importing business – monkey-nuts or something – and drank himself to death. Left them without a penny, poor things. Old Mrs. Sharpe ran a boarding-house in London to make ends meet, and the daughter was maid-of-all-work. They were just going to be turned into the street with their furniture, when the old man at The Franchise died. So providential!”

“Aunt Lin! Where do you get those stories?”

“But it’s true, dear. Perfectly true. I forget who told me – someone who had stayed in the same street in London – but it was first-hand, anyhow. I am not one to pass on idle gossip, as you know. Is it a nice house? I always wondered what was inside that iron gate.”

“No, rather ugly. But they have some nice pieces of furniture.”

“Not as well kept as ours, I’ll be bound,” she said, looking complacently at the perfect sideboard and the beautiful chairs ranged against the wall. “The vicar said yesterday that if this house were not so obviously a home it would be a show place.” Mention of the clergy seemed to remind her of something. “By the way, will you be extra patient with Christina for the next few days. I think she is going to be ‘saved’ again.”

“Oh, poor Aunt Lin, what a bore for you. But I was afraid of it. There was a ‘text’ in the saucer of my early-morning tea today. ‘Thou God seest me’ on a pink scroll, with a tasteful design of Easter lilies in the background. Is she changing her church again, then?”

“Yes. She has discovered that the Methodists are ‘whited sepulchres,’ it seems, so she is going to those ‘Bethel’ people above Benson’s bakery, and is due to be ‘saved’ any day now. She has been shouting hymns all the morning.”

“But she always does.”

“Not ‘sword of the Lord’ ones. As long as she sticks to ‘pearly crowns’ or ‘streets of gold’ I know it is all right. But once she begins on the ‘sword of the Lord’ I know that it will be my turn to do the baking presently.”

“Well, darling, you bake just as well as Christina.”

“Oh, no, she doesn’t,” said Christina, coming in with the meat course. A big soft creature with untidy straight hair and a vague eye. “Only one thing your Aunt Lin makes better than me, Mr. Robert, and that’s hot cross buns, and that’s only once a year. So there! And if I’m not appreciated in this house, I’ll go where I will be.”

“Christina, my love!” Robert said, “you know very well that no one could imagine this house without you, and if you left I should follow you to the world’s end. For your butter tarts, if for nothing else. Can we have butter tarts tomorrow, by the way?”

“Butter tarts are no food for unrepentant sinners. Besides I don’t think I have the butter. But we’ll see. Meanwhile, Mr. Robert, you examine your soul and stop casting stones.”

Aunt Lin sighed gently as the door closed behind her. “Twenty years,” she said meditatively. “You won’t remember her when she first came from the orphanage. Fifteen, and so skinny, poor little brat. She ate a whole loaf for her tea, and said she would pray for me all her life. I think she has, you know.”

Something like a tear glistened in Miss Bennet’s blue eye.

“I hope she postpones the salvation until she has made those butter tarts,” said Robert, brutally materialistic. “Did you enjoy your picture?”

“Well, dear, I couldn’t forget that he had five wives.”

“Who has?”

“*Had*, dear. One at a time. Gene Darrow. I must say, those little programmes they give away are very informative but a little disillusioning. He was a student, you see. In the picture, I mean. Very young and romantic. But I kept remembering those five wives, and it spoiled the afternoon for me. So charming to look at too. They say he dangled his third wife out of a fifth-storey window by the wrists, but I don’t really believe that. He doesn’t look strong enough, for one thing. Looks as if he had chest trouble as a child. That peaky look, and thin wrists. Not strong enough to dangle anyone. Certainly not out of a fifth-storey....”

The gentle monologue went on, all through the pudding course; and Robert withdrew his attention and thought about The Franchise. He came to the surface as they rose from table and moved into the sitting-room for coffee.

“It is the most becoming garment, if maids would only realise it,” she was saying.

“What is?”

“An apron. She was a maid in the palace, you know, and wore one of those silly little bits of muslin. So becoming. Did those people at The Franchise have a maid, by the way? No? Well, I am not surprised. They starved the last one, you know. Gave her—”

“Oh, Aunt *Lin*!”

“I assure you. For breakfast she got the crusts they cut off the toast. And when they had milk pudding....”

Robert did not hear what enormity was born of the milk pudding. In spite of his good dinner he was suddenly tired and depressed. If kind silly Aunt Lin saw no harm in repeating those absurd stories, what would the real gossips of Milford achieve with the stuff of a real scandal?

“And talking of maids – the brown sugar is finished, dear, so you will have to have lump for tonight – talking of maids, the Carleys’ little maid has got herself into trouble.”

“You mean someone else has got her into trouble.”

“Yes. Arthur Wallis, the potman at The White Hart.”

“What, Wallis *again*!”

“Yes, it really is getting past a joke, isn’t it. I can’t think why the man doesn’t get married. It would be much cheaper.”

But Robert was not listening. He was back in the drawing-room at The Franchise, being gently mocked for his legal intolerance of a generalisation. Back in the shabby room with the unpolished furniture, where things lay about on chairs and no one bothered to tidy them away.

And where, now he came to think of it, no one ran round after him with an ash-tray.

Chapter 5

It was more than a week later that Mr. Heseltine put his thin, small, grey head round Robert's door to say that Inspector Hallam was in the office and would like to see him for a moment.

The room on the opposite side of the hall where Mr. Heseltine lorded it over the clerks was always referred to as "the office," although both Robert's room and the little one behind it used by Nevil Bennet were, in spite of their carpets and their mahogany, plainly offices too. There was an official waiting-room behind "the office," a small room corresponding to young Bennet's, but it had never been popular with the Blair, Hayward, and Bennet clients. Callers stepped into the office to announce themselves and usually stayed there gossiping until such times as Robert was free to see them. The little "waiting-room" had long ago been appropriated by Miss Tuff for writing Robert's letters in, away from the distraction of visitors and from the office-boy's sniffings.

When Mr. Heseltine had gone away to fetch the Inspector, Robert noticed with surprise that he was apprehensive as he had not been apprehensive since in the days of his youth he approached a list of Examination Results pinned on a board. Was his life so placid that a stranger's dilemma should stir it to that extent? Or was it that the Sharpes had been so constantly in his thoughts for the last week that they had ceased to be strangers?

He braced himself for whatever Hallam was going to say; but what emerged from Hallam's careful phrases was that Scotland Yard had let them understand that no proceedings would be taken on the present evidence. Blair noticed the "present evidence" and gauged its meaning accurately. They were not dropping the case – did the Yard ever drop a case? – they were merely sitting quiet.

The thought of Scotland Yard sitting quiet was not a particularly reassuring one in the circumstances.

"I take it that they lacked corroborative evidence," he said.

"They couldn't trace the lorry driver who gave her the lift," Hallam said.

"That wouldn't surprise them."

"No," Hallam agreed, "no driver is going to risk the sack by confessing he gave anyone a lift. Especially a girl. Transport bosses are strict about that. And when it is a case of a girl in trouble of some kind, and when it's the police that are doing the asking, no man in his senses is going to own up to even having seen her." He took the cigarette that Robert offered him. "They needed that lorry driver," he said. "Or someone like him," he added.

"Yes," Robert said, reflectively. "What did you make of her, Hallam?"

"The girl? I don't know. Nice kid. Seemed quite genuine. Might have been one of my own."

This, Blair realised, was a very good sample of what they would be up against if it ever came to a case. To every man of good feeling the girl in the witness box would look like his own daughter. Not because she was a waif, but for the very good reason that she wasn't. The decent school coat, the mousy hair, the unmadeup young face with its appealing hollow below the cheek-bone, the wide-set candid eyes – it was a prosecuting counsel's dream of a victim.

"Just like any other girl of her age," Hallam said, still considering it. "Nothing against her."

"So you don't judge people by the colour of their eyes," Robert said idly, his mind still on the girl.

"Ho! Don't I!" said Hallam surprisingly. "Believe me, there's a particular shade of baby blue that condemns a man, as far as I'm concerned, before he has opened his mouth. Plausible liars every one of them." He paused to pull on his cigarette. "Given to murder, too, come to think of it – though I haven't met many killers."

"You alarm me," Robert said. "In the future I shall give baby-blue eyes a wide berth."

Hallam grinned. "As long as you keep your pocket book shut you needn't worry. All Baby-Blue's lies are for money. He only murders when he gets too entangled in his lies. The real murderer's mark is not the colour of the eyes but their setting."

"Setting?"

"Yes. They are set differently. The two eyes, I mean. They look as if they belonged to different faces."

"I thought you hadn't met many."

"No, but I've read all the case histories and studied the photographs. I've always been surprised that no book on murder mentions it, it happens so often. The inequality of setting, I mean."

"So it's entirely your own theory."

"The result of my own observation, yes. You ought to have a go at it sometime. Fascinating. I've got to the stage where I look for it now."

"In the street, you mean?"

"No, not quite as bad as that. But in each new murder case. I wait for the photograph, and when it comes I think: 'There! What did I tell you!'"

"And when the photograph comes and the eyes are of a mathematical identity?"

"Then it is nearly always what one might call an accidental murder. The kind of murder that might happen to anyone given the circumstances."

"And when you turn up a photograph of the revered vicar of Nether Dumbleton who is being given a presentation by his grateful parishioners to mark his fiftieth year of devoted service, and you note that the setting of his eyes is wildly unequal, what conclusion do you come to?"

"That his wife satisfies him, his children obey him, his stipend is sufficient for his needs, he has no politics, he gets on with the local big-wigs, and he is allowed to have the kind of services he wants. In fact, he has never had the slightest need to murder anyone."

"It seems to me that you are having your cake and eating it very nicely."

"Huh!" Hallam said disgustedly. "Just wasting good police observation on a legal mind. I'd have thought," he added, moving to go, "that a lawyer would be glad of some free tips about judging perfect strangers."

"All you are doing," Robert pointed out, "is corrupting an innocent mind. I shall never be able to inspect a new client from now on without my subconscious registering the colour of his eyes and the symmetry of their setting."

"Well, that's something. It's about time you knew some of the facts of life."

"Thank you for coming to tell me about the 'Franchise' affair," Robert said, returning to sobriety.

"The telephone in this town," Hallam said, "is about as private as the radio."

"Anyhow, thank you. I must let the Sharpes know at once."

As Hallam took his leave, Robert lifted the telephone receiver.

He could not, as Hallam said, talk freely over the telephone, but he would say that he was coming out to see them immediately and that the news was good. That would take the present weight off their minds. It would also – he glanced at his watch – be time for Mrs. Sharpe's daily rest, so perhaps he would have a hope of avoiding the old dragon. And also a hope of a tête-à-tête with Marion Sharpe, of course; though he left that thought unformulated at the back of his mind.

But there was no answer to his call.

With the bored and reluctant aid of the Exchange he rang the number for a solid five minutes, without result. The Sharpes were not at home.

While he was still engaged with the Exchange, Nevil Bennet strolled in clad in his usual outrageous tweed, a pinkish shirt, and a purple tie. Robert, eyeing him over the receiver, wondered for the hundredth time what was going to become of Blair, Hayward, and Bennet when it at last slipped from his good Blair grasp into the hands of this young sprig of the Bennets. That the boy had

brains he knew, but brains wouldn't take him far in Milford. Milford expected a man to stop being undergraduate when he reached graduate age. But there was no sign of Nevil's acceptance of the world outside his coterie. He was still actively, if unconsciously, *épaté*-ing that world. As his clothes bore witness.

It was not that Robert had any desire to see the boy in customary suits of solemn black. His own suit was a grey tweed; and his country clientèle would look doubtfully on "town" clothes. ("That awful little man with the striped suits," Marion Sharpe had said of a town-clad lawyer, in that unguarded moment on the telephone.) But there were tweeds and tweeds, and Nevil Bennet's were the second kind. Quite outrageously the second kind.

"Robert," Nevil said, as Robert gave it up and laid down the receiver, "I've finished the papers on the Calthorpe transfer, and I thought I would run into Larborough this afternoon, if you haven't anything you want me to do."

"Can't you talk to her on the telephone?" Robert asked; Nevil being engaged, in the casual modern fashion, to the Bishop of Larborough's third daughter.

"Oh, it isn't Rosemary. She is in London for a week."

"A protest meeting at the Albert Hall, I suppose," said Robert, who was feeling disgruntled because of his failure to speak to the Sharpes when he was primed with good news for them.

"No, at the Guildhall," Nevil said.

"What is it this time? Vivisection?"

"You are frightfully last-century now and then, Robert," Nevil said, with his air of solemn patience. "No one objects to vivisection nowadays except a few cranks. The protest is against this country's refusal to give shelter to the patriot Kotovich."

"The said patriot is very badly 'wanted' in his own country, I understand."

"By his enemies; yes."

"By the police; for two murders."

"Executions."

"You a disciple of John Knox, Nevil?"

"Good God, no. What has that to do with it?"

"*He* believed in self-appointed executioners. The idea has a little 'gone out' in this country, I understand. Anyhow, if it's a choice between Rosemary's opinion of Kotovich and the opinion of the Special Branch, I'll take the Special Branch."

"The Special Branch only do what the Foreign Office tells them. Everyone knows that. But if I stay and explain the ramifications of the Kotovich affair to you, I shall be late for the film."

"What film?"

"The French film I am going into Larborough to see."

"I suppose you know that most of those French trifles that the British intelligentsia bate their breath about are considered very so-so in their own country? However. Do you think you could pause long enough to drop a note into the letter-box of The Franchise as you go by?"

"I might. I always wanted to see what was inside that wall. Who lives there now?"

"An old woman and her daughter."

"Daughter?" repeated Nevil, automatically pricking his ears.

"Middle-aged daughter."

"Oh. All right, I'll just get my coat."

Robert wrote merely that he had tried to talk to them, that he had to go out on business for an hour or so, but that he would ring them up again when he was free, and that Scotland Yard had no case, as the case stood, and acknowledged the fact.

Nevil swept in with a dreadful raglan affair over his arm, snatched up the letter and disappeared with a "Tell Aunt Lin I may be late. She asked me over to dinner."

Robert donned his own sober grey hat and walked over to the Rose and Crown to meet his client – an old farmer, and the last man in England to suffer from chronic gout. The old man was not yet there, and Robert, usually so placid, so lazily good-natured, was conscious of impatience. The pattern of his life had changed. Up to now it had been an even succession of equal attractions; he had gone from one thing to another without hurry and without emotion. Now there was a focus of interest, and the rest revolved round it.

He sat down on one of the chintz-covered chairs in the lounge and looked at the dog-eared journals lying on the adjacent coffee table. The only current number was the *Watchman*, the weekly review, and he picked it up reluctantly, thinking yet once more how the dry feel of the paper offended his finger tips and its serrated edges set his own teeth on edge. It was the usual collection of protests, poems, and pedantry; the place of honour among the protests being accorded to Nevil's future father-in-law, who spread himself for three-quarters of a column on England's shame in that she refused sanctuary to a fugitive patriot.

The Bishop of Larborough had long ago extended the Christian philosophy to include the belief that the underdog is always right. He was wildly popular with Balkan revolutionaries, British strike committees, and all the old lags in the local penal establishment. (The sole exception to this last being that chronic recidivist, Bandy Brayne, who held the good bishop in vast contempt, and reserved his affection for the Governor; to whom a tear in the eye was just a drop of H₂O, and who unpicked his most heart-breaking tales with a swift, unemotional accuracy.) There was *nothing*, said the old lags affectionately, that the old boy would not believe; you could lay it on with a trowel.

Normally Robert found the Bishop mildly amusing, but today he was merely irritated. He tried two poems, neither of which made sense to him, and flung the thing back on the table.

"England in the wrong again?" asked Ben Carley, pausing by his chair and jerking a head at the *Watchman*.

"Hullo, Carley."

"A Marble Arch for the well-to-do," the little lawyer said, flicking the paper scornfully with a nicotine-stained finger. "Have a drink?"

"Thanks, but I'm waiting for old Mr. Wynyard. He doesn't move a step more than he need, nowadays."

"No, poor old boy. The sins of the fathers. Awful to be suffering for port you never drank! I saw your car outside The Franchise the other day."

"Yes," said Robert, and wondered a little. It was unlike Ben Carley to be blunt. And if he had seen Robert's car he had also seen the police cars.

"If you know them you'll be able to tell me something I always wanted to know about them. Is the rumour true?"

"Rumour?"

"Are they witches?"

"Are they supposed to be?" said Robert lightly.

"There's a strong support for the belief in the countryside, I understand," Carley said, his bright black eyes resting for a moment on Robert's with intention, and then going on to wander over the lounge with their habitual quick interrogation.

Robert understood that the little man was offering him, tacitly, information that he thought ought to be useful to him.

"Ah well," Robert said, "since entertainment came into the country with the cinema, God bless it, an end has been put to witch-hunting."

"Don't you believe it. Give these midland morons a good excuse and they'll witch-hunt with the best. An inbred crowd of degenerates, if you ask me. Here's your old boy. Well, I'll be seeing you."

It was one of Robert's chief attractions that he was genuinely interested in people and in their troubles, and he listened to old Mr. Wynyard's rambling story with a kindness that won the old man's

gratitude – and added, although he was unaware of it, a hundred to the sum that stood against his name in the old farmer's will – but as soon as their business was over he made straight for the hotel telephone.

There were far too many people about, and he decided to use the one in the garage over in Sin Lane. The office would be shut by now, and anyhow it was further away. And if he telephoned from the garage, so his thoughts went as he strode across the street, he would have his car at hand if she – if they asked him to come out and discuss the business further, as they very well might, as they almost certainly would – yes, of course they would want to discuss what they could do to discredit the girl's story, whether there was to be a case or not – he had been so relieved over Hallam's news that he had not yet come round in his mind to considering what—

"Evening, Mr. Blair," Bill Brough said, oozing his large person out of the narrow office door, his round calm face bland and welcoming. "Want your car?"

"No, I want to use your telephone first, if I may."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Stanley, who was under a car, poked his fawn's face out and asked:

"Know anything?"

"Not a thing, Stan. Haven't had a bet for months."

"I'm two pounds down on a cow called Bright Promise. That's what comes of putting your faith in horseflesh. Next time you know something—"

"Next time I have a bet I'll tell you. But it will still be horseflesh."

"As long as it's not a cow—" Stanley said, disappearing under the car again; and Robert moved into the hot bright little office and picked up the receiver.

It was Marion who answered, and her voice sounded warm and glad.

"You can't imagine what a relief your note was to us. Both my mother and I have been picking oakum for the last week. Do they still pick oakum, by the way?"

"I think not. It is something more constructive nowadays, I understand."

"Occupational therapy."

"More or less."

"I can't think of any compulsory sewing that would improve my character."

"They would probably find you something more congenial. It is against modern thought to compel a prisoner to do anything that he doesn't want to."

"That is the first time I have heard you sound tart."

"Was I tart?"

"Pure angostura."

Well, she had reached the subject of drink; perhaps now she would suggest his coming out for sherry before dinner.

"What a charming nephew you have, by the way."

"Nephew?"

"The one who brought the note."

"He is not my nephew," Robert said coldly. Why was it so ageing to be avuncular? "He is my first cousin once removed. But I am glad you liked him." This would not do; he would have to take the bull by the horns. "I should like to see you sometime to discuss what we can do to straighten things out. To make things safer—" He waited.

"Yes, of course. Perhaps we could look in at your office one morning when we are shopping? What kind of thing could we do, do you think?"

"Some kind of private inquiry, perhaps. I can't very well discuss it over the telephone."

"No, of course you can't. How would it do if we came in on Friday morning? That is our weekly shopping day. Or is Friday a busy day for you?"

“No, Friday would be quite convenient,” Robert said, swallowing down his disappointment. “About noon?”

“Yes, that would do very well. Twelve o’clock the day after tomorrow, at your office. Goodbye, and thank you again for your support and help.”

She rang off, firmly and cleanly, without all the usual preliminary twitterings that Robert had come to expect from women.

“Shall I run her out for you,” Bill Brough asked as he came out into the dim daylight of the garage.

“What? Oh, the car. No, I shan’t need it tonight, thanks.”

He set off on his normal evening walk down the High Street, trying hard not to feel snubbed. He had not been anxious to go to The Franchise in the first instance, and had made his reluctance pretty plain; she was quite naturally avoiding a repetition of the circumstances. That he had identified himself with their interests was a mere business affair, to be resolved in an office, impersonally. They would not again involve him further than that.

Ah, well, he thought, flinging himself down in his favourite chair by the wood fire in the sitting-room and opening the evening paper (printed that morning in London), when they came to the office on Friday he could do something to put the affair on a more personal basis. To wipe out the memory of that first unhappy refusal.

The quiet of the old house soothed him. Christina had been closeted in her room for two days, in prayer and meditation, and Aunt Lin was in the kitchen preparing dinner. There was a gay letter from Lettice, his only sister, who had driven a truck for several years of a bloody war, fallen in love with a tall silent Canadian, and was now raising five blond brats in Saskatchewan. “Come out soon, Robin dear,” she finished, “before the brats grow up and before the moss grows *right* round you. You know how *bad* Aunt Lin is for you!” He could hear her saying it. She and Aunt Lin had never seen eye to eye.

He was smiling, relaxed and reminiscent, when both his quiet and his peace were shattered by the irruption of Nevil.

“Why didn’t you *tell* me she was like that!” Nevil demanded.

“Who?”

“The Sharpe woman! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t expect you would meet her,” Robert said. “All you had to do was drop the letter through the door.”

“There was nothing in the door to drop it through, so I rang, and they had just come back from wherever they were. Anyhow, *she* answered it.”

“I thought she slept in the afternoons.”

“I don’t believe she ever sleeps. She doesn’t belong to the human family at all. She is all compact of fire and metal.”

“I know she’s a very rude old woman but you have to make allowances. She has had a very hard—”

“*Old*? Who are you talking about?”

“Old Mrs. Sharpe, of course.”

“I didn’t even see old Mrs. Sharpe. I’m talking about Marion.”

“Marion Sharpe? And how did you know her name was Marion?”

“She told me. It does suit her, doesn’t it? She couldn’t be anything but Marion.”

“You seem to have become remarkably intimate for a doorstep acquaintance.”

“Oh, she gave me tea.”

“Tea! I thought you were in a desperate hurry to see a French film.”

“I’m never in a desperate hurry to do anything when a woman like Marion Sharpe invites me to tea. Have you noticed her eyes? But of course you have. You’re her lawyer. That wonderful shading

of grey into hazel. And the way her eyebrows lie above them, like the brush-mark of a painter genius. Winged eyebrows, they are. I made a poem about them on the way home. Do you want to hear it?"

"No," Robert said firmly. "Did you enjoy your film?"

"Oh, I didn't go."

"You didn't *go*!"

"I told you I had tea with Marion instead."

"You mean you have been at The Franchise *the whole afternoon*!"

"I suppose I have," Nevil said dreamily, "but, by God, it didn't seem more than seven minutes."

"And what happened to your thirst for French cinema?"

"But Marion *is* French film. Even you must see that!" Robert winced at the "even you." "Why bother with the shadow, when you can be with the reality? Reality. That is her great quality, isn't it? I've never met anyone as real as Marion is."

"Not even Rosemary?" Robert was in the state known to Aunt Lin as "put out."

"Oh, Rosemary is a darling, and I'm going to marry her, but that is quite a different thing."

"Is it?" said Robert, with deceptive meekness.

"Of course. People don't marry women like Marion Sharpe, any more than they marry winds and clouds. Any more than they marry Joan of Arc. It's positively blasphemous to consider marriage in relation to a woman like that. She spoke very nicely of you, by the way."

"That was kind of her."

The tone was so dry that even Nevil caught the flavour of it.

"Don't you like her?" he asked, pausing to look at his cousin in surprised disbelief.

Robert had ceased for the moment to be kind, lazy, tolerant Robert Blair; he was just a tired man who hadn't yet had his dinner and was suffering from the memory of a frustration and a snubbing.

"As far as I am concerned," he said, "Marion Sharpe is just a skinny woman of forty who lives with a rude old mother in an ugly old house, and needs legal advice on occasion like anyone else."

But even as the words came out he wanted to stop them, as if they were a betrayal of a friend.

"No, probably she *isn't* your cup of tea," Nevil said tolerantly. "You have always preferred them a little stupid, and blond, haven't you." This was said without malice, as one stating a dullish fact.

"I can't imagine why you should think that."

"All the women you nearly married were that type."

"I have never 'nearly married' anyone," Robert said stiffly.

"That's what you think. You'll never know how nearly Molly Manders landed you."

"Molly Manders?" Aunt Lin said, coming in flushed from her cooking and bearing the tray with the sherry. "Such a silly girl. Imagined that you used a baking-board for pancakes. And was always looking at herself in that little pocket mirror of hers."

"Aunt Lin saved you that time, didn't you, Aunt Lin?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Nevil dear. Do stop prancing about the hearthrug, and put a log on the fire. Did you like your French film, dear?"

"I didn't go. I had tea at The Franchise instead." He shot a glance at Robert, having learned by now that there was more in Robert's reaction than met the eye.

"With those strange people? What did you talk about?"

"Mountains – Maupassant – hens—"

"*Hens*, dear?"

"Yes; the concentrated evil of a hen's face in a close-up."

Aunt Lin looked vague. She turned to Robert, as to terra firma.

"Had I better call, dear, if you are going to know them? Or ask the vicar's wife to call?"

"I don't think I would commit the vicar's wife to anything so irrevocable," Robert said, dryly.

She looked doubtful for a moment, but household cares obliterated the question in her mind.

"Don't dawdle too long over your sherry or what I have in the oven will be spoiled. Thank goodness,

Christina will be down again tomorrow. At least I hope so; I have never known her salvation take more than two days. And I don't really think that I will *call* on those Franchise people, dear, if it is all the same to you. Apart from being strangers and very odd, they quite frankly terrify me."

Yes; that was a sample of the reaction he might expect where the Sharpes were concerned. Ben Carley had gone out of his way today to let him know that, if there was police trouble at The Franchise, he wouldn't be able to count on an unprejudiced jury. He must take measures for the protection of the Sharpes. When he saw them on Friday he would suggest a private investigation by a paid agent. The police were overworked – had been overworked for a decade and more – and there was just a chance that one man working at his leisure on one trail might be more successful than the orthodox and official investigation had been.

Chapter 6

But by Friday morning it was too late to take measures for the safety of The Franchise.

Robert had reckoned with the diligence of the police; he had reckoned with the slow spread of whispers; but he had reckoned without the *Ack-Emma*.

The *Ack-Emma* was the latest representative of the tabloid newspaper to enter British journalism from the West. It was run on the principle that two thousand pounds for damages is a cheap price to pay for sales worth half a million. It had blacker headlines, more sensational pictures, and more indiscreet letterpress than any paper printed so far by British presses. Fleet Street had its own name for it – monosyllabic and unprintable – but no protection against it. The press had always been its own censor, deciding what was and what was not permissible by the principles of its own good sense and good taste. If a “rogue” publication decided not to conform to those principles then there was no power that could make it conform. In ten years the *Ack-Emma* had passed by half a million the daily net sales of the best selling newspaper in the country to date. In any suburban railway carriage seven out of ten people bound for work in the morning were reading an *Ack-Emma*.

And it was the *Ack-Emma* that blew the Franchise affair wide open.

Robert had been out early into the country on that Friday morning to see an old woman who was dying and wanted to alter her will. This was a performance she repeated on an average once every three months and her doctor made no secret of the fact that in his opinion she “would blow out a hundred candles one day without a second puff.” But of course a lawyer cannot tell a client who summons him urgently at eight-thirty in the morning not to be silly. So Robert had taken some new will forms, fetched his car from the garage, and driven into the country. In spite of his usual tussle with the old tyrant among the pillows – who could never be brought to understand the elementary fact that you cannot give away *four* shares amounting to one third each – he enjoyed the spring countryside. And he hummed to himself on the way home, looking forward to seeing Marion Sharpe in less than an hour.

He had decided to forgive her for liking Nevil. After all, Nevil had never tried to palm her off on Carley. One must be fair.

He ran the car into the garage, under the noses of the morning lot going out from the livery stable, parked it, and then, remembering that it was past the first of the month, strolled over to the office to pay his bill to Brough, who ran the office side. But it was Stanley who was in the office; thumbing over dockets and invoices with the strong hands that so surprisingly finished off his thin forearms.

“When I was in the Signals,” Stanley said, casting him an absent-minded glance, “I used to believe that the Quarter-bloke was a crook, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Something missing?” said Robert. “I just looked in to pay my bill. Bill usually has it ready.”

“I expect it’s somewhere around,” Stanley said, still thumbing. “Have a look.”

Robert, used to the ways of the office, picked up the loose papers discarded by Stanley, so as to come on the normal tidy strata of Bill’s arrangement below. As he lifted the untidy pile he uncovered a girl’s face; a newspaper picture of a girl’s face. He did not recognise it at once but it reminded him of someone and he paused to look at it.

“Got it!” said Stanley in triumph, extracting a sheet of paper from a clip. He swept the remaining loose papers on the desk into a pile and so laid bare to Robert’s gaze the whole front page of that morning’s *Ack-Emma*.

Cold with shock, Robert stared at it.

Stanley, turning to take the papers he was holding from his grasp, noticed his absorption and approved it.

“Nice little number, that,” he said. “Reminds me of a bint I had in Egypt. Same far-apart eyes. Nice kid she was. Told the most original lies.”

He went back to his paper-arranging, and Robert went on staring.

THIS IS THE GIRL

said the paper in enormous black letters across the top of the page; and below it, occupying two-thirds of the page, was the girl's photograph. And then, in smaller but still obtrusive type, below:

IS THIS THE HOUSE?

and below it a photograph of The Franchise.

Across the bottom of the page was the legend:

THE GIRL SAYS YES: WHAT DO THE POLICE SAY?

See inside for the story.

He put out his hand and turned over the page.

Yes; it was all there, except for the Sharpes' name.

He dropped the page, and looked again at that shocking frontispiece. Yesterday The Franchise was a house protected by four high walls; so unobtrusive, so sufficient unto itself, that even Milford did not know what it looked like. Now it was there to be stared at on every bookstall; on every newsagent's counter from Penzance to Pentland. Its flat, forbidding front a foil for the innocence of the face above it.

The girl's photograph was a head-and-shoulders affair, and appeared to be a studio portrait. Her hair had an arranged-for-an-occasion look, and she was wearing what looked like a party frock. Without her school coat she looked – not less innocent, nor older; no. He sought for the word that would express it. She looked less – tabu, was it? The school coat had stopped one thinking of her as a woman, just as a nun's habit would. A whole treatise could probably be written, now he came to think of it, on the protective quality of school coats. Protective in both senses: armour and camouflage. Now that the coat was no longer there, she was feminine instead of merely female.

But it was still a pathetically young face, immature and appealing. The candid brow, the wide-set eyes, the bee-stung lip that gave her mouth the expression of a disappointed child – it made a formidable whole. It would not be only the Bishop of Larborough who would believe a story told by that face.

“May I borrow this paper?” he asked Stanley.

“Take it,” Stanley said. “We had it for our elevenses. There's nothing in it.”

Robert was surprised. “Didn't you find this interesting?” he asked, indicating the front page.

Stanley cast a glance at the pictured face. “Not except that she reminded me of that bint in Egypt, lies and all.”

“So you didn't believe that story she told?”

“What do *you* think!” Stanley said, contemptuous.

“Where do you think the girl was, then, all that time?”

“If I remember what I *think* I remember about the Red Sea sadie, I'd say very definitely – oh, but definitely – on the tiles,” Stanley said, and went out to attend to a customer.

Robert picked up the paper and went soberly away. At least one man-in-the-street had not believed the story; but that seemed to be due as much to an old memory as to present cynicism.

And although Stanley had quite obviously read the story without reading the names of the characters concerned, or even the place-names, only ten per cent of readers did that (according to the best Mass Observation); the other ninety per cent would have read every word, and would now be discussing the affair with varying degrees of relish.

At his own office he found that Hallam had been trying to reach him by telephone.

"Shut the door and come in, will you," he said to old Mr. Heseltine, who had caught him with the news on his arrival and was now standing in the door of his room. "And have a look at that."

He reached for the receiver with one hand, and laid the paper under Mr. Heseltine's nose with the other.

The old man touched it with his small-boned fastidious hand, as one seeing a strange exhibit for the first time. "This is the publication one hears so much about," he said. And gave his attention to it, as he would to any strange document.

"We are both in a spot, aren't we!" Hallam said, when they were connected. And raked his vocabulary for some epithets suitable to the *Ack-Emma*. "As if the police hadn't enough to do without having that rag on their tails!" he finished, being naturally absorbed in the police point of view.

"Have you heard from the Yard?"

"Grant was burning the wires at nine this morning. But there's nothing they can do. Just grin and bear it. The police are always fair game. Nothing you can do, either, if it comes to that."

"Not a thing," Robert said. "We have a fine free press."

Hallam said a few more things about the press. "Do your people know?" he asked.

"I shouldn't think so. I'm quite sure they would never normally see the *Ack-Emma*, and there hasn't been time for some kind soul to send it to them. But they are due here in about ten minutes, and I'll show it to them then."

"If it was ever possible for me to be sorry for that old battle-axe," Hallam said, "it would be at this minute."

"How did the *Ack-Emma* get the story? I thought the parents – the girl's guardians, I mean – were very strongly against that kind of publicity."

"Grant says the girl's brother went off the deep end about the police taking no action and went to the *Ack-Emma* off his own bat. They are strong on the champion act. 'The *Ack-Emma* will see right done!' I once knew one of their crusades run into a third day."

When he hung up Robert thought that if it was a bad break for both sides, it was at least an even break. The police would without doubt redouble their efforts to find corroborative evidence; on the other hand the publication of the girl's photograph meant for the Sharpes a faint hope that somebody, somewhere, would recognise it and say: "This girl could not have been in The Franchise on the date in question because she was at such-and-such a place."

"A shocking story, Mr. Robert," Mr. Heseltine said. "And if I may say so a quite shocking publication. Most offensive."

"That house," Robert said, "is The Franchise, where old Mrs. Sharpe and her daughter live; and where I went the other day, if you remember, to give them some legal advice."

"You mean that these people are our clients?"

"Yes."

"But, Mr. Robert, that is not at all in our line." Robert winced at the dismay in his voice. "That is quite outside our usual – indeed quite beyond our normal – we are not competent—"

"We are competent, I hope, to defend any client against a publication like the *Ack-Emma*," Robert said, coldly.

Mr. Heseltine eyed the screaming rag on the table. He was obviously facing the difficult choice between a criminal clientèle and a disgraceful journal.

“Did you believe the girl’s story when you read it?” Robert asked.

“I don’t see how she could have made it up,” Mr. Heseltine said simply. “It is such a very circumstantial story, isn’t it?”

“It is, indeed. But I saw the girl when she was brought to The Franchise to identify it last week – that was the day I went out so hurriedly just after tea – and I don’t believe a word she says. Not a word,” he added, glad to be able to say it loudly and distinctly to himself and to be sure at last that he believed it.

“But how could she have thought of The Franchise at all, or known all those things, if she wasn’t there?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t the least idea.”

“It is a most unlikely place to pick on, surely; a remote, invisible house like that, on a lonely road, in country that people don’t visit very much.”

“I know. I don’t know how the job was worked, but that it *is* a job I am certain. It is a choice not between stories, but between human beings. I am quite certain that the two Sharpes are incapable of insane conduct like that. Whereas I don’t believe the girl incapable of telling a story like that. That is what it amounts to.” He paused a moment. “And you’ll just have to trust my judgment about it, Timmy,” he added, using his childhood’s name for the old clerk.

Whether it was the “Timmy” or the argument, it was apparent that Mr. Heseltine had no further protest to make.

“You’ll be able to see the criminals for yourself,” Robert said, “because I hear their voices in the hall now. You might bring them in, will you.”

Mr. Heseltine went dumbly out on his mission, and Robert turned the newspaper over so that the comparatively innocuous GIRL SMUGGLED ABOARD was all that would meet the visitors’ eye.

Mrs. Sharpe, moved by some belated instinct for convention, had donned a hat in honour of the occasion. It was a flattish affair of black satin, and the general effect was that of a doctor of learning. That the effect had not been wasted was obvious by the relieved look on Mr. Heseltine’s face. This was quite obviously not the kind of client he had expected; it was, on the other hand, the kind of client he was used to.

“Don’t go away,” Robert said to him, as he greeted the visitors; and to the others: “I want you to meet the oldest member of the firm, Mr. Heseltine.”

It suited Mrs. Sharpe to be gracious; and exceedingly Victoria Regina was old Mrs. Sharpe when she was being gracious. Mr. Heseltine was more than relieved; he capitulated. Robert’s first battle was over.

When they were alone Robert noticed that Marion had been waiting to say something.

“An odd thing happened this morning,” she said. “We went to the Ann Boleyn place to have coffee – we quite often do – and there were two vacant tables, but when Miss Truelove saw us coming she very hastily tilted the chairs against the tables and said they were reserved. I might have believed her if she hadn’t looked so embarrassed. You don’t think that rumour has begun to get busy already, do you? That she did that because she has heard some gossip?”

“No,” Robert said, sadly, “because she has read this morning’s *Ack-Emma*.” He turned the newspaper front side up. “I am sorry to have such bad news for you. You’ll just have to shut your teeth and take it, as small boys say. I don’t suppose you have ever seen this poisonous rag at close quarters. It’s a pity that the acquaintance should begin on so personal a basis.”

“Oh, no!” Marion said, in passionate protest as her eye fell on the picture of The Franchise.

And then there was unbroken silence while the two women absorbed the contents of the inner page.

“I take it,” Mrs. Sharpe said at last, “that we have no redress against this sort of thing?”

"None," Robert said. "All the statements are perfectly true. And it is all statement and not comment. Even if it were comment – and I've no doubt the comment will come – there has been no charge so the case is not *sub judice*. They are free to comment if they please."

"The whole thing is one huge implied comment," Marion said. "That the police failed to do their duty. What do they think we did? Bribed them?"

"I think the suggestion is that the humble victim has less pull with the police than the wicked rich."

"Rich," repeated Marion, her voice curdling with bitterness.

"Anyone who has more than six chimneys is rich. Now. If you are not too shocked to think, consider. We *know* that the girl was never at The Franchise, that she could not—" But Marion interrupted him.

"Do *you* know it?" she asked.

"Yes," Robert said.

Her challenging eyes lost their challenge, and her glance dropped.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"If the girl was never there, how could she have seen the house!.. She did see it somehow. It is too unlikely for belief that she could be merely repeating a description that someone else gave her.... How could she see it? Naturally, I mean."

"You could see it, I suppose, from the top deck of a bus," Marion said. "But there are no double-decker buses on the Milford route. Or from on top of a load of hay. But it is the wrong time of year for hay."

"It may be the wrong time for hay," croaked Mrs. Sharpe, "but there is no season for lorry-loads. I have seen lorries loaded with goods as high as any hay waggon."

"Yes," Marion said. "Suppose the lift the girl got was not in a car, but on a lorry."

"There is only one thing against that. If a girl was given a lift on a lorry she would be in the cabin, even if it meant sitting on someone's knee. They wouldn't perch her up on top of the load. Especially as it was a rainy evening, you may remember.... No one ever came to The Franchise to ask the way, or to sell something, or to mend something – someone that the girl could have been with, even in the background?"

But no; they were both sure that no one had come, within the time the girl had been on holiday.

"Then we take it for granted that what she learned about The Franchise she learned from being high enough on one occasion to see over the wall. We shall probably never know when or how, and we probably could not prove it if we did know. So our whole efforts will have to be devoted, not to proving that she wasn't at The Franchise, but that she was somewhere else!"

"And what chance is there of that?" Mrs. Sharpe asked.

"A better chance than before this was published," Robert said, indicating the front page of the *Ack-Emma*. "Indeed it is the one bright spot in the bad business. We could not have published the girl's photograph in the hope of information about her whereabouts during that month. But now that *they* have published it – her own people, I mean – the same benefit should come to us. They have broadcast the story – and that is our bad luck; but they have also broadcast the photograph – and if we have any good luck at all someone, somewhere, will observe that the story and the photograph do not fit. That at the material time, as given in the story, the subject of the photograph could not possibly have been in the stated place, because they, personally, know her to have been elsewhere."

Marion's face lost a little of its bleak look, and even Mrs. Sharpe's thin back looked less rigid. What had seemed a disaster might be, after all, the means of their salvation.

"And what can we do in the way of private investigation?" Mrs. Sharpe asked. "You realise, I expect, that we have very little money; and I take it that a private inquiry is a spendthrift business."

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