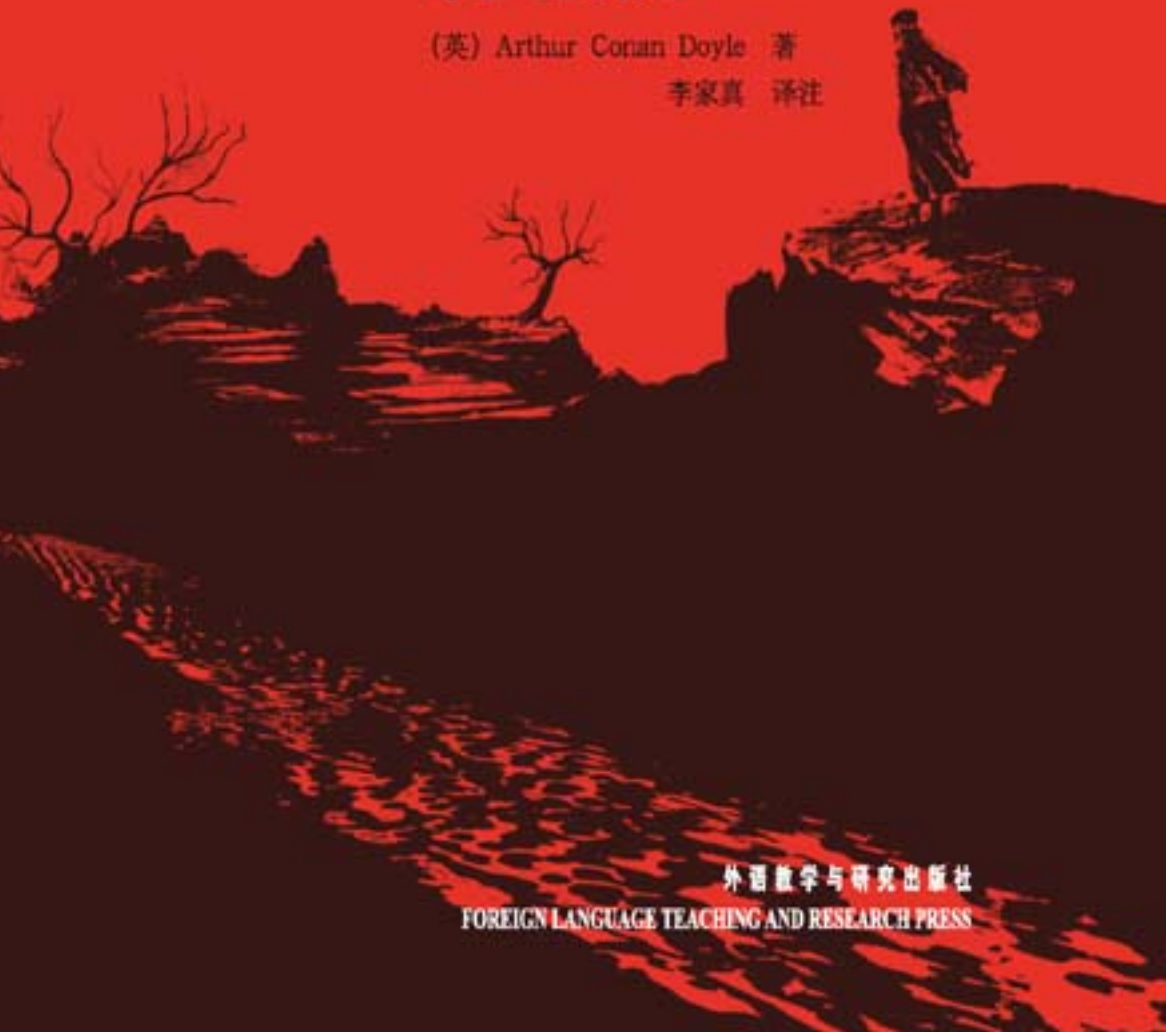
新课程尔摩斯探案全集

汉英双语版

The Valley of Fear 恐怖谷

(英) Arthur Conan Doyle 著

李家真 译注



外语教学与研究出版社

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新译福尔摩斯探案全集

（汉英双语版）

恐怖谷

（英）Arthur Conan Doyle著
李家真　译注

外语教学与研究出版社
北京

福尔摩斯及其他（代译序）

世上有许多曾经在于某处、此刻在于某处、将来或者在于某处的人，我们不曾听说、无缘识荆，甚而至于，将来也永远不会了解。对于我们来说，他们的离合悲欢，他们的喜怒哀乐，既不是司空见惯的常事，也不是茶余饭后的谈资，更不是铭心刻骨的记忆，仅仅只是并不存在的虚空，如此而已。

也有一些人，曾经的下落颇有疑问，此刻的踪影不易找寻，将来的行藏更是无从预期，然而，我们对他们非常熟悉，熟悉他或者她的相貌、熟悉他或者她的性情、熟悉他或者她的一颦一笑、熟悉他或者她的一言一语，熟悉到想用自己的心思和力气，为他或者她在身边的世界里找一个笃定的位置。

这些人当中，就有歇洛克·福尔摩斯。

他也许生活在维多利亚时代的伦敦，也许住在某条真实街道当中的某间虚拟公寓，也许拥有凡人难以企及的高超智力和凡人难以认同的智力优越感，也许拥有“为艺术而艺术”的可钦信念和“无艺术即无意义”的可疑立场，也许拥有视邪恶罪行如寇仇的侠肝义胆和视他人疾苦如无物的铁石心肠，也许拥有最为充沛的精力和最为怠惰的习性，也许刻板自律，也许佻脱不羁，也许是最不业余的业余侦探，也许是最不守法的法律卫士，也许拥有一个滋养思维的黑陶烟斗和一只盛放烟草的波斯拖鞋，也许拥有一件鼠灰色的睡袍和一堆孤芳自赏的古旧图书，也许，还拉得一手可以优美醉人也可以聒噪刺耳的小提琴……

他自己说：“我的人生就是一场漫长的逃亡，为的是摆脱平淡庸碌的存在状态。”（《红发俱乐部》）同时又说：“生活比人们的任何想象都要奇

异，人的想象根本不能与它同日而语。”（《身份问题》）也许，就是由于这样的原因，他才会让我们如此难以忘记，因为我们偶尔也会厌倦“平淡庸碌的存在状态”，偶尔也希望看到生活之中的种种奇异，毕竟，连他的忠实朋友华生都曾经愤愤不平地对他说：“除了你之外，其他人也有自尊，搞不好还有名誉哩。”（《查尔斯·奥古斯塔斯·米尔沃顿》）

也许，文学形象之所以可以比血肉之躯更加动人，归根结底，是因为他们告诉我们，人生之中，终归有其他的一些可能。无从逃脱的此时此刻之外，终归有一个名为“别处”的所在。

在长达四十年的时间里，柯南·道尔爵士（Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1859—1930）陆续写下了这些他自己并不看重的文字。一百多年以来，数不清的读者因为各种各样的理由喜欢上了他笔下的这位神探，喜欢上了神探的医生朋友，喜欢上了维多利亚时代伦敦的昏暗街灯，喜欢上了风光旖旎的英格兰原野，喜欢上了各位蠢笨低能的官方探员，甚至还喜欢上了神探的头号敌人、智力与他一时瑜亮的莫里亚蒂教授。更有一些读者对神探的演绎法如醉如痴，不遗余力地四处寻觅他和他的朋友在现实中留下的蛛丝马迹，以至于最终断定，他和他的朋友实有其人，柯南·道尔爵士反倒是一种伪托的存在。

神探的身影在各式各样的舞台剧、电视和电影当中反复出现，又在万千读者的记忆之中反复萦回。我们真的应该感谢柯南·道尔爵士，感谢他不情不愿抑或半推半就地写下了这样六十个故事，为我们的好奇心提供了一座兴味无穷的宝山。六十个故事如同一幅斑斓的长卷，我们可以从中窥见另一个民族在另一个时空的生活，窥见一个等级森严却依然不乏温情的社会，窥见一个马车与潜艇并存的过渡年代，窥见一个又一个虽欠丰满却不失生动的人，窥见一鳞半爪、商品化程度较低的人性。

忝为这套巨帙的译者，我喜欢作者时或淋漓尽致时或婉转含蓄的文笔，更喜欢浸润在字里行间的浪漫精神，尤其喜欢的是，这种浪漫精神的两个化身。人的浪漫，是真正懂得人的可贵在于人本身，男女之间的浪漫，何尝不是如此。

以我愚见，如果说福尔摩斯代表着惊世骇俗的才能和智慧，华生就代表着惊世骇俗的理解与宽容，两样禀赋同样难得，两个妙人同样可喜，

他们两个在文字的国度里风云际会，我们就看到了一段无比浪漫的不朽传奇。

再写下去，恐怕会破坏阅读的趣味。

止笔之前，请允许我引用一个经久不衰的笑话作为结尾：

歇洛克·福尔摩斯先生和华生医生一起到郊外露营。享用完一顿美餐和一瓶美酒之后，他俩钻进了帐篷。

凌晨三点左右，福尔摩斯推醒华生，如是问道："华生，你能不能抬头看看天空，再把你的发现告诉我呢？"

华生说道："我看到了亿万颗星星。"

福尔摩斯接着问道："很好，你从中演绎出了什么结论呢？"

华生回答道："从天文学的角度来演绎，结论是宇宙中存在亿万个星系，很可能还存在亿亿颗行星。从占星学的角度来演绎，结论是土星升入了狮子座。从神学的角度来演绎，结论是上帝至高至大、我等至卑至小。从计时学的角度来演绎，结论是眼下大约是凌晨三点。从气象学的角度来演绎，结论是明天的天气非常不错。你又演绎出了什么结论呢，福尔摩斯？"

福尔摩斯咬牙切齿地说道："有人偷走了咱们的帐篷。"

这一次，我们的浪漫英雄终于看到了平庸至极的现实。

是为序。

二〇一二年二月十二日

目 录

恐怖谷

第一部 Part 1

第一章　警讯　2
第二章　歇洛克·福尔摩斯的妙论　15
第三章　伯尔斯通惨剧　25
第四章　暗夜难明　36
第五章　剧中人　51
第六章　一线曙光　64
第七章　答案　80

第二部 Part 2

第一章　某人　100
第二章　会首　112
第三章　维尔米萨三百四十一分会　131
第四章　恐怖谷　148
第五章　最黑暗的时辰　161
第六章　危机　175
第七章　博迪·爱德华兹的陷阱　186
尾声　198
译后记　377

CONTENTS

The Valley of Fear

Chapter 1	The Warning	202
Chapter 2	Sherlock Holmes Discourses	211
Chapter 3	The Tragedy of Birlstone	220
Chapter 4	Darkness	230
Chapter 5	The People of the Drama	242
Chapter 6	A Dawning Light	255
Chapter 7	The Solution	268

Chapter 1	The Man	286
Chapter 2	The Bodymaster	296
Chapter 3	Lodge 341, Vermissa	314
Chapter 4	The Valley of Fear	330
Chapter 5	The Darkest Hour	341
Chapter 6	Danger	354
Chapter 7	The Trapping of Birdy Edwards	364
Epilogue		374

SHERLOCK HOLMES

恐怖谷

SHERLOCK HOLMES

恐怖谷

◎ 第一部 ◎

伯尔斯通惨剧

第一章 * 警讯

“我在想——”我开口说道。

“接着想吧，”歇洛克·福尔摩斯不胜其烦地接口说道。

我自认拥有全世界数一数二的耐性，可我必须承认，他这句藏针带刺的插话让我相当着恼。

“说实在的，福尔摩斯，”我义正词严地说道，“有些时候，你可真有点儿让人受不了。”

他完全沉浸在自己的思绪之中，没有立刻回答我的抗议。他一只手托着下巴，面前的早餐原封未动，眼睛直勾勾地盯着他刚刚从信封里抽出来的一张纸片。这之后，他把信封拿了起来，举到光亮的地方，仔仔细细地研究了一下信封的外观和封口。

“这是波洛克的笔迹，”他若有所思地说道。“波洛克的笔迹我虽然只见过两次，可我几乎可以断定这是他写的东西。这个希腊式的字母‘e’顶端带点儿花体，恰好是他的特征。不过，如果这封信真的来自波洛克的话，信里讲的就一定是一件至关紧要的事情。”

他不像是在对我说话，更像是自言自语，可他的话让我一下子充满好奇，忘记了刚才的不快。

“那么，波洛克是谁呢？”我问道。

“华生啊，‘波洛克’只是一个笔名、一个身份标记而已，它代表的是一个变化多端、藏头露尾的人物[1]。

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[1] 这篇故事首次发表于 1914 年 9 月至 1915 年 5 月，连载于《斯特兰杂志》（*The Strand Magazine*）；“波洛克”的英文是“Porlock”，

在前面的一封信当中，他坦白地告诉我这不是他的真名，还叫我尽管去试，看看我能不能在这座大都市的百万人海当中查出他来。波洛克非常重要，不是因为他自己，而是因为跟他有交道的那个大人物。你不妨把他想象成鲨鱼身边的引水鱼[2]，或者是狮子左右的豺狼，总之就是个微不足道的角色，但却跟某个十分强大的家伙混在一起。他身边的那个家伙不光是强大而已，华生，而且还十分邪恶，邪恶到了无以复加的程度。这就是我对那个家伙的评价。你听我提过莫里亚蒂教授吗？”

“那个著名的科学罪犯，在歹徒当中广为人知的程度正如——”

“我真替你难为情，华生！”福尔摩斯不以为然地咕哝了一句。

“我要说的是，正如在公众当中鲜为人知的程度一样惊人[3]。”

“点中了！确实让你给点中了！[4]”福尔摩斯叫道。“华生，你显然是学会了一种本事，懂得冷不丁地开暗藏机关的玩笑了，我可得防着点儿。不过，你把莫里亚蒂叫做罪犯，本身倒是口出诽谤之言，为法律所不容——他的本事高就高在这里、妙就妙在这里！有史以来最了不起的阴谋家、所有暴行的策划者、控制地下世界的神经中枢、左右各国命运的大脑——他就是这么个人物！可他距离公众的猜疑是那么地遥远，跟外界的非议是那么地不相

是英格兰西南海滨一个村庄的名字。英国诗人柯尔律治（Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1772—1834）在未完成诗歌《忽必烈汗》（*Kubla Khan*, 1816）的题记当中说，他在梦中得到了整首诗的文字，醒来时也记得非常清楚，之所以没能全部记录下来，是因为受到了一个访客的打扰，这个访客来自波洛克。自此之后，“person from Porlock”（波洛克来客）或者“Porlock”（波洛克）就成了“不受欢迎的不速之客”的代名词。当然，也有人认为柯尔律治关于“波洛克”的说法不过是没能写完这首诗的托词而已。——译者注，以下同

[2] 引水鱼（pilot fish）亦称领航鱼，学名舟鲫，拉丁学名 *Naucrates ductor*，是一种体型细长的小海鱼，喜欢成群跟随鲨鱼之类的大鱼，为的是捡食残渣。

[3] 原文如此。不过，本章下文说“这个故事发生在遥远的十九世纪八十年代末期”，时间在《福尔摩斯回忆录》的《最后一案》（故事中给出的时间是 1891 年）之前，而在《最后一案》当中，福尔摩斯曾经问华生，“莫里亚蒂教授这个人，你也许从来没听说过吧？”，华生的回答是“没听说过”。

[4] 福尔摩斯这是在用击剑术语来打比方，参见《巴斯克维尔的猎犬》第五章当中的注释。

干，隐身幕后操控一切的手法又是那么地令人叫绝，以至于光凭你刚才说的那几句话，他就可以拖着你去对簿公堂，把你整整一年的年金变成他的名誉损失费。《小行星动力学》一书的理论数学水平达到了唯我独尊的高度，据说整个科学舆论界都没有人能对它提出任何批评，那本奇书的著名作者不就是他吗？这样的人是可以随便中伤的吗？满嘴胡言的医生和清誉受损的教授，这就是你们俩各自扮演的角色！他可真是个天才，华生。不过，只要我没在那些小阴沟里翻了船，咱们就必然会有旗开得胜的一天。”

“但愿我能够亲眼见证那一天！”我热忱地高喊一声。“不过，你刚才谈的可是波洛克这个家伙的事情。”

“呃，没错——所谓的波洛克是链条当中的一个环节，离那个了不起的核心距离不远。咱俩私下说啊，波洛克这个环节并不是特别牢靠。根据我现有的测试结果来看，他是那根链条当中唯一的一个薄弱环节。”

“可是，链条的牢靠程度总是由最薄弱的一个环节来决定的啊。”

“一点儿不错，亲爱的华生！就是因为这一点，波洛克才显得极端重要。这个人总算是良心未泯，加上我时不时地采取一种助人向善的明智举措，转弯抹角地送他一张十镑的钞票，结果呢，有那么一两次，他赶在事发之前给过我一些很有价值的情报——那些情报的价值可以说是无可比拟，因为它们可以帮助我预防犯罪，而不是事后再去讨还公道。我敢说，要是能找到解码方法的话，咱们肯定会发现，眼下这封信也属于我刚才提到的那个类型。”

福尔摩斯再一次把纸片平摊在他那个未曾使用的碟子上。我站起身来，低下头去，隔着他的肩膀看到了以下的古怪符号：

534 C2 13 127 36 31 4 17 21 41
DOUGLAS 109 293 5 37 BIRLSTONE
26 BIRLSTONE 9 47 171

这之后，他把信封拿了起来，举到光亮的地方，仔仔细细地研究了一下信封的外观和封口。

“你觉得这是什么意思呢，福尔摩斯？”

“显而易见，这是想向咱们提供一份机密情报。”

“可是，不附上解码的方法，密信能有什么用处呢？”

“就这个例子来说，一点儿用处也没有。”

“你为什么要强调‘就这个例子来说’呢？”

“原因在于，我可以轻而易举地解读很多密码，就跟解读报纸私人启事栏里的那些天方夜谭一样简单：解读那些粗糙的密码只是一种有趣的消遣，算不上一种智力上的负担。眼前的这个例子就不同了，这些符号显然是代表着某本书某一页当中的词语，不知道具体是哪本书哪一页的话，我是完全奈它们不何的。”

“可是，信里面为什么又有‘Douglas’（道格拉斯）和‘Birlstone’（伯尔斯通）这样的词语呢？”

“当然是因为那一页当中找不出这两个词来。”

“那么，他为什么不指明是哪一本书呢？”

“单凭你生来就有的精明，亲爱的华生，单凭你那种让朋友们喜闻乐见的固有智术，你也绝不会把解码的方法和密信装进同一个信封。那样的话，信一旦有了闪失，你这个人也就完蛋了。眼下呢，除非是两封信都有了闪失，否则就不会造成任何危险。我说，咱们的第二班邮差应该已经到了才对啊，不出意外的话，邮差送来的要么是一封补充说明的信件，要么就是与这些数字相关的那本书，书的可能性还要大一些。”

一两分钟之内，福尔摩斯的预测就得到了验证。我们的小听差比利[1]走进房间，送来了我们正在等待的那封信。

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[1] 福尔摩斯系列当中多次提到贝克街的小听差，“Billy”（比利）这个名字却只在三个故事当中出现过，第一次出现就是在这个故事当中。本故事发表之前，美国演员及剧作家威廉·吉勒特（William Hooker Gillette, 1853—1937）的四幕剧《歇洛克·福尔摩斯》（*Sherlock Holmes*, 1899）当中已经出现了名为比利的贝克街小听差。1903 年，时年 13 岁的喜剧大师卓别林在这部戏剧当中饰演比利，舞台生涯由是开始。

“同样的笔迹，”他一边说，一边把信拆开，“而且实实在在地署上了名字，”他展开信纸，兴高采烈地补了一句。“过来看看，华生，看看咱们的进展。”不过，读完信之后，他的脸上罩上了一层乌云。

“天哪，这可真是太叫人失望了！要我说，华生，咱们恐怕是白等了一场。波洛克这家伙可别出什么事儿啊。他的信是这么写的：

“亲爱的福尔摩斯先生：

这事情我不打算接着干了。太危险了——他对我起了疑心。我看得出来，他对我起了疑心。我刚刚写好这封信的信封，打算把解码的线索寄给你，他已经出其不意地出现在了我的面前。好在我把信给盖住了，要是被他瞧见的话，我可就吃不了兜着走啦。可是，我已经看到了他怀疑的眼神。把那封密信烧了吧，眼下你拿着它也没用了。

弗雷德·波洛克”

福尔摩斯皱着眉头坐了一小会儿，把信拿在手里揉来揉去，眼睛直勾勾地盯着炉火。

“说来说去，”他终于开了口，“兴许他并没有受到怀疑，不过是自己心虚而已。他清楚自己的叛徒身份，自然会在对方的眼睛里看到谴责的神色。”

“你说的‘对方’，应该就是莫里亚蒂教授吧。”

“如假包换！他们那帮人嘴里的‘他’，不用问你也知道是谁。凌驾于他们所有人之上的，只有这么一个‘他’。”

“可是，他究竟能把波洛克怎么样呢？”

“哼！你这个问题问得真好。他拥有全欧洲数一数二的头脑，所有的黑暗势力都听凭他的差遣，有这样的一个人跟你作对，什么样的事情都有可能发生。不管怎么样，咱们的波洛克老兄反正已经被他吓得灵魂出窍——麻烦你拿信封上的笔迹跟信纸上的笔迹作个对比，按波洛克的说法，信封是在那个丧门星到来之前写的。前一种笔迹又清晰又肯定，后一种呢，差不多都要没法认了。”

“那他干吗还写第二封信呢？索性就此罢手不是更好吗？”

“他担心要是不作解释的话，我就会跑去追查这件事情，没准儿会让他惹上麻烦。”

“那倒也是，”我说道。“确实如此。”我已经拿起了最初的那封密信，这会儿便皱着眉头看了起来。“想到这张纸片承载着一个重大的秘密，又想到纸上的密码超出了凡人所能破解的范围，简直会让人急出疯病来呢。”

歇洛克·福尔摩斯已经推开一口没尝的早餐，点上了不甚可口的烟斗，那是他专注思考之时的必有良伴。“我看不见得！”他一边说，一边往椅子上一靠，目光定在了天花板上。“说不定，尽管你拥有马基雅维利[1]一般的头脑，信里的一些东西还是逃过了你的注意。好了，咱们不妨通过纯粹的演绎来解决这个问题。这个人的密码钥匙是一本书，这就是咱们的演绎起点。”

“这个起点多少有点儿宽泛啊。”

“那咱们就想想办法，看看能不能把它收窄一点儿。仔细想来，我觉得它也不是那么难于破解。关于这本书，咱们有一些什么样的提示呢？”

“什么也没有。”

“好啦，好啦，情况绝对没有糟糕到这种地步。密信的开头是一个大大的‘534’，对吧？咱们不妨假定，534 就是与密信相关的那一页的页码。由此可知，这本书必然是一部大部头，这么着，咱们就算是有了一点儿进展。关于这本大部头，咱们还有些什么提示呢？接下来的标记是‘C2’。这你怎么看呢，华生？”

“意思是第二章，错不了。”

“多半不是，华生。依我看，你肯定会同意我的看法，既然已经有了页码，再指明章节未免有点儿多余。再说了，如果第 534

[1] 马基雅维利（Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469—1527）为意大利政治理论家，著有《君主论》（*The Prince*），首次用客观科学的方法对获得及维持政治权力的途径进行了分析。

页才到第二章的话，第一章的长度一定达到了让人忍无可忍的地步。”

“第二栏！[1]”我大叫一声。

“聪明啊，华生，今天早上你可真是灵光四射。如果这不是指第二栏的话，那我就算是栽了一个大跟头。好了，你瞧，咱们眼前已经出现了一本双栏排印的大部头，每一栏都相当长，因为密信当中指明了一个序号是二百九十三的词语。到这个地方，咱们的演绎算不算是到了头呢？”

“要我看，恐怕是到了头。”

“你显然是低估了自己的能力。再闪点儿灵光出来吧，亲爱的华生——再让你的灵机动一动！如果这本书不太常见的话，他一定会把它寄给我。可他没有这么做，在计划受挫之前，他的打算只是把关于书的线索装在这个信封里寄给我。他的信里就是这么说的。由此看来，他认为我自个儿也可以轻而易举地找到这本书。这本书他自己有，并且相信我也有。一句话，华生，这是一本十分常见的书。”

“你这个推测确实很有道理。”

“这一来，咱们就把搜索目标缩小成了一本双栏排印、十分常见的大部头。”

“《圣经》！”我发出一声胜利的叫喊。

“很好，华生，很好！只可惜还没有，容我补充一句，好到十分！即便我本人当得起你这句美言，可我实在想象不出，还有哪本书比《圣经》更不可能出现在莫里亚蒂党羽的手边。[2] 再者说，《圣经》的版本千千万万，他不可能假定他那本《圣经》的页码编排跟我这本一样。显而易见，咱们要找的是一本格式统一的书，

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[1] 英文中的“章”和“栏”分别是“Chapter”和“Column”，都以字母 C 开头。

[2] 这句话隐含的意思是把《圣经》备在手边的都是好人，可以视作一句戏言。

只有这样，他才可以断定，他那本的 534 页就是我这本的 534 页。”

“这样的书很少啊。”

“一点儿不错。咱们的希望就在这里。好了，咱们的目标已经进一步缩小，变成了一本人人都会有的标准化书籍。”

“《列车时刻表》！[①]”

“这也是讲不通的，华生。《列车时刻表》使用的词汇固然简洁有力，数量却十分有限。它提供的那些词汇很难用来传递其他类型的讯息。咱们得把《列车时刻表》排除在外，词典嘛，恐怕也不能接受，原因跟《列车时刻表》一样。还剩什么呢？”

“年鉴！”

“好极了，华生！这次你要还没猜中的话，那我就真是大错特错了。年鉴！咱们来考虑一下《惠特克年鉴》[②]的入选资格吧。它十分常见，页码足够多，双栏排印，前面部分的词汇量虽然有限，靠近结尾的部分呢，如果我没记错的话，词汇还是相当丰富的。”他从自己的写字台上拿起了那本年鉴。“喏，这就是 534 页，第二栏，我看到了，是一篇字数很多的文章，讲的是英属印度的贸易和资源。把这些词写下来，华生！第十三个词是‘Mahratta’（马拉塔）[③]。要我说，这个头开得不怎么吉利啊。第一百二十七个词是‘Government’（政府），这个词总算有点儿意义，话说回来，它似乎跟咱们和莫里亚蒂教授都扯不上什么关系。咱们接着往下看吧。马拉塔政府干了些什么呢？哎唷！下一个词是‘pig’s-bristles’（猪鬃）。咱们完了，我的好华生啊！没戏唱了！”

[①] 原文是“Bradshaw”，实指列车时刻表。1839 年，英国人布拉德肖（George Bradshaw , 1801—1853）出版了世界上第一本汇编列车时刻表。对维多利亚时代的英国人来说，所有的列车时刻表都可以称为“Bradshaw”，不管它跟布拉德肖这个人有没有关系。

[②]《惠特克年鉴》（*Whitaker's Almanac*）为英国出版的著名年鉴，由约瑟夫·惠特克（Joseph Whitaker, 1820—1895）始创于 1868 年，至今犹存。

[③] 马拉塔（Mahratta）是始建于 1674 年的一个印度帝国，1818 年被英国殖民者摧毁。

他说话的口气虽然轻松俏皮，抽动的浓眉却让他心里的失望和懊恼暴露无遗。我无可奈何地坐在那里，闷闷不乐地盯着炉火。一段漫长的沉默之后，福尔摩斯突然大叫一声，冲到一个橱柜跟前，从里面拿出了另一本黄色封皮的《惠特克年鉴》。

“咱们赶潮流赶得太快，华生，这回可算是有教训了！”他高声说道。“咱们走在了时间的前面，活该受这样的惩罚。眼下才一月七号，咱们就应时应节地弄来了一本新年鉴。十有八九，波洛克写信的时候用的还是旧年鉴。毫无疑问，如果能把那封提示信件写出来的话，他肯定会把这一点讲清楚的。好了，咱们来看一看，这一本的 534 页给咱们准备了一些什么货色。第十三个词是‘There’（今），看着可比上一次的希望大多了。第一百二十七个词是‘is’（有）——‘There is’（今有）”——福尔摩斯的眼睛闪出了兴奋的火花，纤长有力的手指抖抖索索地数着文章里的词汇——“‘danger’（祸患）。哈！哈！妙极了！赶紧写下来，华生。‘There is danger——may——come——very——soon——one’（今有祸患，旦夕将临），然后是‘Douglas’这个名字，再往后是‘rich——country——now——at——Birlstone——House——Birlstone——confidence——is——pressing’。[1] 瞧啊，华生！你说说看，纯粹演绎的效果怎么样？如果蔬菜铺子里有桂冠这种东西卖的话，我这就打发比利去给我买一顶。”

在福尔摩斯解读密信的过程当中，我把一张富士纸摊在自己的膝盖上，草草地记下了他的解读成果。到这会儿，我直愣愣地看着这条古怪的讯息。

“他表达意思的方式可真是稀奇古怪、乱七八糟！”我说道。

“恰恰相反，他把自己的意思表达得非常好，”福尔摩斯说道。

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[1] 所有这些词连成的句子并不完全符合英语规范，加上合理推测，句子的意思是：“今有祸患，旦夕将临，受害者为乡间富绅道格拉斯，现居伯尔斯通村之伯尔斯通宅邸。确信此事十万火急。”伯尔斯通（Birlstone）是作者虚构的一个地名。

“如果你表达意思的词汇只能从孤零零的一栏文字里面选择，当然不可能要什么有什么，总有一部分的意思得靠收信的人自己去揣摩。这封信的主旨已经是清楚得不能再清楚了。有人阴谋算计某个名为道格拉斯的人，不管这个道格拉斯究竟是何方神圣，总之是一个富有的乡绅，就住在信里所说的那个地方。他确信事情万分紧急，只不过没有用‘confident’（确信）这个词，用的是‘confidence’（信任），因为这一栏当中只有这个词跟‘confident’最为接近。这就是咱们的成果——这段小小的演绎确实是有点儿技巧哩！”

跟真正的艺术家一样，如果作品没有达到自己的高远期许，福尔摩斯会表现得痛不欲生，同样道理，他也会为自己的得意之作表现出一种不带个人色彩的喜悦。这不，当比利一把推开房门、将苏格兰场的麦克唐纳督察领进房间的时候[①]，福尔摩斯还在为这一次的成就吃吃地笑个不停呢。

这个故事发生在遥远的十九世纪八十年代末期，那个时候，亚历克·麦克唐纳远不像如今这样举国闻名。当时的他还是警队里的一名年轻成员，不过也很受重用，因为他在奉命侦办的几件案子当中有过突出的表现。他身材高大、骨骼突出，一看就知道膂力过人，而他硕大的脑瓜和炯炯有神的深陷眼睛也以同样一目了然的方式表明，他那两道浓眉背后闪烁着耀眼的智慧火花。他沉默寡言、一板一眼、脾气倔犟，说话带有浓重的阿伯丁[②]口音。

在此之前，福尔摩斯已经两次帮助他成功破案，破案的功劳都给了他，福尔摩斯自己的收获仅仅是解决难题的智力享受。有了这样的铺垫，这个苏格兰人自然对这位业余同僚产生了极大的

[①] 苏格兰场（Scotland Yard）是伦敦警察厅的代称，按照苏格兰场官网的说法，这是因为它原来的办公地点有一道开在“大苏格兰场街”（Great Scotland Yard Street）的后门；英国的警衔系统与香港大致相同，故书中警衔译名比照香港警衔，由低到高包括警员、警长、督察、警司等等级别。

[②] 阿伯丁（Aberdeen）为苏格兰东北部港口城市。

好感和敬重，表现则是他一遇上难题就老实不客气地跑来向福尔摩斯讨教。庸碌凡夫自以为登峰造极，禀赋超卓的人物却可以一眼看出他人的盖世天才，麦克唐纳拥有相当的职业禀赋，足以让他明白，向一个天赋和经验都已经冠绝全欧的人求教，并不是一件有伤颜面的事情。福尔摩斯并不喜欢结交朋友，但却对这个苏格兰大块头格外优待，看到他的时候还笑了起来。

“你可真是只早起的鸟儿，麦克先生，”福尔摩斯说道。“希望老天爷多赏你几只虫子。要我说，你这么早来，恐怕是出了什么乱子吧。”

“福尔摩斯先生，我是这么想的，如果您把‘恐怕’换成‘但愿’的话，应该会更加符合事实，”督察回答道，脸上带着心照不宣的笑容。“呃，稍微来一口也好，可以挡一挡今天早上的刺骨寒气。不用，我不抽烟，谢谢您。一会儿我就得赶紧上路，因为案发之初的几个钟头再宝贵不过了，这一点您比谁都清楚。不过——不过——”

督察突然打住话头，直勾勾地盯着桌上的一张纸片，脸上的表情惊愕至极。他看的正是我刚才用过的那张纸，纸上是我草草记下的那一条谜一般的讯息。

“道格拉斯！”他结结巴巴地说道。“伯尔斯通！这是怎么回事，福尔摩斯先生？嘿，这简直是巫术啊！我的天，这些名字您究竟是从哪儿搞来的呢？”

“这是一封密信的内容，基于某种理由，我和华生医生破译了这封密信。可你为什么——这些名字有什么问题吗？”

督察晕头转向地来回打量着我俩。“问题恰恰是，”他说道，“昨天夜里，伯尔斯通宅邸的道格拉斯先生遭到了惨无人道的谋杀！”

第二章 * 歇洛克·福尔摩斯的妙论

这一刻可谓惊心动魄，而我朋友正是为这样的时刻而生。听到这个惊人消息之后，他的反应不光不能说是震撼，就说是激动都嫌过分。他的特异性情之中并不包含哪怕是一丝残忍的成分，毋庸置疑的是，长期以来的过度刺激已经让他的神经结上了一层茧子。话说回来，即便他的情感确实已经趋于迟钝，他的理性认知却只能说是活跃得出奇。这样一来，督察的这句简短声明让我惊骇不已，而他没有任何表示，脸上只有一种饶有兴趣的沉静表情，仿佛是一位化学家，正在看自己配制的过饱和溶液析出晶体。

“不一般！”他说道。“不一般！”

“您好像并不觉得惊讶啊。”

“关注而已，麦克先生，惊讶可谈不上。我有什么理由感到惊讶呢？我从某个地方收到了一条我知道十分重要的匿名讯息，由此知道某个人面临危险。接下来不到一个钟头，我得知危险变成了现实，那个人已经死亡。这事情确实引起了我的关注，不过，就像你看到的那样，并没有让我感到惊讶。”

这之后，他三言两语地向督察讲清了关于信件和密码的种种事实。麦克唐纳坐在那里，双手托着下巴，浓密的沙色眉毛拧成了一个黄色的结。

“我本打算今早就去伯尔斯通，”他说道。“来这里是想问您愿不愿意跟我一起去——我是说，您和您的朋友。可是，从您刚才说的这些事情来看，咱们还是在伦敦调查比较好。”

“我倒不这么觉得，”福尔摩斯说道。

“得了吧，福尔摩斯先生！”督察叫道。“一两天之内，伯尔斯通谜案就会占满各家报纸的版面。可是，既然已经有人在伦敦预见了这桩罪行，它还叫什么谜案呢？咱们只需要把这个人抓来就行了，其他的问题自然会迎刃而解。”

“你说得对极了，麦克先生。不过，你打算用什么方法去抓这个所谓的波洛克呢？”

麦克唐纳把福尔摩斯递给他的信翻了一面。“信是从坎伯维尔街区寄来的，这一点对咱们没多大帮助。名字嘛，您已经说了是假的。是的，咱们手里的线索确实不多。可是，您刚才不是说您给过他钱吗？”

“给过两次。”

“怎么给的呢？”

“把钞票寄到坎伯维尔邮局。”

“您就没有劳神去看看取钞票的人吗？”

“没有。”

督察的表情有点儿惊讶，甚至可以说是有点儿震撼。“为什么呢？”

“因为我一向说话算话。他第一次写信给我的时候，我已经答应了他，不会去追查他的身份。”

“您认为他背后还有别人，对吗？”

“不是认为，我知道还有别人。”

“就是您提过的那位教授吗？”

“还能是谁！”

麦克唐纳督察笑了起来，还冲我挤了挤眼睛。“我跟您实说了吧，福尔摩斯先生，我们刑事侦缉处的人都觉得，您对那位教授稍微有那么一点儿神经过敏。我自个儿也对这件事情进行了一些调查，他似乎是个非常体面、非常渊博、非常有才干的人。”

“你居然看出了他的才干，我真是高兴极了。”

“咳，想不看出来也不行啊！听过您对他的看法之后，我打定主意要去会会他。我跟他聊了聊关于日食的问题，怎么聊起来的我记不得了，总之他搬出一台反光灯和一个地球仪，只用了一分钟就把这个问题讲得清清楚楚。他还借了一本书给我，可我不怕跟您说，虽说我在阿伯丁也受过很好的教育，那本书还是有点儿超出了我的智力。他脸庞瘦削、头发花白，说起话来跟讲道一样，准保能成为一位了不起的母（牧）师[①]。我告辞的时候，他把手放到了我的肩膀上，感觉就像是父亲正在祝福即将踏入冷酷社会的孩子。”

福尔摩斯吃吃地笑了起来，搓了搓自己的双手。“妙极了！”他说道。“妙极了！据我看，麦克唐纳老弟，你们这次愉快感人的会晤应该是发生在教授的书房里，对不对？”

“对。”

“房间不错，对吧？”

“非常不错——实际上是漂亮极了，福尔摩斯先生。”

“你坐在他那张写字台跟前，对吧？”

“没错。”

“阳光照进了你的眼睛，他的脸却在阴影里，对吧？”

“呃，我是晚上去的。可我确实记得，灯光是照在我脸上的。”

“理当如此。教授那把椅子的上方挂着一幅画，当时你有没有注意到呢？”

“我这个人可不会漏过太多细节，福尔摩斯先生。说不定，这还是跟您学的呢。是的，我看到了那幅画，画的是一个年轻女人，双手托着脑袋，斜着眼睛看人。”

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① 如前文所说，这名探员说话有“阿伯丁口音”，原文中表现为他话语中的个别单词与正常拼写有异，译文中均表现为与括号内正确文字同音异调的别字。

“那幅画是让·巴蒂斯特·格勒兹[1]的作品。”

督察努力装出一副兴致勃勃的模样。

“让·巴蒂斯特·格勒兹，”福尔摩斯接着说道，双手的指尖顶在一起，身子深深地倒进了背后的椅子，“是活跃于一七五〇至一八〇〇年间的一位法国画家，当然喽，我这里说的是他的职业生涯。他在世的时候就享有很高的声誉，当代的评论家更是对他赞不绝口。”

督察的眼神渐渐地迷茫起来。“咱们是不是应该——”他说道。

“不是应该，咱们正在这么做，”福尔摩斯打断了他。“我说的所有事情都跟你所说的伯尔斯通谜案存在十分直接、至关紧要的联系。事实上，从某种意义上说，我正在谈论这件谜案的核心。”

麦克唐纳勉勉强强地笑了笑，求助般地看了看我。“对我来说，您的思维跳跃得有点儿太快了，福尔摩斯先生。您少讲了一两个环节，而我自个儿又补不上。说一千道一万，那个死掉了的画匠跟伯尔斯通的事情究竟能有什么联系呢？”

“对于一名侦探来说，世上没有无用的知识，”福尔摩斯说道。“说不定，即便是以下这件琐碎事情也可以让你展开一系列的联想：一八六五年，名为《少女与羔羊》的格勒兹作品在波塔利斯拍卖会上卖到了一百二十万法郎，也就是超过四万英镑[2]。”

显而易见，这件事情确实引发了一系列的联想。到这会儿，督察脸上的兴趣不像是装的了。

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[1] 让·巴蒂斯特·格勒兹（Jean Baptiste Greuze, 1725—1805）为法国著名画家，作品多含有道德讽喻。

[2] 据伦敦华莱士藏馆（The Wallace Collection）官方网站所说，该馆藏有一幅格勒兹画作，系该馆创始人于 1865 年自巴黎的波塔莱斯－戈吉耶伯爵（Comte de Pourtalès-Gorgier）藏品拍卖会中购得。这幅画的内容虽然是抱持羊羔的少女，名字却是《纯真》（*Innocence*）。文中的“波塔利斯”原文是“Portalis”，与这位伯爵的名字略有差异。有一些版本将这里的画价改成了“四千镑”，依据可能是四万镑的价格与格勒兹画价当时的真实水平相去甚远，不过，四千镑的画价似乎不足以凸显教授的收入问题。

“我还可以提醒你一下，”福尔摩斯接着说道，“好几种可靠的参考书籍都可以帮助我们确定教授的薪资。教授的薪资是一年七百镑。”

“那他怎么买得起——”

“可不是嘛！他怎么买得起呢？”

“没错，这事情确实很不寻常，”督察若有所思地说道。“接着说啊，福尔摩斯先生。我爱听极了，妙极了！”

福尔摩斯露出了笑容。跟真正的艺术家一样，真诚的赞美总是会让他觉得格外愉快。“伯尔斯通的事情怎么办呢？”他问道。

“时间还来得及，”督察一边说，一边看了看表。“有辆出租马车在门口等我，从这儿到维多利亚车站用不了二十分钟。咱们接着说这幅画吧：我记得您跟我提过一次，福尔摩斯先生，您从来没有见过莫里亚蒂教授。”

“是的，我从来没有见过他。”

“那您怎么会知道他房间里的情形呢？”

“这个嘛，当然是另外一回事情。我到他家里去过三次，前两次都是找了不同的借口去等着见他，然后又赶在他出现之前溜之大吉。最后一次，呃，这一次可不太方便告诉一位警方的探员。就是这一次，我冒昧地浏览了一下他的文件，结果就有了一个极其惊人的发现。”

“您发现他的罪证了吗？”

“什么也没发现，惊人就惊人在这个地方。不过，眼下你已经看到了那幅画的意义，意义就是他这个人十分富有。他的财富是怎么来的呢？他没有结婚，弟弟不过是英格兰西部的一个火车站站长[1]，自己的教席也只能带来一年七百镑的收入，可他竟然拥有一幅格勒兹的作品。”

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[1] 按照《最后一案》当中的记述，莫里亚蒂还有一个头衔是上校的兄弟。

“怎样呢？”

“其中的含意只能说是一目了然。”

“您是说他拥有非法取得的巨额收入，是吗？”

“一点儿不错。当然喽，我这个判断还有其他的依据——那个毒物一动不动地潜伏在网子的中央，几十条若有若无的纤细丝线把我引到了那里。我只跟你提到了格勒兹的画，不过是因为你亲眼看见过那件东西而已。”

“是这样，福尔摩斯先生，我承认您说的这些都很有趣，岂止是有趣而已，应该说是非常精彩。不过，如果可以的话，您最好再说得明白一点儿。他的钱具体是怎么来的，是伪造纸钞、私铸硬币，还是入室抢劫呢？”

“你读过乔纳森·怀尔德的事迹吗？”

“呃，名字听着倒挺熟的。他是小说里的人物，对吗？小说里的侦探我可不怎么感冒，那些家伙从来都不肯让人看到他们的办案手法。他们办案凭的是一时的灵感，并不是踏踏实实的工作。”

“乔纳森·怀尔德并不是侦探，也没有在小说里出现过。此人是上世纪的一个罪魁，生活在一七五〇年左右。[1]”

“这么说的话，他对我就没有什么用处，我可是讲求实效的。”

“麦克先生，你这辈子能做的最有实效的事情就是闭门谢客，踏踏实实地待上三个月，每天花十二个钟头的时间来阅读过往的犯罪记录。所有的事情都会循环出现，就连莫里亚蒂教授这样的人物也是如此。乔纳森·怀尔德是伦敦罪犯的幕后主使，他为他们出谋划策、提供人手，回报则是百分之十五的赃物。时间的轮子周而复始，转下去的辐条还会转上来。所有的事情都有先例，将来也会再次发生。我这就给你讲一两件莫里亚蒂的事情，兴许能引起你的兴趣。”

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[1] 乔纳森·怀尔德（Jonathan Wild）确有其人，为十八世纪英国著名罪犯及盗窃团伙首领。不过，此人于 1725 年被处绞刑，时间上与文中所说略有出入。

“这些事情当然能引起我的兴趣，错不了。”

“他那根链条，一端是这个走上邪路的拿破仑，另一端是由上百名打手、窃贼、勒索犯、牌桌骗子组成的乌合之众，中间则是应有尽有的罪行，而我碰巧知道，谁才是那根链条当中的第一个环节。他的参谋长是塞巴斯蒂安·莫兰上校，那家伙跟他本人一样置身事外、一样戒备森严、一样让法律鞭长莫及。你知道他给上校多少钱吗？”

“我很想听一听。”

“一年六千镑。你看到了吧，这就叫做‘把钱花在脑瓜子上’，用的是美国人的商业准则。完全是机缘巧合，我才了解到了这个细节。这可比首相的薪水还要高啊。听了这一点，你应该对莫里亚蒂的收入和生意规模有点儿概念了吧。还有一点，最近这段时间，我专门下了一点儿工夫，查到了莫里亚蒂使用的一些支票——不过是他用来支付家庭开销的支票而已，普普通通、合理合法，但却是从六家不同的银行开出来的。这件事情，你觉不觉得蹊跷呢？”

“怪啊，确实是怪！不过，您的结论又是什么呢？”

“结论是他不希望别人对他的财富说三道四，不想让任何人知道他到底有多少钱。我敢肯定他拥有二十个银行账户，十之八九，他大部分的财产都在国外，都在德意志银行和里昂信贷银行之类的地方。将来，等你有了一两年空闲时间的时候，我建议你好好地研究一下莫里亚蒂教授。”

对话过程之中，麦克唐纳督察表现得越来越感兴趣，最后就听得入了迷。到这会儿，他那颗讲求实效的苏格兰脑袋“啪”的一声转了个方向，回到了手头的案子上。

“不管怎么样，教授的事情可以以后再说，”他说道。“福尔摩斯先生，您这些趣事轶闻已经让咱们偏离了主题。您说了这么多，真正的要害不过是那位教授跟这次的罪行脱不了干系，而您之所以这么说，是因为波洛克这个家伙给您发来了警讯。就眼下的实

际需要而言，咱们还能有什么进一步的结论吗？”

“咱们可以由此推测这起罪案的动机。从你最初的描述来看，这是一起无法解释、至少是尚未得到解释的谋杀案。好了，假设罪行的源头确实符合咱们的推测，犯罪动机就有两种解释。首先我得告诉你，莫里亚蒂对他的党羽实施的是一种铁腕统治。他的戒条十分恐怖，处罚则只有一种，那就是死刑。那么，咱们不妨假定这个死者——也就是这个道格拉斯，他的临头厄运已经传到了魔头帐下一名爪牙的耳朵里——是莫里亚蒂的爪牙，而且以某种方式背叛了自己的首领。处罚随之而来，而且要让所有人知道，目的嘛，兴许只是为了让其他的爪牙看到死亡的恐怖。”

“呃，您只说了一种解释，福尔摩斯先生。”

“另一种解释就是，这起罪行虽然出自莫里亚蒂的策划，但却只是他日常生意当中的一件。现场有抢劫的迹象吗？”

“这我还没听说。”

“当然喽，如果有抢劫迹象的话，第二种解释就比第一种更显得符合情理。那样的话，莫里亚蒂既可能是按照某种分赃协议策划了这起罪案，也可能是预先收到了足够的策划费用。两种情形都有可能。不过，具体是哪一种情形，会不会有第三种情形，咱们只能到伯尔斯通去找答案。我可是非常了解咱们的这个对手，绝不指望他会在伦敦这边留下什么可以追到他头上的线索。”

“那好，咱们赶紧去伯尔斯通吧！”麦克唐纳嚷了一声，从椅子上一跃而起。“天哪！没想到这么晚了，先生们，我只能给你们五分钟的准备时间，再多就没有啦。”

“这对我俩来说都是绰绰有余，”福尔摩斯说道，跟着就跳起身来，急匆匆地脱下睡袍、换上大衣。“咱们上路之后，麦克先生，我得麻烦你给我讲讲全部的案情。”

事实证明，“全部的案情”实在是少得让人大失所望，同时也足以让我们确信，眼前这件案子完全值得这位探案专家最密切的

关注。他搓着瘦骨嶙峋的双手，容光焕发地倾听着那些寥寥无几却又非比寻常的案情细节。好多个星期百无聊赖的日子就此结束，我们终于迎来了一个配得上他那些非凡本领的目标。跟所有的特殊禀赋一样，如果没有用武之地，那些本领就会变成主人的烦恼。闲置不用的话，他剃刀一般锋锐的脑子就会变得麻木迟钝、锈迹斑斑。

听到了工作的召唤，歇洛克·福尔摩斯两眼发亮，苍白的双颊呈现出了一种更为温暖的色调，整张脸显得十分热切，洋溢着一种由内而外的光彩。他在出租马车的座位上欠身向前，专注地听麦克唐纳概述在萨塞克斯[1]等待我们的那个难题。据督察自己的解释，他对案情也是所知有限，还得参考别人通过当天清早的牛奶列车[2]送来的一份潦草记录。麦克唐纳跟萨塞克斯探员怀特·梅森私交不错，这样一来，在当地警方需要苏格兰场协助的时候，他收到消息的速度要比正常的官方渠道快得多。正常情形之下，首都警局的专家得在案发许久之后才能收到请求协助的公函。这一次，他念给我们听的那封信是这么写的：

> 亲爱的麦克唐纳督察：
>
> 请求贵局协助的正式公文另见专函，这封信仅供你私人过目。请电告你坐早晨的哪班火车前来伯尔斯通，我会到车站去接你——或者派人去接你，如果我脱不开身的话。这可是一件了不得的大案子。你赶紧动身吧，一秒钟也别耽搁。你要能把福尔摩斯先生带来的话，麻烦你务必这么办，这案子肯定能对上他的胃口。要不是死者摆在现场的话，我们简直会觉得整件事情是一场刻意追求轰动效果的舞台剧呢。相信我！这**真的是**一件了不得的大案子。

“看样子，你这位朋友一点儿也不傻嘛，”福尔摩斯如是评论。

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[1] 萨塞克斯（Sussex）是英格兰东南部一片历史悠久的地域，当时虽然分为东西两部，名义上却是一个郡，到 1974 年才分为东萨塞克斯和西萨塞克斯两个郡。

[2] 牛奶列车（milk train）指清早开行运送牛奶的客货混装列车。

“不傻，先生，如果我还算有点儿眼光的话，怀特·梅森可是个非常机灵的家伙。”

“好吧，你还知道别的什么情况吗？”

“我只知道，咱们跟他见上面的时候，他就会把所有的细节告诉咱们。”

“那你怎么知道死者是道格拉斯先生，又怎么知道这是一起惨无人道的谋杀呢？”

“这是专函里的正式报告上说的。报告里倒没有‘惨无人道’这个字眼儿，因为这不是一个普遍通行的官方术语。报告给出了约翰·道格拉斯这个名字，说了他伤在头部，凶器是一把霰弹枪，还说了报案的时间是昨天夜里将近十二点。报告里又说，这案子毫无疑问是一起谋杀，目前还没有拘捕任何嫌犯，案子当中有一些非常让人迷惑的离奇细节。目前我们只知道这些，再没有别的了，福尔摩斯先生。”

“既然如此，麦克先生，你不反对的话，咱们的讨论不妨到此为止。资料不够的时候，咱们可不能急急忙忙地拿出假设，这是咱们这一行的大忌。到目前为止，我能确定的只有两样东西，一样是待在伦敦的一颗聪明脑袋，另一样是躺在萨塞克斯的一名死者。两样东西之间的因果链条，便是咱们此行的追查目标。”

第三章 * 伯尔斯通惨剧

故事讲到这里，我得向读者诸君告个假，暂时让我自己饰演的卑微角色从情节当中消失，转而叙述我们到达凶案现场之前的种种事件，叙述的依据则是我们后来才了解到的一些情况。只有通过这种办法，我才能让读者们看清涉入此案的各个人物，看清决定他们命运的那个离奇背景。

伯尔斯通是萨塞克斯郡北端一个历史悠久的小小村落，村里只有一些砖木结构的农舍。它一成不变地度过了几百年的岁月，前些年才凭借如画的风景和优越的地理位置引来了不少富裕的住户，村子周围的林地之中也才有了这些住户建起的一座座别墅。广袤的“大林地”[1]向着北部的白垩山丘延伸，越是往北，林木越是稀疏。按照当地人的看法，伯尔斯通的林地正是“大林地”最靠北的边缘部分。人口增多之后，各式各样的小商铺应运而生，由此看来，伯尔斯通很快就会从一个古老的村落演变成一个现代化的城镇。伯尔斯通是周围一大片乡区的神经中枢，原因在于，离它最近的重要城镇也得到十至十二英里之外的地方去找，那个城镇就是它东边的坦布里奇韦尔斯，已经进入了肯特郡的地界[2]。

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[1] “大林地”（Weald）指的是英格兰东南部两条平行丘陵之间的一大片林地，《福尔摩斯归来记》的《黑彼得》当中也讲到了这个地方。从文中的叙述来看，虚构的伯尔斯通村应该离《黑彼得》当中的弗雷斯特劳村很近，离伦敦也不远，所以有“地理位置优越”之说。

[2] 肯特郡（Kent）为英格兰东南部的一个郡，紧邻伦敦；坦布里奇韦尔斯（Tunbridge Wells）为肯特郡西边毗邻萨塞克斯郡的一个镇子。

离村子半英里左右的地方有一片以巨型山毛榉树闻名的古老庭园，庭园之中矗立着源远流长的伯尔斯通宅邸。这座气度端严的建筑有一部分可以追溯到第一次十字军东征时期，那时候，“红王”将这片土地赏给了雨果·德·卡皮，后者就在土地的中央建起了一座城堡。卡皮的城堡在1543年付之一炬，到了詹姆斯一世时代，有人又在这座封建城堡的废墟之上建起了一座砖砌的乡间宅邸，还把那些熏得黢黑的基石用了起来。[①]

山墙林立的宅子装的是菱形窗格的小玻璃窗，很大程度上还保留着十七世纪早期刚刚落成时的模样。宅子周围有两圈城壕，曾经为宅子那个更为军事化的前身提供了屏障。外面的一圈已经自然干涸，眼下扮演的是菜园子这个卑微平凡的角色。里面的一圈则依然存在，包围着整座宅子，深度虽然已经下降到了区区几英尺，宽度却足足有四十英尺。城壕里的水来自一条穿壕而过的小河，虽然说混浊不堪，但却与普通的沟中死水绝不相同，并不会危及健康。宅子底楼的窗子离水面还不到一英尺。

进入宅子的唯一一条通道是一座吊桥，吊桥的铁链和绞盘早就已经锈蚀断裂。不过，宅邸的新主人已经凭着惯有的干劲把吊桥修复如初，到眼下，吊桥不光是拉得起来，每天晚上也实实在在地拉了起来，要到第二天早上才会放下去。这一来，宅子又恢复了封建时代的旧貌，一到晚上就会变成一座孤岛——这样的一个事实，对即将轰动全英的那件谜案造成了十分直接的影响。

道格拉斯一家入主宅邸的时候，宅邸已经荒废多年，眼看着就要土崩瓦解，变成一堆惊心怵目的断壁残垣。这家人只有两个

[①] 十字军东征是西欧封建领主及骑士向地中海东岸国家发动的一系列侵略性远征的统称，断断续续地打了将近200年，第一次十字军东征的时间是1096至1099年；“红王”（Red King）即1087至1100年间在位的英格兰国王威廉二世（William II，1056?—1100），“红王”之称可能是因为他的红脸膛；詹姆斯一世时代即英王詹姆斯一世在位的时代，亦即1603至1625年；雨果·德·卡皮（Hugo de Capus）为虚构人物。

成员，一个是约翰·道格拉斯，另一个就是他的妻子。道格拉斯是个外表和性格都不一般的人物，他年纪五十上下，下巴宽大、面容粗犷、髭须花白，灰色的眼睛极其锐利，瘦削结实的身板充满活力，分毫不少地保持着年轻时代的强健和机敏。他在所有人面前都是兴高采烈、一团和气，举止却多少有点儿唐突简慢，给人的印象是他曾经体验过另一个阶层的生活，那个阶层的社会等级要比萨塞克斯乡绅低得多。

然而，尽管那些较为文雅的邻居看他的眼神里透着一点儿惊讶和不以为然，他还是迅速赢得了村民们的热爱，因为他出手阔绰地支持村里的所有公益事业，积极参加吸烟音乐会[1]之类的社交活动，同时又拥有一副异常浑厚的男高音，随时乐意用一首十分悦耳的歌曲为参加聚会的人们助兴。他似乎非常有钱，钱据说是从加利福尼亚的金矿里赚来的，从他和他妻子的言谈来看，他确实是在美国生活过一段时间。

他慷慨大方的秉性和平易近人的做派已经赢得了人们的好感，履险如夷的胆色则让他声望倍添。他的骑术十分蹩脚，可他却一次不落地参加了所有的赛马会，并且打定主意要跟最好的骑手比个高低，不顾自己一次又一次地摔得落花流水。教区牧师家里着火的时候，他也表现出了过人的勇气，因为当地的救火队已经无计可施、放弃扑救，他却毫无惧色地再一次冲进房子去抢救财物。这样一来，迁居伯尔斯通还不到五年，宅邸主人约翰·道格拉斯就已经变成了一个响当当的人物。

道格拉斯的妻子也很受各位相识的欢迎，当然，她的相识并不多，因为按照英格兰人的习俗，很少有人会在未经正式引见的情形之下去拜访迁居本郡的外乡人。她对此不以为意，因为她天性恬退，与此同时，从方方面面的情况来看，她心里只有丈夫和

[1] 吸烟音乐会（smoking concert）为维多利亚时代常见的一种氛围轻松随意的音乐会，参与者可以在现场演奏的陪伴之下一边吸烟，一边高谈阔论。

家务。根据大家的了解，她出身于英格兰良家，是在伦敦与时为鳏夫的道格拉斯先生相识的。她长得非常漂亮，身材修长、肤色较深，年纪则比她丈夫小了二十岁左右。不过，悬殊的年龄似乎并没有对夫妻俩和和美美的家庭生活造成丝毫影响。

不过，有些时候，跟这对夫妻走得最近的人们会说，他俩之间似乎并没有完全的信任。做妻子的很少谈论丈夫的过去，这可能是因为她主动选择守口如瓶，更大的可能则是她本来就对丈夫的过去不甚了了。除此之外，道格拉斯太太有时会显得十分紧张，赶上丈夫回家特别晚的时候，她更会流露出极为强烈的不安，这些情况也让一些目光敏锐的人看在了眼里、挂在了嘴上。在这种宁静安闲的乡村地区，闲言碎语总是格外受人欢迎，宅邸女主人的这种怪癖自然逃不过人们的议论。后来的种种事件让她的怪癖有了一层十分特殊的含意，到那个时候，关于她这种怪癖的记忆便格外清晰地浮现在了人们的脑海之中。

还有个人需要提一提，他虽然只是个来来往往的过客，并不在宅邸之中长住，可他来的时候刚好赶上了下文之中的离奇事件，结果就让自己的名字赫然出现在了公众眼前。这个人就是塞西尔·詹姆斯·巴克，住在汉普斯蒂德街区[1]的黑尔斯公寓。

塞西尔·巴克那个晃晃悠悠的高大身影是伯尔斯通村那条主要街道上的常见风景，因为他经常来伯尔斯通宅邸做客，而且很受主人的欢迎。人们对他格外留意，因为他一方面是道格拉斯先生在那段不为人知的往昔岁月当中结交的朋友，一方面又是道格拉斯先生英格兰新生活当中的一个成员，同时具备这两种身份的人只有他一个。巴克本人无疑是英格兰的土产，不过，他自己说得非常清楚，他是在美国认识道格拉斯的，他俩在那边有过十分亲密的交往。他似乎非常富裕，据说还是个单身汉。

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[1] 汉普斯蒂德街区（Hampstead）为伦敦西北部的一个街区。

巴克比道格拉斯先生年轻不少，充其量不过四十五岁。他身材高大挺拔，胸膛宽阔，刮得干干净净的脸活像个职业拳手，乌黑的双眉浓密劲挺，一双黑色的眼睛咄咄逼人。瞧他那双眼睛，他兴许不需要强悍双手的帮助，单凭目光就可以在敌视自己的人群当中清出一条路来。他既不骑马也不打猎，成天都叼着烟斗在古老的村子周围晃荡，或者是跟主人一起坐着马车欣赏美丽的乡野，主人不在就跟女主人一起出游。“他是一位脾气随和、出手阔绰的绅士，”宅邸管家埃姆斯如是评论。“不过，说真的！我可不敢惹他动火！”他跟道格拉斯非常亲密，对待道格拉斯太太的态度也是同样友善，友善得不止一次引起了道格拉斯的明显不快，就连仆人们都看得出来。灾难降临的时候，这家人当中的第三个成员就是这么一个人物。

说到这座古老建筑当中的其他住客嘛，住客虽然不少，提一提其中两个也就够了，一个是庄重体面、治家有方的埃姆斯，另一个则是体态丰腴、开朗乐观的艾伦太太，她帮道格拉斯太太分担了不少家务。除开他俩之外，宅子里还有六名仆人，不过，那些仆人都跟一月六号夜间的种种事件没有什么关系。

伯尔斯通当地的小警局是在当晚十一点三刻接到报案的，值班的人是萨塞克斯警队的威尔逊警长。当时，塞西尔·巴克火急火燎地冲到警局门口，疯了似的把门铃拉得山响。他上气不接下气地说了一大通，要点则是伯尔斯通宅邸发生了可怕的惨剧，约翰·道格拉斯遭到了谋杀。说完之后，巴克急匆匆地赶回了宅邸，警长则立刻将大案发生的消息发往郡里的警局，几分钟之内就跟了过去，赶到凶案现场的时间是十二点多一点儿。

赶到宅邸的时候，警长发现吊桥已经放下，窗子里灯火通明，所有的人都惊惶失措，乱成了一锅粥。仆人们在大厅里挤作一团，一个个脸色惨白，惊骇不已的管家则在门厅里绞着自己的双手。仍然能够保持自控的似乎只有塞西尔·巴克；他已经打开了离入口

最近的那道门，示意警长跟他一起去看现场。与此同时，手脚麻利、医术高明的全科医师伍德也从村里赶到了伯尔斯通宅邸。他们三个一起走进了发生凶案的那个房间，惊恐万状的管家也跟了进去，并且随手关上了房门，免得女仆们看到房间里的可怕景象。

死者仰面躺在房间中央，四肢摊开，身上只穿了一套睡衣，外面罩着一件粉色的睡袍，脚上没穿袜子，趿拉着一双绒面拖鞋。医生跪到死者身边，把桌上的提灯拿下来照了照。一眼看过去，医生就知道自己已经回天乏术。死者伤得惨不忍睹，横在他胸膛上的是一件奇特的武器。那是一把双筒霰弹枪，扳机前方的枪管被锯掉了一英尺。显而易见，凶手开火的距离非常近，所有的弹药结结实实地倾泻到了死者的脸上，几乎把他的脑袋炸成了碎片。凶手还用铁丝把两个扳机绑在了一起，目的正是让两筒弹药同时发射，造成更大的杀伤效果。

面对这份突如其来的重大责任，乡村警员觉得惶惑不安。“咱们什么也别动，等我的上级来吧，”他惊骇地紧盯着形容可怖的死者，压低嗓门儿说了一句。

“我们什么都没动过，”塞西尔·巴克说道。“这一点我可以保证。您看到的情形跟我刚发现的时候一模一样。”

“您是什么时候发现的呢？”警长已经把自己的记事本掏了出来。

“刚好是十一点半的时候。听到枪声的时候，我坐在自个儿卧室的壁炉旁边，还没有脱衣上床。枪声并不是特别响，听着像是被什么捂住了似的。我赶紧冲下楼来，依我看，最多不过半分钟，我已经冲进了这个房间。”

“这道门当时开着吗？”

“是的，门是开着的。可怜的道格拉斯就躺在眼下的这个位置，他从自个儿卧室里拿来的蜡烛还在桌子上燃烧。过了几分钟，我才把这盏提灯点上。”

“您没有看见什么人吗？”

“没有。我听见道格拉斯太太跟着我下了楼，便赶紧冲出去拦她，免得她看见这种可怕的景象。女管家艾伦太太跑了过来，搀着她离开了。埃姆斯已经到场，我们俩就一起跑回了这个房间。”

“可我确实听说，吊桥整夜都是收在上面的。”

“没错，的确收在上面，是我后来把它放下去的。”

“这么说的话，凶手怎么跑得掉呢？根本就不可能嘛！道格拉斯先生肯定是自杀的。”

“刚开始的时候，我们也是这么想的。可是您瞧！”巴克拉开窗帘，窗帘后面那扇狭长的菱形格子窗已经开到了最大的限度。“再瞧瞧这个！”他用提灯照了照，木头窗台上有一块形如靴印的血迹。“有人从窗子往外逃，所以才踩到了这上面。”

“您是说有人趟过城壕跑掉了吗？”

“没错！”

“可是，既然您案发之后不到半分钟就跑进了这个房间，肯定能看到他在水里啊。”

“肯定能看到。老天在上，我要是一进来就往窗子跟前冲就好了！可是，您也看见了，窗子上还拉着窗帘呢，所以我压根儿就没往这上面想。接着我就听见了道格拉斯太太的脚步声，一心只想着不能让她走进这个房间。这里面的景象确实是太惨了。”

“是够惨的！”医生接口说道，眼睛看着那颗粉碎的脑袋和脑袋周围的可怖印迹。“自从伯尔斯通火车相撞事件以来，我还没见过这么可怕的伤情呢。”

“慢着，听我说，”警长说道，他那个乡村风格的迟钝头脑仍然在围着那扇敞开的窗子打转。“您当然可以说有人趟过城壕跑掉了，可我倒想问问您，既然吊桥收在上面，当初他究竟是怎么进来的呢？”

“呃，这还真是让您给问着了，”巴克说道。

“吊桥是什么时间收上去的呢？”

“将近六点的时候，”管家埃姆斯说道。

“我听说，”警长说道，“你们通常都是在太阳落山的时候收吊桥。眼下这个时节，太阳应该是在四点半左右落山，可不会等到将近六点。”

“道格拉斯太太请了一些客人来喝茶，”埃姆斯说道。“客人不走我是不能收吊桥的。他们走了以后，我亲手把吊桥拉了起来。”

“既然如此，咱们可以这么说，”警长说道，“如果有人从外面进来的话，我是说**如果**，那么，这个人必须得在六点之前通过吊桥，然后还得在宅子里躲到十一点钟以后，直到道格拉斯先生走进这个房间为止。”

“一点儿不错！每天晚上睡觉之前，道格拉斯先生做的最后一件事就是把宅子巡查一遍，看看各处的灯火是否正常。他巡查到这个房间的时候，等在房间里的凶手冲他开了枪，然后就从窗子逃了出去，把枪留在了这儿。我只能这么解释，因为其他的解释都跟事实对不上。”

警长从死者身边的地板上捡起了一张卡片，卡片上有两行十分潦草的墨水字迹，上面一行是字母缩写“V. V.”，下面一行是数字“341”。

“这是什么东西？”他举着卡片问道。

巴克好奇地看了看。“之前我还真没注意到这张卡片，”他说道。“肯定是凶手留下的吧。”

“V. V.——341。我完全想不出这是什么意思。”警长的一双大手把卡片翻来翻去。“‘V. V.’是什么意思呢？某个人的姓名缩写，也许吧。您在那边找到什么了呢，伍德医生？”

医生在壁炉跟前的毯子上找到了一把大号的锤子，分量十足、工艺精湛。看到锤子之后，塞西尔·巴克指了指壁炉台上的一盒铜头钉。

“就在昨天，道格拉斯先生把墙上的画挪了挪位置，”他说道。“我亲眼看见他站在那把椅子上，把椅子上方的那幅大画往墙上钉。锤子就是这么来的。”

“咱们最好把它放回毯子上的原位吧，”警长一边说，一边迷惑不解地抓挠自己的脑袋。“要把这件事情查个水落石出，恐怕得用上警队里最好使的脑瓜子。伦敦的专家不来，这案子是结不了的。”说到这里，他举起提灯，慢慢地在房里走了一圈儿。“嘿！”他突然把窗帘扒拉到一边，兴奋不已地嚷了一声。“宅子里的窗帘是什么时候拉上的呢？”

“掌灯的时候，”管家说道。“应该是四点刚过不久。”

“之前确实有人躲在这儿，错不了。”警长把提灯移向地面，墙角里有几个清清楚楚的泥巴靴印。“我不得不承认，巴克先生，这跟您的推测完全吻合。看情形，这个人闯进宅子的时间是在四点钟拉上窗帘之后，同时又在六点钟收起吊桥之前。他躲进了这个房间，因为这是他看到的第一个房间。房间里没有藏人的地方，所以他钻到了这道帘子后面。这些事实似乎都很清楚。他主要的目的兴许是偷东西，没想到让道格拉斯先生给撞见了，于是他杀死了道格拉斯先生，然后就逃之夭夭。”

“我也是这么看的，”巴克说道。“不过，要我说，咱们这不是白白浪费宝贵的时间吗？咱们干吗不趁着这个家伙还没跑远，把周围的乡区搜查一遍呢？”

警长思索了片刻。

“早上六点之前是没有火车的，他不可能坐火车逃走。他要是拖着滴答淌水的双腿走大路的话，肯定会引起别人的注意。不管怎么说，没有人来接手的话，我是绝对不能离开这儿的。还有啊，照我看，在我们把眼下的情形全都弄清楚之前，你们也通通不能离开。”

医生已经把提灯拿了过去，这会儿正在近距离地验看尸体。“这

个记号是怎么回事？”他问道。“它会跟这桩罪行有什么关联吗？”

死者的右臂从睡袍里支棱出来，手肘以下的部位露在了外面。靠近前臂中央的位置有一个古怪的褐色标记，图案是一个圆圈套着一个三角形。标记像浮雕一般从牛脂色的胳膊上凸了起来，看上去格外扎眼。

“这可不是刺上去的，”医生一边说，一边眯缝起眼睛，透过眼镜仔细察看，“我从来没见过这样的记号。这个标记肯定是以前的某个时候烙上去的，手法跟烙牲口一样。这是什么意思呢？”

“是什么意思我倒说不好，”塞西尔·巴克说道，“不过，过去这十年当中，道格拉斯身上的这个标记我看见过好多次。”

“我也是，”管家说道。“这个标记我看见过很多次，都是在东家卷起袖管的时候。以前我经常都在琢磨，这到底是什么意思。”

“这么说的话，它跟这桩罪行怎么也扯不上关系，”警长说道。“话说回来，这终归是一件非常古怪的事情。这件案子当中的事情全都非常古怪。我说，这又是怎么啦？”

管家刚刚发出了一声惊叫，这会儿正指着死者那只伸得长长的手。

“他们拿走了他的结婚戒指！”他倒吸了一口凉气。

“什么！”

“真的，错不了。东家一直都把素面的金结婚戒指戴在左手的小指上，再把镶有天然块金的那枚戒指戴在结婚戒指的上面，盘蛇形状的戒指则戴在中指上。眼下呢，块金戒指和盘蛇戒指都还在，结婚戒指却不见了。”

“他说得没错，”巴克说道。

“你难道是说，”警长说道，“结婚戒指在另一枚戒指下面吗？”

“一直都在！”

“也就是说，这个凶手，或者是别的什么人，先把你说的块金戒指取了下来，再把结婚戒指取了下来，然后又把块金戒指套了

回去。”

“就是这样！”

可敬的乡村警员开始大摇其头。“要我看，我们必须得让伦敦方面来接手这件案子，越快越好，”他说道。“怀特·梅森是个聪明人，本地还没出过怀特·梅森办不了的案子呢。要不了多久，他就会到这儿来帮我们。可我还是觉得，没有伦敦方面的帮助，这件事情完不了。不管怎么样，说出来也不怕你们笑话，对于我这样的人来说，这件活计真的是太复杂啦。”

第四章 * 暗夜难明

接到伯尔斯通村威尔逊警长的紧急请求之后，萨塞克斯的首席探员坐上一辆轻便马车，凌晨三点就从总部赶到了现场，车前的马儿已经跑得上气不接下气。他通过凌晨五点四十的火车向苏格兰场发出了求援报告，中午十二点的时候就在伯尔斯通车站跟我们碰上了头。怀特·梅森貌不惊人、和颜悦色，身穿一套松松垮垮的花呢西装，红润的脸庞刮得干干净净，身材略显臃肿，强壮的罗圈腿上打着绑腿，看着又像是一个小本经营的农场主，又像是一个退休的猎场看守，像什么都说得过去，唯独不像一个外郡探员之中的模范人物。

“真真正正是一件了不得的大案子，麦克唐纳先生！”他翻来覆去地说道。“那些记者知道之后，马上就会像闻见味儿的苍蝇一样扑到这里来。要我说，咱们得赶紧把工作做完，别等他们伸着鼻子到处乱拱，把所有的线索弄得乱七八糟。按我的印象，以前还从来没有发生过这样的案子呢。我没搞错的话，福尔摩斯先生，这里面有些东西特别对您的胃口。还有您，华生医生，没有医学界的意见，咱们肯定是结不了案的。你们的房间在威斯特维尔纹章旅馆，别的选择也没有，不过我听说，那家旅馆还算是干净舒适。这个人可以帮你们拿行李。这边请，先生们。”

这位萨塞克斯探员真是个忙忙叨叨、和蔼可亲的人物。十分钟之后，我们就找到了各自的住处。又过了十分钟，我们已经坐进了旅馆的客厅，开始听他飞

快地给我们概述前一章当中讲过的那些事情。麦克唐纳时不时地做着笔记，福尔摩斯则全神贯注地坐在那里，脸上带着一种虔敬的惊叹，神情十足是一位正在鉴赏奇花异草的植物学家。

“不一般！”探员的故事讲完之后，福尔摩斯开口说道，“太不一般了！我简直想不起来，还有哪件案子比这件更奇特。”

“我就知道您会这么说，福尔摩斯先生，”怀特·梅森欣喜万分地说道。“这一回，我们萨塞克斯也算是赶上时代啦。好了，我是在今早三、四点之间从威尔逊警长手里接过这件案子的，在那之前的事情，我已经全部讲完了。嗐！我把我那匹老母马赶得跟什么似的！后来我才发现，我压根儿就用不着赶那么急，因为我一时之间什么也干不了。威尔逊警长已经掌握了所有的事实，我只是核对了一下，然后又掂量了一下，兴许还往里面加了点儿我自个儿的东西。”

“加的是什么东西呢？”福尔摩斯迫不及待地问道。

“是这样，我首先对那把锤子进行了一番检查，伍德医生也在那儿，可以帮我的忙。结果呢，我们并没有在锤子上找到暴力的痕迹。我本来是想，如果道格拉斯先生曾经用锤子自卫的话，锤子兴许就会在凶手的身上留下一点儿印记，然后才落到毯子上。不过，锤子上压根儿就没有血迹。”

“当然喽，你这个发现证明不了任何东西，”麦克唐纳督察说道。“用锤子杀了人，锤子上又没留下任何痕迹，这样的凶案多得是。”

“的确如此。这证明不了死者没有用过那把锤子。不过，万一能找到血迹的话，咱们的事情就好办了。事实呢，我们没有找到血迹。这之后，我检查了一下那把枪。那把枪用的是大号铅弹，还有呢，正像威尔逊警长所说的那样，两个扳机是用铁丝绑在一起的，一旦扣动后面那个扳机，两筒弹药就会同时发射出去。不管把枪弄成这样的人究竟是谁，他总归是打定了主意，决不给目标留下任何机会。那把枪是锯过的，长度还不到两英尺，携带非

常方便，藏在大衣下面就可以。枪上面没有完整的厂商名字，两根枪管之间的凹槽里还剩着‘P-E-N’三个字母，名字的其余部分都让锯子给锯掉了。”

“‘P’这个字母比较大，而且是花体的，‘E’和‘N’则比较小，对吗？”福尔摩斯问道。

“没错。”

“宾夕法尼亚小型火器制造公司[1]，美国的枪械名厂，”福尔摩斯说道。

怀特·梅森直勾勾地盯着我朋友，神情就像是一名小村诊所的坐店郎中正在膜拜一位哈莱街[2]的医学专家，后者可以一语道破他无法辨别的疑难杂症。

“这一点非常有用，福尔摩斯先生。毫无疑问，您说得一点儿不错。太妙了！太妙了！难道说，您把世界上所有枪械厂商的名字都装进了自己的脑子吗？”

福尔摩斯把手一摆，打住了这个话头。

“毫无疑问，那是一把来自美国的霰弹枪，”怀特·梅森接着说道。“我似乎在哪里读到过，美国有些地方的人就爱拿锯短的霰弹枪来当武器。抛开枪管上的名字不说，当时我确实想过，那把枪有可能来自美国。这样的话，咱们就可以说，有证据表明，闯进宅子杀死主人的是一个美国人。”

麦克唐纳摇了摇头。“伙计，你走得有点儿太快了吧，”他说道。“到现在为止，我连可以证明真的有生人闯进宅子的证据都还没有听见呢。”

“敞开的窗子、窗台上的血迹、古怪的卡片、墙角的靴印，还有那把枪！”

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[1] 宾夕法尼亚州的英文是“Pennsylvania”。

[2] 哈莱街（Harley Street）是当时伦敦的医家麇集之所。

“你说的那些东西全都可以伪造出来。道格拉斯先生是个美国人，要不就是在美国生活过很长时间，巴克先生也是一样。就算是为了解释现场的美国做派，也不是非得从外面进口一个美国人不可吧。”

“还有埃姆斯，那个管家——”

“他能说明什么问题呢？他靠得住吗？”

“他在查尔斯·钱多斯爵士身边待了十年，为人跟岩石一样可靠。从道格拉斯五年前租下宅邸的时候开始，他一直都跟着道格拉斯。他从来没在宅邸里看见过那样的枪。”

“枪的主人本来就想把它隐藏起来，为了这个目的才锯短了枪管。随便哪个箱子都装得下那把枪，他怎么能断定宅邸里没有那样的枪呢？”

“呃，不管怎么说，他反正是从来没看见过。”

麦克唐纳又一次摇起了他那颗顽固不化的苏格兰脑袋。“直到现在，我仍然不能确信，真的有生人进过宅子，”他说道。“请你靠（考）虑一下，”（全身心投入争论之后，他的阿伯丁口音变得越发浓重）“请你靠（考）虑一下，如果那把枪真的是从外面带进去的，如果那些怪事真的都是某个外来人干的，那该是怎样的一种局面。噢，伙计，那种局面根本没法想象！完全违反常识！您来评评理吧，福尔摩斯先生，您来根据咱们刚才听见的情况作个公断。”

“好吧，先说说你的理由，麦克先生，”福尔摩斯说道，摆出了他最为天公地道的架势。

“就算是真有那么个人，这个人也绝不是什么窃匪。戒指和卡片都可以证明，这是一起出于私怨的蓄意谋杀。很好。有那么个人偷偷地溜进了一座宅子，意图是实施谋杀。只要不是傻子，这个人就会知道宅子周围都是水，自己逃跑的时候会遇上捆（困）难。他会选择什么武器呢？换了你们也会说，他会选择这世上声

音最小的武器。那样的话，他才能指望着完事之后赶紧爬出窗子，趟过城壕，然后再从容不迫地溜之大吉。这也算可以理解。可是，他竟然千挑万选地带上了一把声音大得不能再大的武器，明知道它会让宅子里所有的人以最快的速度赶到现场，明知道自己必定会在趟过城壕之前被人看见，这还算可以理解吗？您觉得这样的情形可能吗，福尔摩斯先生？”

“呃，你这些理由非常充分，”我朋友若有所思地回答道。“这样的情形显然是非常不合逻辑。怀特·梅森先生，麻烦您告诉我，当时您有没有立刻检查城壕的对岸，有没有看到什么人趟水上岸的痕迹呢？”

“岸上没有任何痕迹，福尔摩斯先生。话又说回来，岸是石头砌的，本来也留不下什么痕迹。”

“没有脚印，也没有其他印迹吗？”

“没有。”

“哈！怀特·梅森先生，咱们这就上宅邸去看一看，您没有什么意见吧？说不定，咱们还能有一点儿启迪思维的小小发现哩。”

“我正打算这么提议呢，福尔摩斯先生，刚才我只是想，在咱们过去之前，最好先让您了解所有的事实。要我说，如果您有了什么发现的话——”怀特·梅森犹犹豫豫地看着这位业余同行。

“我跟福尔摩斯先生有过合作，”麦克唐纳督察说道。“他这个人是很守规矩的。”

“至少是很守我自个儿订的规矩，”福尔摩斯笑着说道。“我参加查案是为了伸张正义，同时也是为了协助警方的工作。要说我什么时候撇开过警方的话，那也是因为警方先撇开我。我从来也不曾有过拿警方当垫脚石的打算。与此同时，怀特·梅森先生，我要求按我自个儿的方式查案，在我自个儿认为合适的时间交出我的成果——我指的是完整的成果，阶段性的汇报我可不想做。”

“毫无疑问，跟您一起办案是我们的荣幸，在您面前，我们一

定会知无不言，”怀特·梅森恳切地说道。“请吧，华生医生，到时候，我们都想在您的书里占据一席之地哩。”

我们沿着风貌古雅的村中街道往前走，路两边都是打过顶的榆树。街道尽头是两根风雨剥蚀、苔痕点点的古老石柱，高踞柱头的曾经是象征伯尔斯通领主卡皮家族的舞爪雄狮，眼下则已经不成形状。石柱前方就是蜿蜒曲折的马车道，马车道周围的橡树和草坪幽姿独具，都是只有在英格兰乡野之中才能见到的东西。我们沿着马车道走了一小段，转过一道急弯，眼前就出现了一座詹姆斯一世时代的房屋。房屋又长又矮，暗红色的砖墙沾满煤烟，房屋两侧是一座由紫杉树篱构成的老式花园。走到近处，木制的吊桥和宽广美丽的城壕同时映入眼帘，城壕的水面平静无波，在冷冷的冬日阳光之下泛着水银一般的光泽。

古老的领主宅邸经历了三个世纪的风风雨雨，见证了无数次的呱呱坠地、无数次的重归故里、无数次的乡村舞筵、无数次的猎狐竞技。如今它垂垂老矣，这桩黑暗的勾当竟然会在它古朴庄严的墙壁上投下阴影，简直是岂有此理！话又说回来，它那些奇异的尖顶和突兀的古雅山墙确实可以为阴沉可怖的诡计提供合适的荫蔽。看着那些深深嵌入墙壁的窗子，看着水流轻轻拍打宅子正面的黯淡长墙，我禁不住觉得，要上演这样的一出惨剧，再没有比眼前更合适的布景了。

“就是那扇窗子，”怀特·梅森说道，“吊桥右边的第一扇。窗子是开着的，跟昨天夜里发现的时候一模一样。”

“窗子看着挺窄的，钻过去可能不太容易吧。”

“呃，再怎么说，凶手肯定不是个胖子。我们也明白这一点，福尔摩斯先生，用不着您的演绎。不过，您跟我都能挤过去，不会有什么问题。”

福尔摩斯走到城壕边缘，往对面看了看，然后就开始检查石砌的堤岸和岸边的草坪。

“我已经仔仔细细地检查过了，福尔摩斯先生，”怀特·梅森说道。“这里什么也没有，看不到有人爬上岸来的痕迹——再说了，他干吗要留下什么痕迹呢？”

“说得对，他干吗要留下痕迹呢？沟里的水一直都这么浑吗？”

“通常都是这个颜色。流过这里的小河把上游的泥沙带了下来。”

“水有多深？”

“岸边大概是两英尺深，中间是三英尺。”

“这么说的话，咱们就彻底排除了那个人淹死在趟水途中的可能性。”

“是的，这条沟连小孩子都淹不死。”

我们走过吊桥，一个苍老干瘪、骨节嶙峋的人招呼我们进了门，正是管家埃姆斯。可怜的老人脸色苍白、抖抖索索，显然是惊魂未定。本村的警长仍然守在灾祸降临的那个房间里，医生则已经离开了。警长身材高大，看起来一本正经、郁郁不乐。

“有什么新情况吗，威尔逊警长？”怀特·梅森问道。

“没有，先生。”

“那好，你回家去吧。你已经够辛苦的了。有事的话，我们会派人去找你的。最好让管家在门外等着。你叫他去跟塞西尔·巴克先生、道格拉斯太太和女管家说一声，我们很快就会找他们谈话。好了，先生们，首先请你们听听我的看法，然后呢，你们也可以拿出你们自个儿的高见。”

这位乡下专家给我留下了深刻的印象。他能够牢牢地把握事实，并且拥有冷静清晰、富于常识的头脑，应该可以在他的行当里有所成就。福尔摩斯经常都对官方探员的陈述感到不胜其烦，这一次却听得十分专注，完全没有厌倦的表示。

“自杀还是谋杀，这是摆在咱们眼前的第一个问题，对吧，各位？如果是自杀的话，咱们就必须相信，这个人首先取下自己的

结婚戒指，把它藏了起来，然后就穿着睡袍下了楼，走进这个房间，在墙角踩上几个泥脚印，以便让别人认为有人在那里打他的埋伏，再往后，他打开窗子，把血涂在——”

“毫无疑问，咱们可以排除这种可能，”麦克唐纳说道。

“我也这么觉得。自杀既然不可能，眼前的事情就只能是一起谋杀。需要确定的是，凶手究竟是来自宅邸内部，还是来自宅邸之外。”

“没错，说说您的高见吧。”

“两种说法都有很多讲不通的地方，其中却必有一种符合事实。咱们不妨先假定凶手是宅邸里的某个人或者某些人，他们把受害人弄进了这个房间，选的是一个所有人都已安歇同时又尚未入眠的时间。然后呢，他们用世上最古怪、声音也最大的武器实施了罪行，为的是让所有人都知道发生了什么事情。与此同时，他们用的武器从来都没有在宅邸里出现过。这样的开头好像不太可能，对吧？”

“是的，确实不太可能。”

“很好，然后呢，所有人一致同意，枪声响起之后，最多不过一分钟，宅子里的全体人员就赶到了现场，不光是塞西尔·巴克先生，虽然他自称是第一个赶到的人，还有埃姆斯和其他所有的人。这么短的时间里面，凶手得在墙角留下脚印、打开窗子、在窗台上留下血迹、取走死者的结婚戒指，还得完成其他种种事情，您觉得这可能吗？压根儿就不可能！”

“您分析得非常透彻，”福尔摩斯说道。“我倾向于赞同您的看法。”

“这样的话，咱们不得不重新捡起先前的假设，也就是说，凶手是个外来人。这种假设也存在很大的破绽，可它好歹不是绝无可能。凶手闯进宅子的时间是四点半到六点之间，也就是太阳落山之后、吊桥收起之前。宅子里当时有客人，门是开着的，不会

对他构成障碍。他可能是一名寻常的窃匪，也可能跟道格拉斯先生有什么私怨。鉴于道格拉斯先生大半辈子都生活在美国，这把霰弹枪又似乎是从美国来的，看样子，还是私怨的说法更有可能。闯进宅子之后，他首先看到了这个房间，于是就溜了进来，躲到窗帘后面。他一直等到夜里十一点之后，等到道格拉斯先生走了进来。他俩如果聊了聊的话，肯定也没聊多久，因为道格拉斯太太说，她听到枪声的时候，她丈夫只跟她分开了几分钟。”

“道格拉斯的蜡烛也可以说明这一点，”福尔摩斯说道。

“没错。蜡烛是新的，只烧了不到半英寸。遭到袭击之前，他一定是先把蜡烛放在了桌子上，要不然，蜡烛当然会跟着他跌到地上。这样看来，他并不是一进房间就遭到了袭击。巴克先生赶到的时候，蜡烛还在燃烧，提灯则处于熄灭的状态。”

“这些都可以说是非常清楚。”

“好了，咱们不妨根据这些事实来复原当时的情形。道格拉斯先生走进房间，放下蜡烛，有个人从窗帘后面跑了出来，手里拿着这把霰弹枪。他要求道格拉斯交出结婚戒指——天知道他为什么要提这种要求，可咱们别无选择，只能这么解释。道格拉斯先生交出了戒指。接下来，他开枪把道格拉斯打成了这副惨不忍睹的模样，或者是因为他本来就有这种歹毒的打算，或者是因为他俩打了起来——道格拉斯兴许是抄起了咱们在毯子上找到的这把锤子。这之后，他把枪扔在这里，这张古怪的卡片多半也是他留下的，不管卡片上的‘V. V. 341’到底是什么意思。就在塞西尔·巴克即将发现罪行的那个时刻，他钻出窗子，趟过城壕，就这么跑掉了。您觉得怎么样，福尔摩斯先生？”

“非常有趣，只可惜稍微有点儿不让人信服。”

“伙计，要不是其他的说法都更加讲不通的话，你这些话就纯属胡说八道！”麦克唐纳叫道。“确实是有人杀死了这个人，可是，不管凶手是谁，我都可以清清楚楚地向你证明，他肯定不会采用

你说的这种方法。他干吗要这样自绝后路呢？不弄出声响才是他成功逃脱的唯一希望，他干吗要用霰弹枪呢？说说吧，福尔摩斯先生，您既然说怀特·梅森先生的假设不让人信服，那就给我们指条明路吧。”

漫长的讨论过程之中，福尔摩斯一直全神贯注地坐在那里，耳朵一字不落地倾听着所有人的言论，锐利的眼睛不停地左右扫视，皱眉蹙额，显然是正在沉思。

“要拿出一个假设，我还得多了解一些情况才行，麦克先生，”他一边说，一边跪到了尸体旁边。“天哪！这样的伤痕可真是怵目惊心。咱们能把管家叫进来问问吗？……埃姆斯，我听说你经常看见道格拉斯先生前臂上这个十分奇特的烙印、这个套着圆圈的三角形，对吗？”

“经常看见，先生。”

“关于它的意义，你从来没有听到过任何说法吗？”

“没有，先生。”

“烙这个标记的时候，他肯定经受了巨大的痛苦。毫无疑问，这是烧灼造成的痕迹。好了，埃姆斯，我看到道格拉斯先生的下巴尖端有一块小小的橡皮膏。他还活着的时候，你看见过这块东西吗？”

“是的，先生，昨天早上刮胡子的时候，他把脸给刮破了。”

“你以前看见过他刮破脸吗？”

“很久没看见过了，先生。”

“有意思！”福尔摩斯说道。“这当然可能只是一种巧合，同时也可能说明他精神紧张，进而说明他看到了什么值得担忧的危险信号。埃姆斯，根据你的观察，昨天他有没有什么反常的举止呢？”

“按我看，他显得有点儿激动不安，先生。”

“哈！这么说，这次的袭击并不完全出乎他的意料。看样子，

咱们确实有了一点儿小小的进展，对吧？你是不是更愿意亲自盘问证人呢，麦克先生？”

“不用，福尔摩斯先生，这件工作已经落到了比我更高明的人手里。”

“好吧，那么，咱们来说说这张卡片——V. V. 341。这是张非常粗糙的卡纸，你们这座宅子里有这样的东西吗？”

“我看是没有。”

福尔摩斯走到写字台跟前，从每个墨水瓶里蘸了点儿墨水，涂在吸墨纸上试了试。“卡片不是在这个房间里写的，”他说道，“这里只有黑墨水，卡片上的字迹却有点儿发紫。卡片上的字是用粗笔写的，这里的笔都很细。没错，我认为卡片是在别的地方写的。你知道这些字是什么意思吗，埃姆斯？”

“不知道，先生，完全没有概念。”

“你怎么看呢，麦克先生？”

“我感觉这张卡片来自某个秘密的帮会，跟他前臂上的标记一样。”

“我也是这么想的，”怀特·梅森说道。

“呃，咱们不妨暂时这么假定，看看这个假定能帮咱们解决多少问题。某个秘密帮会的爪牙闯进了这座宅子，等着道格拉斯先生出现，然后就用上这把武器，几乎是整个儿轰掉了道格拉斯的脑袋。接下来，他趟过城壕逃之夭夭，逃跑之前还把一张卡片放在了死者身边，这一来，等报纸上说到这张卡片的时候，其他的帮会成员就可以知道复仇的工作已经完成。这些都可以说得通。可是，世上的武器这么多，他干吗要用这么一把枪呢？”

“是啊。”

“失踪的戒指又怎么解释呢？”

“确实不好解释。”

“还有啊，为什么没抓到人呢？眼下已经是下午两点多了啊。

“天啊！这样的伤痕可真是怵目惊心。”

我敢肯定，从天亮到现在，方圆四十英里之内的所有警察都在搜寻一名全身上下湿淋淋的外乡人，对吧？”

“的确如此，福尔摩斯先生。”

“那么，除非他有一个近便的巢穴，或者是准备了一身替换的衣服，不然的话，他们肯定能抓到他。事实呢，到现在还是没有抓到！”说话间，福尔摩斯已经走到了窗边，这会儿正在用放大镜检查窗台上的血迹。“这显然是一个鞋印。这个人的脚宽得出奇，又宽又扁，用‘大鸭蹼’这个字眼儿来形容都可以。这可就怪了，原因嘛，要是你真的能在这个沾满泥污的墙角里认出什么脚印的话，那你肯定会说，这个人的脚应该没有那么难看。话说回来，墙角里的脚印确实是非常模糊。边桌底下的这个玩意儿是什么呢？”

“道格拉斯先生的哑铃，”埃姆斯说道。

“哑铃——只有一只啊。另一只在哪儿呢？”

“我不知道，福尔摩斯先生，说不定本来就只有一只呢。我已经好几个月没留意到这东西了。”

“单独的一只哑铃——”福尔摩斯的口气十分郑重。可是，没等他把话说完，我们就听见了一阵急促的敲门声。

一个身材高大、肤色黝黑、模样精干、脸蛋光溜的男人站在门口看着我们，一望而知，他就是我已有耳闻的那个塞西尔·巴克。他那双咄咄逼人的眼睛飞快地扫视着我们的脸，眼神之中带着疑问。

“抱歉打断你们的讨论，”他说道，“不过，你们确实应该听听最新的消息。”

“抓到人了吗？”

“哪里去找那么好的运气。不过，他们已经找到了他的自行车。那家伙把自个儿的自行车给扔下了。一起去看看吧，就在离宅子大门不到一百码的地方。”

我们看到马车道上站着三四个人，有的是宅邸的马夫，有的是看热闹的闲人。那些人正在围观一辆自行车，车子本来被人藏在一丛常绿灌木里面，眼下已经被拖了出来。那是一辆成色很旧的拉奇－惠特沃思牌[1]自行车，车身溅满泥泞，似乎是刚刚跑完了一段很长的路程。自行车后座上挂着一个袋子，里面有一个扳手和一个油罐，车主的身份则没有任何线索。

“要是这些东西都编过号登过记的话，”督察说道，“警方可就省事儿多啦。话又说回来，能够有这样的发现，咱们也应该谢天谢地了。再怎么说，咱们就算查不出他去了哪里，查出他来自何处还是有可能的。可是，说一千道一万，那个家伙干吗要扔下这辆车呢？没了这辆车，他到底是怎么跑掉的呢？这件案子简直是一团漆黑，咱们好像连一点儿光线都看不见啊，福尔摩斯先生。”

“看不见吗？”我朋友若有所思地回答道。“不见得吧！”

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[1] 拉奇－惠特沃思（Rudge-Whitworth）为当时的一个英国自行车品牌，今已不存。然而，上文说故事发生在“十九世纪八十年代末期”，而拉奇－惠特沃思自行车公司是在 1894 年才由考文垂的拉奇自行车公司和伯明翰的惠特沃思自行车公司合并而成的，时间上略有出入。

第五章 * 剧中人

“书房里还有什么要看的吗？”我们再次走进宅子的时候，怀特·梅森问道。

“暂时没有了吧，”督察说道，福尔摩斯也点了点头。

“那么，你们不妨去听听几名宅邸住客的证词。我们就在餐厅里问，埃姆斯。麻烦你第一个来，给我们讲讲你知道的事情吧。”

管家的叙述简单明了，说话的口吻也诚恳可信。他是五年前来这里干活的，正是道格拉斯刚来伯尔斯通的时候。据他所知，道格拉斯先生在美国发了财，是一位富有的绅士。道格拉斯是个和善体贴的东家，兴许跟埃姆斯习以为常的那种东家不太一样，不过，谁也不可能指望样样都好。他从来没见过道格拉斯先生为什么事情担心，恰恰相反，他这辈子从来没见过像东家那么无所畏惧的人。东家吩咐仆人每晚收起吊桥，仅仅是为了维持古老的风俗，因为这座老宅向来就是这样的。

道格拉斯先生很少去伦敦，也很少离开村子。不过呢，就在出事之前的那一天，东家到坦布里奇韦尔斯去买了点儿东西。那一天，他注意到东家有点儿激动不安，因为东家表现得焦灼暴躁，跟平常很不一样。事发当晚，铃声大作的时候，他正在宅子背面的餐具室里拾掇银器，还没有上床睡觉。他没有听见枪声，实际上也不太可能听见，因为餐具室和厨房在宅子最靠里的位置，跟书房之间隔着好几道关着的门，还隔

着一条长长的过道。他跑出去的时候，女管家已经从她自己的房间里跑了出来，因为她也听见了狂乱的铃声。这么着，他俩就一起跑到了宅子的前屋。

他俩跑到楼梯脚下的时候，他看到道格拉斯太太正在下楼。不，她走得并不匆忙，按他的感觉，她的神态说不上特别惊慌。她刚刚走下楼梯，巴克先生就从书房里冲了出来。巴克先生拦住了道格拉斯太太，恳求她转头回去。

“看在上帝分上，回你自个儿的房间去吧！”巴克先生叫道。“可怜的杰克[1]已经死了！你去了也没有什么用。看在上帝分上，回去吧！”

巴克先生劝了一阵，道格拉斯太太就回楼上去了。太太没有尖叫，自始至终都没有大喊大闹。女管家艾伦太太搀着太太上了楼，陪着太太在卧室里待着。这之后，他和巴克先生一起走进了书房，看到的情形跟警方后来看到的一模一样。那个时候，蜡烛已经熄灭，提灯倒是亮着的。他和巴克先生往窗子外面看了看，只可惜当晚非常黑，什么都看不见，什么也听不见。接下来，他俩从书房跑进了大厅，等他转动绞盘放下吊桥之后，巴克先生就急匆匆地报警去了。

大致说来，以上这些就是管家的证词。

女管家艾伦太太的叙述也没有什么新鲜内容，作用不过是确证了她那位仆役同事的说辞。女管家的房间远比埃姆斯干活的餐具室靠前，铃声大作的时候，她正准备上床就寝。她的耳朵有点儿背，没听见枪声的原因兴许就在这里，当然喽，再怎么说，她的房间也跟书房隔着一大段的距离。她记得自己听见过一个声音，按她的感觉是有人重重地摔上了房门。不过，那个声音要比铃声早得多，至少要早半个小时。埃姆斯先生往宅子前屋跑的时候，

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[1] 道格拉斯的名字是“John”（约翰），昵称是“Jack”（杰克）。

她就跟着埃姆斯一起去了。她看见巴克先生从书房里冲了出来，脸色惨白、十分激动。巴克先生截住了正在下楼的道格拉斯太太，恳求太太回去。太太回答了一句，可她听不见太太说的是什么。

“扶她上去！陪着她！”巴克先生这么吩咐她。

于是乎，她扶着太太回了房间，竭尽全力地安慰太太。太太非常激动，浑身颤抖，但却再也没提过下楼的事情。太太穿着睡袍，就那么坐在卧室的壁炉跟前，双手抱着脑袋。她大半夜都跟太太待在一起。至于其他的仆人嘛，他们都已经睡觉了，直到警察快来的时候才知道出了事情。他们都睡在宅子最靠里的地方，什么动静也听不见。

讲完这些之后，女管家再也不能为我们的讯问记录增添任何内容，形诸言辞的不过是她哀痛和震惊的情绪而已。

排在艾伦太太之后的证人是塞西尔·巴克。关于昨天夜里的情形，他已经向警方作过陈述，眼下也没有什么可以补充的东西。他个人深信不疑，凶手是从窗子逃走的。按他的看法，窗台上的血迹就是盖棺论定的证据。再说，既然吊桥收在上面，凶手也没有其他的逃跑途径。他想不出凶手去了哪里，也想不出凶手为什么撇下自行车，如果那辆自行车确实属于凶手的话。凶手不可能淹死在了城壕里，因为城壕里没有水深超过三英尺的地方。

关于这起谋杀案，他脑子里有一种非常笃定的假设。道格拉斯口风很严，绝口不提自己过往生涯当中的某些片断。道格拉斯年纪轻轻就去了美国，而且混得非常不错。他是在加利福尼亚跟道格拉斯相识的，他俩合伙在一个名为贝尼托峡谷的地方开矿，事业风生水起。不过，道格拉斯突然卖掉了自己的产业，跟着就来了英格兰。那个时候，道格拉斯是一个鳏夫。再往后，他自己也把产业变成现钱，迁居到了伦敦。这一来，他俩又续上了往日的交情。

按他的印象，道格拉斯一直都面临着某种威胁，而他也总是

觉得，道格拉斯突然离开加利福尼亚，又把房子租在英格兰一个如此偏僻的地方，这些事情都跟那种威胁脱不了干系。照他的看法，某个秘密帮会一直在追踪道格拉斯，那个组织不依不饶，非得把道格拉斯杀死才会甘心。他这种看法的依据是道格拉斯说过的一些话，只不过，道格拉斯从来没跟他说过那是个什么样的帮会，自己又是怎么得罪了它。他只能估摸着说，那张卡片上的文字跟那个秘密帮会存在一定的关联。

“您跟道格拉斯一起在加利福尼亚待了多久呢？”麦克唐纳督察问道。

“总共五年。”

“您刚才说他是个单身汉，对吧？”

“是个鳏夫。”

“他的前妻是哪里人，您有没有听说过呢？”

“没有，我记得他说过她有德国血统，也见过她的相片。她长得非常漂亮，是在我跟他认识的前一年得伤寒死的。”

“他到加利福尼亚之前，还在美国哪个地方待过，您知道吗？”

“我听他说起过芝加哥，他对那个城市非常熟悉，还曾经在那里工作。我还听他说起过那些采煤炼铁的矿区。他这辈子去过的地方可不少。”

“他搞过政治吗？那个秘密帮会跟政治有联系吗？”

“没有，他对政治毫无兴趣。”

“您觉得这会不会是因为他犯了什么罪呢？”

“恰恰相反，我这辈子从来没见过比他更正派的人。”

“他在加利福尼亚的生活有什么古怪之处吗？”

“我们的矿区在山里，他最喜欢待在那里工作。如果不是非去不可的话，他从来不去热闹的地方。就是因为他这种习惯，我才开始怀疑有人在追踪他。等到他突然迁居欧洲的时候，我的怀疑就得到了确证。按我看，当时他肯定是收到了某种警告。他刚走

的那个星期，有那么六七个人跑来打听他的事情。”

“都是些什么样的人呢？”

“呃，是一帮模样十分凶恶的人。他们跑到我们的矿区，想要知道他的下落。我跟他们说，他已经到欧洲去了，我也不知道该到哪里去找他。他们找他没什么好事儿，一眼就可以看得出来。”

“那些人是不是美国人——是不是加利福尼亚人？”

“呃，我说不准是不是加利福尼亚人，可他们确实是美国人，错不了。不过，他们并不是采矿的。不知道他们是干吗的，总之我巴不得他们赶紧离开。”

“那是六年前的事情了吧？”

“差不多七年了。”

“再算上你们一起待在加利福尼亚的那五年，这件事情的由头少说也得追溯到十一年前，对吧？”

“确实如此。”

“过了这么多年都还是这么锲而不舍，他跟那些人之间肯定得有不共戴天的仇恨。这么大的仇恨，起因也不会是什么鸡毛蒜皮的事情。”

“按我看，那件事情纠缠了他一辈子，始终都在他的脑子里打转。”

“可是，您说说看，一个人既然面临危险，而且知道危险来自何方，难道不应该向警方寻求保护吗？”

“没准儿那是一种没法让别人代为防范的危险，谁知道呢。有件事我得告诉您，他去哪儿身上都带着武器，他那把左轮手枪时时刻刻都在他的兜里。不幸的是，昨晚他只穿了一件睡袍，把手枪落在了卧室里。依我看，当时他肯定是觉得，吊桥既然已经收起，自己也就安全了。”

“我想把事情的年月理得清楚一点儿，”麦克唐纳说道。“六年多以前，道格拉斯离开了加利福尼亚，第二年您就跟了来，对吗？”

“对。”

“他结婚是五年前的事情，这样看来，您一定是在他结婚前后回来的。”

“在他结婚之前一个月左右。我还是他的伴郎呢。”

“道格拉斯太太结婚之前，您认识她吗？”

“不，不认识。回英格兰来的时候，我已经在国外待了十年了。”

“可是，打那以后，您倒是经常见到她。”

巴克恶狠狠地瞪了探员一眼。“打那以后，我经常见到的是**他**，”他回答道。“就算我见到了她，理由也非常简单，你既然上门拜访一个做丈夫的人，认识他的妻子就是不可避免的事情。您要是觉得这当中有什么瓜葛——”

“我什么也不觉得，巴克先生。只要事情与案子有关，我都得问一问，可我并没有冒犯您的意思。”

“有些问题本身就是一种冒犯，”巴克气冲冲地回答道。

“我们想要的只是事实。澄清事实对您有好处，对大家都有好处。您和道格拉斯太太的友情，道格拉斯先生完全赞成吗？”

巴克的脸色白了一层，一双强壮的大手猛一下扣在了一起。“您没有权利问这样的问题！”他大声说道。“这跟您正在调查的事情有什么关系？”

“我必须重复我的问题。”

“很好，我拒绝回答。”

“您可以拒绝回答，可您必须明白，您的拒绝本身也是一种回答，原因很简单，如果没有什么事情需要藏着掖着的话，您肯定不会拒绝回答。”

巴克板着脸站在那里，乌黑的浓眉低低地压住了眼睛。苦思片刻之后，他抬起眼睛，脸上露出了笑容。“呃，依我看，说来说去，在座诸位只不过是在履行自己的应尽之责，而我没有权利妨碍你们。我只想请求你们别拿这件事情去惊扰道格拉斯太太，因

为她眼下的折磨已经够大的了。我可以告诉你们，可怜的道格拉斯只有一个缺点，那就是喜欢嫉妒。他对我非常喜爱，谁的友情也不可能超过他对我的友情。与此同时，他对他的妻子也是死心塌地。他非常欢迎我来做客，不停地向我发出邀请。可是，要是我跟他妻子一起聊天，或者是跟他妻子表现得比较投契的话，他就会醋意大发、火冒三丈，一下子说出一些完全不成体统的话来。为了这个缘故，我不止一次发誓再也不上这儿来，可他又会写来一些诚心悔改、苦苦哀求的信件，致使我不得不来。可是，先生们，你们只管相信我，到死我也是这么说，世上从来不曾有过比她更真挚、更忠诚的妻子——我还可以说，也不曾有过比我更忠实的朋友！”

他的话说得慷慨激昂、十分动情，麦克唐纳督察却不肯善罢甘休。

“死者戴在手上的结婚戒指被人给取走了，”他说道，“这您应该知道吧？”

“好像是吧，”巴克说道。

“‘好像’是什么意思？您应该知道这是事实啊。”

巴克似乎有点儿困惑，同时又有点儿犹豫。“我说‘好像’，意思是说，戒指也可能是他自个儿取下来的。”

“不管是谁取的，戒指总归是不见了。单凭这个事实，谁都会想到这场惨剧跟婚姻有关，不是吗？”

巴克耸了耸宽阔的肩膀。“我倒不知道这个事实意味着什么，”他回答道。“不过，您要是非得在那里含沙射影，说它有可能以某种方式影响这位女士的清誉”——他眼睛里闪出了愤怒的火光，片刻之后又控制住了自己的情绪，显然是费了不小的力气——“呃，那您就选错了查案的方向，仅此而已。”

“就目前来说，我没有什么要请教您的事情了，”麦克唐纳冷冰冰地说道。

“还有个小问题，”歇洛克·福尔摩斯说道。“您走进那个房间的时候，桌子上只点着一支蜡烛，对吗？”

“是的，确实是这样。”

“借着烛光，您看到房间里发生了可怕的事情，对吗？”

“没错。”

“您立刻就拉铃叫其他的人了吗？”

“是的。”

“其他的人来得非常快，对吗？”

“不到一分钟就来了。”

“可是，其他的人赶到的时候，看到的情形却是蜡烛已经熄灭，提灯也已经点燃。这似乎非常不合情理啊。”

巴克又一次露出了犹豫不决的神情。“我倒不觉得这有什么不合情理，福尔摩斯先生，”他停了片刻才开口作答。“烛光非常微弱，所以我第一个念头就是把房间弄得亮一点儿。桌子上刚好有盏提灯，我就把它给点上了。”

“并且吹灭了蜡烛，对吗？”

“没错。”

福尔摩斯没有再问什么问题，巴克慢条斯理地挨个儿看了看我们，按我的感觉，他的眼神之中带着几分挑衅。接下来，他转身走出了餐厅。

这之前，麦克唐纳督察曾经给道格拉斯太太写了张便条，意思是他打算上太太的房间去拜望她，太太却回复说，她可以到餐厅来见我们。眼下她走了进来，出现在我们眼前的是一个年约三旬的漂亮女人，身材高挑，举止出奇地沉静自持，完全不是我想象的那种哀恸欲绝、六神无主的模样。她的脸固然苍白憔悴，确实像一个刚刚遭受了沉重打击的人，可她的神态却十分镇静，放在桌子边缘的纤纤素手也跟我自个儿的手一样稳当。她那双哀婉动人的眼睛挨个儿看了看我们，带着一种异乎寻常的探询意味。

突然之间，她收起疑问的目光，猛一下开了腔。

“你们有什么发现了吗？”她问道。

她问话的口气不像是充满期待，倒有点儿恐惧我们有所发现的意思，莫非是我听错了吗？

“我们已经采取了所有的措施，道格拉斯太太，”督察说道。“您尽管放心，我们绝不会放过任何细节。”

“别怕花钱，”她的语调平静得无以复加。“我希望你们不遗余力地追查这件案子。”

“您应该可以给我们提供一点儿线索吧。”

“恐怕不能，不过我一定知无不言。”

“我们听塞西尔·巴克先生说，您并没有亲眼看见——这么说吧，您还没有去过发生惨剧的那个房间，对吧？”

“没去过，他在楼梯上截住了我，恳求我回我自己的房间去。”

“确实如此。当时您听见了枪声，马上就下了楼。”

“我先是穿上了睡袍，然后才往楼下走。”

“从您听见枪声开始，到巴克先生在楼梯上截住您为止，中间经过了多长时间呢？”

“大概是两分钟吧，赶上这样的情况，你很难正确地估计时间。他劝我不要过去，还跟我说去也没用。接下来，女管家艾伦太太就搀着我回楼上去了。整件事情就像是一场可怕的梦魇。”

“您能不能大致说说，您听见枪声的时候，您的丈夫下楼有多久了呢？”

“不知道，我说不好。他是从他的更衣室下楼的，我没听见他出去的声音。他每天晚上都会把宅子巡查一遍，因为他对火灾有点儿神经过敏。据我所知，这是唯一的一件让他神经过敏的事情。”

“我正打算跟您打听这方面的事情呢，道格拉斯太太。您是在您丈夫到英格兰之后才跟他认识的，对吧？”

“是的，我俩结婚是五年之前的事情。”

“还在美国的时候，他有没有遇上过什么可能让他面临危险的事情，他有没有跟您提过呢？”

道格拉斯太太认认真真地想了好一会儿。“有的，”她终于开了口，“我一直都觉得他面临着某种危险，可他不愿意跟我谈论这件事情。这倒不是因为他对我不够信任，我俩之间的感情和信任称得上完美无缺，而是因为他想让我远离一切忧虑。他怕我知道全部真相之后心里会有包袱，所以才守口如瓶。”

“那您又是怎么知道的呢？”

一抹笑容从道格拉斯太太的脸上一掠而过。“做丈夫的怎么可能把一个秘密捂一辈子，爱他的女人又怎么可能不起疑心呢？我之所以知道，是因为他拒绝谈论美国生活当中的一些片断，因为他采取的某些防范措施，因为他无意之中的一些话语，还因为他打量不速之客的那种方式。我心里完全明白，他有一些势力很大的敌人，他认为那些人在追踪他，所以才会时刻戒备。我对这件事情十分肯定，以至于这些年来，一旦他没有按时回家，我就会觉得心惊肉跳。”

“我能不能问一问，”福尔摩斯问道，“他的什么话引起了您的注意呢？”

“恐怖谷，”女士回答道。“我问他的时候，他曾经用过这么一个字眼儿，说的是，‘我在恐怖谷里待过，到现在还出不来呢。’赶上他表现得比平常还要担心的时候，我曾经问过他，‘难道说，咱们永远都逃不出恐怖谷吗？’他的回答则是，‘有时候我确实觉得，咱们永远也出不去啦。’”

“‘恐怖谷’究竟是什么意思，您肯定问过他吧？”

“问过，可我一问，他就会把脸拉得老长，摇着头跟我说，‘咱俩当中有一个笼罩在它的阴影之下，已经是够糟糕的了。上帝保佑，永远也别让它的阴影落到你的头上！’他说的是一座真实存在的山谷，他曾经在那里生活，在那里遇上了可怕的事情。这一点我

可以肯定，别的我就不知道了。”

“他从来没提到过什么人名吗？”

“提到过，那是三年前的事情，他打猎的时候出了意外，后来就发起烧来，烧得说起了胡话。我记得，当时他反复地念叨同一个名字，语气又是愤怒又是恐惧。那个名字是‘麦金提’，会首麦金提。等他恢复健康之后，我就问他，会首麦金提是谁，究竟是什么会的首领。可他只是笑着回答，‘反正不是我的首领，谢天谢地！’不管我怎么问，他也不肯再往下说了。不过，会首麦金提肯定跟那个恐怖谷有什么关系。”

“还有个问题，”麦克唐纳督察说道。“您是在伦敦的一家寄宿公寓里认识道格拉斯先生的，也是在那里跟他订的婚，对吧？你们的婚事有没有什么非比寻常的地方，有没有什么遮遮掩掩或者神秘莫测的地方呢？”

“非比寻常，当然是非比寻常，但却没有什么神秘莫测的地方。”

“他没有情敌吗？”

“没有，那时我完全是自由之身。”

“他的结婚戒指被人给取走了，这您肯定听说了吧。这件事情您怎么看呢？要说是他的某个夙敌找上门来下了毒手的话，那个夙敌干吗要拿走他的结婚戒指呢？”

我可以百分之百地肯定，听到这个问题的那个瞬间，道格拉斯太太的唇边掠过了一丝若有若无的笑意。

“这我可说不上来，”她回答道。“这件事情确实是古怪极了。”

“好吧，我们不耽搁您了。赶在这种时候来给您添麻烦，我们给您赔个不是，”督察说道。“毫无疑问，以后我们还会有别的问题需要问您，不过，还是等问题来了的时候再说吧。”

她站起身来，而我立刻察觉到，跟刚刚进来的时候一样，她又用探询的目光迅速地扫了我们一眼，简直就像是正在发问，“你们觉得我的证词怎么样啊？”这之后，她躬身施礼，飘然走出了

房间。

“这个女人挺漂亮的，非常漂亮，”她带上房门之后，麦克唐纳若有所思地说道。“巴克这个家伙肯定是没少往这儿跑，而他又是个兴许能讨女人喜欢的男人。他说死者喜欢嫉妒，说不定，他自个儿最清楚死者为什么嫉妒。还有那枚失踪的结婚戒指，这件事情也绕不过去。那个人取走了结婚戒指，而且是从死者的——这事情您怎么看呢，福尔摩斯先生？”

我朋友一直坐在那里苦思冥想，双手托着脑袋。听到问话之后，他站起身来，拉响了唤人铃。“埃姆斯，”他对应声赶来的管家说道，“塞西尔·巴克先生眼下在哪儿呢？”

“我去看看好了，先生。”

片刻之后，他跑回来告诉我们，巴克在花园里。

“昨晚你跟巴克先生一起走进书房的时候，他穿的是什么鞋子，你想得起来吗？”

“想得起来，福尔摩斯先生。他穿的是一双卧室里用的拖鞋。他要去报警的时候，我才替他取来了他的靴子。”

“那双拖鞋眼下在哪儿呢？”

“还在门厅里的那把椅子下面。”

“很好，埃姆斯。当然喽，我们得知道哪些脚印是巴克先生的，哪些又是那个外来人的，这一点非常重要。”

“是的，先生。不过我得说明一下，我发现那双拖鞋沾上了血迹，说实在的，我自个儿的也是一样。”

“考虑到书房里的情况，这也没什么不正常的。很好，埃姆斯。需要你的时候，我们会再拉铃的。”

几分钟之后，我们一起走进了书房。福尔摩斯已经从门厅里取来了巴克的绒面拖鞋，埃姆斯说得没错，两只鞋的鞋底都有黑黢黢的血迹。

“怪事！”福尔摩斯嘀咕了一句。他站在窗边的亮处，仔仔细

细地检查着那双拖鞋。“咄咄怪事！”

他纵身向前，把一只拖鞋跟窗台上的血迹对在了一起，动作像灵猫一样迅捷。鞋子和血迹完全吻合。紧接着，他转头对着各位同事，无声无息地笑了起来。

督察的脸兴奋得变了形，浓重的阿伯丁口音连珠炮似的迸了出来，听着就像是一根手杖扫过了一排栏杆。

“伙计，”他高声说道，“这下子就没有疑问了！窗台上的脚印是巴克自己摁上去的，因此就比普通的靴印宽得多。我还记得您当时说那人的脚是‘大鸭蹼’，现在可算是找到原因了。可是，这到底是什么把戏，福尔摩斯先生——到底是什么把戏呢？”

“是啊，到底是什么把戏呢？”我朋友若有所思地附和了一句。

怀特·梅森一边吃吃地笑个不停，一边揉搓他那双胖乎乎的手，显然是产生了极大的成就感。“我就说这件案子了不得吧！”他叫了起来。“它还真是不得了！”

第六章 * 一线曙光

三位侦探还有许多细节需要调查，于是我独自回到了乡村旅馆当中的简陋住处。不过，回去之前，我到宅子侧翼那座别具一格的古代花园里散了散步。花园周边是一排排十分古老的紫杉树丛，全部都被修剪得奇形怪状，中心则是一片美丽的草坪，草坪中央立着一个古老的日晷。整个儿的环境十分地恬静宁神，刚好可以安抚我多少有点儿烦乱的心情。

置身于如此静谧的氛围之中，你会不由自主地忘记那间幽暗的书房，忘记书房地板上那个四仰八叉、血肉模糊的人形，即便想了起来，也只会把它当作一场怪诞的梦魇。可是，此时我缓步园中，努力将自己的心神融入淡淡的草木清香，突然却碰上了一件十分离奇的事情，不光是想起了那场惨剧，心里还产生了一种非常恶劣的印象。

刚才我已经说过，花园周边装点着一排又一排的紫杉树。在花园距离宅子最远的那一侧，密集的紫杉树形成了一道连绵的树篱。树篱背后有一张石头长凳，从宅子这边是看不见的。走近那个地方的时候，我听到了说话的声音，一个低沉的男声说了句什么，随之而来的则是一个女人银铃般的轻笑声。

片刻之后，我绕到了树篱后面。道格拉斯太太和那个名为巴克的家伙赫然出现在了我的眼前，他俩却没有立刻注意到我的存在。看到她的模样，我着实吃了一惊。在餐厅里的时候，她显得又庄重又矜持，如今却彻底撕下了哀悼的伪装，闪闪发光的眼睛里充满

了生的喜悦，脸上也笑意盈盈，显然是听到了她同伴的什么妙语。她的同伴则欠身向前，双手扣在一起，前臂架在膝头，英俊粗犷的脸膛上挂着回应的笑容。看到我之后，他俩立刻把那副庄严肃穆的面具戴了回去，这个转变在我看到他俩的一瞬之间便告完成，只可惜晚就晚在这一瞬之间。他俩急匆匆地商量了一两句，这之后，巴克站起身来，走到了我的面前。

“打扰一下，先生，”他说道，“您就是华生医生吧？”

我冷冷地欠了欠身，毫无疑问，我的态度已经将我心里的感觉诠释得淋漓尽致。

“我们猜您就是，因为您跟歇洛克·福尔摩斯先生的交情可谓尽人皆知。您能不能过去跟道格拉斯太太说几句话呢？”

我沉着脸跟在他的后面，地板上那个支离破碎的人形清清楚楚地浮现在了我的眼前。惨剧发生才几个小时，他的妻子和他最亲近的朋友就一起跑进曾经属于他的花园，躲在灌木丛后面有说有笑。我不咸不淡地跟那位女士打了个招呼。在餐厅里的时候，我曾经为她的悲痛深感同情，眼下呢，我却用无动于衷的眼神回应着她哀恳的凝视。

“依我看，您恐怕会觉得我是个无情无义、铁石心肠的人吧，”她说道。

我耸了耸肩膀。“这不关我的事，”我说道。

“说不定，有一天您会还我一个公道。要是您知道了——”

“华生医生并不需要知道，”巴克赶紧插了一句。“他自个儿也说了，这不关他的事。”

“没错，”我说道，“那么，我这就跟两位告辞，接着散我的步。”

“等一等，华生医生，”女的叫住了我，声音里带着求恳。“有这么一个问题，您比世上任何人都更有资格回答，与此同时，问题的答案可能会对我造成莫大的影响。这世上没有人能比您更了解福尔摩斯先生，也没有人能比您更了解他和警方之间的关系。

假设有人秘密地告诉了他什么事情，他是不是必须得通知警方的探员呢？”

“对啊，就是这个问题，”巴克急不可耐地补充道。“他是按自个儿的判断行事，还是跟他们完全不分彼此呢？”

“我真的觉得，我不应该谈论这样的问题。”

“我请您——我求您务必谈一谈，华生医生！您一定得相信，如果您能在这个问题上指点一二的话，就算是帮了我们——帮了我一个大忙。”

这个女人的声音如此诚恳，致使我一下子把她的轻佻举止忘得一干二净，再也不能不为所动，只好满足她的请求。

“福尔摩斯先生是一位独立的侦探，”我说道。“他自己做主，自行其是。与此同时，他也会用理所应当的坦诚态度来对待侦办同一件案子的警方探员，不会向他们隐瞒任何可能协助他们将罪犯绳之以法的情报。别的我就不能说了，如果您还想知道更多情况的话，我建议您去问福尔摩斯先生本人。”

说到这里，我抬抬帽子表示告辞，跟着就继续前行，由得他俩在树篱遮蔽的那个隐秘处所坐着。转过树篱远端的时候，我回头看了看，发现他俩还在那里热火朝天地谈论着什么。他俩的目光朝着我离开的方向，谈论的主题显然是刚刚结束的这次偶遇。

“我可不需要他俩的信任，”听过我的报告之后，福尔摩斯说道。整个下午他都在宅邸那边跟两位同事商量事情，五点钟左右才回到旅馆，开始狼吞虎咽地大嚼我替他叫来的点心。“一点儿也不需要，华生。原因嘛，等到咱们用合谋杀人的罪名去逮捕他俩的时候，他俩就该觉得自己的信任非常可笑了。”

“你觉得事情会发展到这种地步吗？”

他的兴致高得不能再高，心情也好得不能再好。“亲爱的华生啊，这是我一口气吃的第四只鸡蛋，消灭掉它之后，我就会向你介绍一下整个儿的形势。倒不是说我们已经看穿了这场把戏——

惨剧发生才几个小时，他的妻子和他最亲近的朋友就一起跑进曾经属于他的花园，躲在灌木丛后面有说有笑。

还差得远呢——不过，一旦我们找到了那只失踪的哑铃——”

“哑铃！”

“天哪，华生，这件案子的关键就是那只失踪的哑铃，你总不可能到现在都还没看出来吧？好啦，好啦，你用不着垂头丧气，咱俩私下说吧，据我看，麦克督察和那位非常不错的本地行家都跟你一样，也没有看出这件事情的莫大意义。单独的一只哑铃，华生！想想吧，只用一只哑铃锻炼的运动员会是什么模样！自个儿想想他半边发达半边萎缩的躯体，想想他那根随时都会弯曲的脊柱。吓人哪，华生，真够吓人的！”

他坐在那里观察我搜肠刮肚的狼狈模样，嘴里塞满面包，眼里闪着恶作剧式的光芒。光看他饕餮一般的胃口，我就知道他已经胜券在握，因为我清清楚楚地记得他那些废食忘餐的日日夜夜，那样的时候，他的心智饱受难题的煎熬，他那张瘦削热切的脸庞也在殚精竭虑的苦行之中日益憔悴。眼下呢，他终于点起烟斗，坐到这家乡村古栈的壁炉跟前，开始漫不经心地慢慢讲述他对这件案子的看法，样子不像是发表什么精心准备的声明，更像是自言自语。

“谎言哪，华生——庞然巨大、漫无边际、触目惊心、彻头彻尾的谎言——这就是这家人给咱们准备的东西！咱们的调查就是这么开始的。巴克的全部说辞都是谎言。还有啊，道格拉斯太太既然证实了巴克的说辞，只能说明她也在撒谎。他俩都在撒谎，而且是事先串通好的。这一来，咱们就看到了一个十分明显的问题，他俩为什么要撒谎，他俩拼命掩盖的真相又是什么呢？咱们不妨试一试，华生，你和我不妨试一试，看看能不能找出谎言背后的真相。

“我怎么知道他俩在撒谎呢？原因是他俩的谎言编得非常拙劣，压根儿就没法让人相信。想想吧！按照他俩的说法，实施谋杀之后，凶手只有不到一分钟的时间，其间他先得从死者手上取

走藏在另一枚戒指下面的结婚戒指，跟着又得做一件凶手绝对不会做的事情，把另一枚戒指套回去，最后还得把那张古怪的卡片摆在死者身边。要我说，他俩的说法显然属于天方夜谭。

“你可能会说，凶手可以先拿戒指后杀人。当然喽，华生，我对你的判断力非常敬重，绝不会真的认为你会这么说。可是，蜡烛只燃了很短的一段时间，说明凶手和死者之间的会面也长不到哪里去。根据咱们听说的情况，道格拉斯是一个无所畏惧的人物，他这样的人会在这么短的时间里面乖乖交出自己的结婚戒指吗？进一步说，他这样的人竟然会乖乖交出自己的结婚戒指，这样的事情可能吗？不，不对，华生，凶手一定是迅速杀人，然后又在现场单独待了一段时间，靠的是提灯照明。这一点我有百分之百的把握。

“话又说回来，受害人显然是被枪打死的。由此看来，真正的开枪时间一定比他们告诉咱们的那个时间早一些。可是，像开枪时间这样的事情是不可能弄错的，这样一来，咱们就只能认为，听到了枪声的那两个人串通起来撒了谎，撒谎的就是那个名为巴克的男人和那个名为道格拉斯的女人。除此之外，我还证明了窗台上的血印是巴克故意摁上去的，目的是给警方留下一条虚假的线索，这时你就不能不承认，形势已经对巴克十分不利。

“到了现在，咱们必须问问自己，凶案究竟发生在什么时间。直到十点半的时候，仆人们都还在宅子里跑来跑去，由此可知，谋杀必然发生在那个时间之后。十点四十五分，仆人们回到了各自的房间，只有埃姆斯还在餐具室里忙活。今天下午你走了之后，我做了一些实验，结果就发现，如果各个房间的门都关着的话，不管麦克唐纳在书房里弄出多大的动静，我在餐具室里也不可能听见。

“不过，如果是在女管家的房间里，情形就不一样了。她的房间也在过道里，离书房却比较近。在她房间里的时候，如果书房

里有人高声说话，我可以模模糊糊地听见声音。开火距离非常近的时候，霰弹枪的枪声就会有所减弱，毫无疑问，这一次的情形正是如此。枪声应该不会太响，不过，案发当时夜深人静，枪声肯定会传进艾伦太太的房间。按她自己的说法，她耳朵有点儿背，即便如此，作证的时候她还是告诉咱们，警报响起半小时之前，她听到了一个类似于摔上房门的声音。警报响起半小时之前，刚好就是十点四十五分。我完全肯定，她听到的那个声音就是枪声，那个时间就是真正的案发时间。

“果真如此的话，咱们就必须搞清楚，假定巴克和道格拉斯太太并不是凶手，那么，从听到枪声下楼的十点四十五分开始，到拉铃唤来仆人的十一点十五分为止，他俩究竟干了些什么事情。他俩当时在干什么，为什么没有立刻发出警报呢？这就是摆在咱们面前的问题，搞清楚这个问题之后，咱们肯定能离破案更近一步。”

“我自个儿也完全确信，”我说道，“那两个人之间存在某种默契。丈夫惨遭杀害才几个小时，她就可以笑呵呵地坐在那里听俏皮话，肯定是个无情无义的东西。”

“一点儿不错。就从她自个儿叙述的事情经过来看，她的妻子形象也说不上光彩照人。华生啊，你是知道的，我这个人向来都不是特别地崇拜女性，即便如此，根据我的生活经验，只要对自个儿的丈夫有一点儿起码的恩爱之情，很少有哪个妻子会听了别人的话就止步不前，不去看看丈夫的遗体。万一我真的结了婚的话，华生，我一定得跟我妻子培养一点儿感情，免得到头来，我的尸身就躺在几码之外的地方，她却让女管家搀着自己扬长而去。这场戏编得太假了，即便是最缺乏经验的调查人员也会觉得奇怪，奇怪自己为什么没有听见女性惯有的哀号。就算没有别的疑点，单是这一件事情也足以让我察觉，他俩是在串谋撒谎。”

“如此说来，你已经断定凶手就是巴克和道格拉斯太太，

对吗？”

“华生啊，你提的问题总是这样，直接得骇人听闻，”福尔摩斯一边说，一边冲我晃动他的烟斗。“简直就像是冲我发射的一颗颗子弹。你应该这么说，道格拉斯太太和巴克知道凶案的真相，眼下正在串谋掩盖真相，这样的话，我就可以毫无保留地表示赞同，因为我断定他俩确实是这么干的。至于你那个更加要命的假设嘛，暂时还不是那么肯定。这样吧，咱们这就抽出一点儿时间，看看你那个假设面临着哪些问题。

“咱们不妨假定，这对男女已经勾搭成奸，而且决意除掉他俩之间的那块绊脚石。这种假定十分大胆，因为我们已经仔细盘问过那些仆人，再加上其他的一些人，他们的说法完全不支持这种假定。恰恰相反，为数众多的证据表明，道格拉斯夫妇十分恩爱。”

“我敢肯定，他俩的恩爱不可能是真的，”说这话的时候，我想起了花园里那张笑吟吟的美丽脸庞。

“呃，不管真的假的，别人的印象反正是这样的。不说这个，咱们假定这对男女极其狡猾，在这件事情上瞒过了所有的人，并且合谋杀害那个做丈夫的。事有凑巧，做丈夫的刚好笼罩在某种危险之中——”

“这只是他俩的说辞而已。”

福尔摩斯露出了若有所思的神情。“我看出来了，华生，你的结论是他俩从一开始就没有一句真话。按你的看法，潜藏的威胁也好，秘密帮会也好，恐怖谷也好，那个名叫麦什么的帮会头领也好，其他什么也好，通通都是子虚乌有的东西。怎么说呢，你这种笼而统之的假设确实具有横扫一切的力量。咱们这就来看一看，它会把咱们引到什么地方。为了给凶案找个原因，他俩编出了这么一个故事，于是就把那辆自行车摆到庭园里，以便证明凶案是外来人干的。窗台上的血迹服务于同样的目的，尸体旁边的卡片也是一样。卡片是他俩在宅子里鼓捣出来的，这种可能性完

全存在。这些都跟你的假设对得上，华生。不过，咱们马上就会看到，有几块板子非常地招人讨厌，不方不圆、不听使唤，怎么拼也拼不进你设计的那张拼图。世上的武器那么多，他俩干吗要用一把锯短了的霰弹枪，而且是一把美国制造的枪呢？他俩怎么能那么肯定，枪声不会把别人引来呢？从实际的情形来看，仅仅是因为偶然，艾伦太太才把枪声当成了摔门的声音，没有立刻冲过去看个究竟。你心目当中的这对狗男女为什么要这么干呢，华生？”

“说实在的，这我确实解释不了。”

“还有啊，如果某个女人跟情夫合谋杀害自己的丈夫，他们会耀武扬威地取走死者的结婚戒指，替自己的罪行打广告吗？你真的觉得这样的举动很合情理吗，华生？”

“不，不合情理。”

“除此之外，即便你想到了在宅子外面藏一辆自行车的主意，你真的会觉得这样的主意值得一试吗？照常理看，最蠢笨的侦探也会说这是个显而易见的烟幕弹，原因嘛，自行车可是亡命之徒最需要的逃跑工具啊。”

“我完全想不出任何解释。”

“话也不能这么说，世上不可能会有让人想不出任何解释的因果链条。我来给你提供一条可行的思路吧，只当是一次思维训练，且不管正确与否。我并不否认这仅仅是我的想象，不过，想象孕育真相，例子不是数不胜数吗？

“咱们不妨假定，道格拉斯这个家伙的人生之中有一个罪恶的秘密，一个十分可耻的秘密。这个秘密导致他死于非命，凶手呢，咱们不妨假定，是一个外来的仇人。这个仇人从他的尸身上取走了结婚戒指，原因嘛，我承认我到现在也解释不了。可想而知，他们之间的仇恨可以追溯到他第一次结婚的时候，拿走戒指的举动多半与此有关。

“仇人还没来得及逃走，巴克和那个做妻子的已经跑进了房间。凶手言之凿凿地告诉他俩，如果他俩打算逮捕他，某件骇人听闻的丑事就会公之于众。他俩相信了凶手的说辞，觉得放他走才是上算。为了放跑凶手，他俩很可能是放下了吊桥，然后又重新拉了起来，收放吊桥的过程是可以做到无声无息的。出于某种考虑，凶手觉得徒步逃跑会比骑车安全，于是就把自行车扔在了一个他跑远之后才会被人发现的地方。到现在为止，咱们还没有越出情理的疆界，对吧？”

“呃，毫无疑问，这些都还在情理之中，”我嘴里这么说，心里却并不十分信服。

“咱们必须牢记，华生，这次的事情不论真相如何，总之是十分不同凡响。好了，咱们顺着刚才的假设往下推，凶手跑了之后，这对男女——倒不一定是一对狗男女——意识到自己办了件作茧自缚的蠢事，因为他俩很难洗脱自己的凶嫌，也很难证明自己没有包庇凶手。他俩应变神速，同时也十分笨拙。巴克用他那双沾了血的拖鞋在窗台上摁了个鞋印，打算让人相信凶手是从窗子逃走的。显而易见，他俩不可能装作没听见枪声，因此就只能按正常的做法发出警报，只不过是迟了整整半个钟头而已。”

“可是，你打算怎么证明这些事情呢？”

“这个嘛，如果外来的凶手确有其人的话，咱们是可以把他缉拿归案的，这是最有效的一种证明方法。这要是行不通的话——怎么说呢，科学的破案手段还多得很呢。依我看，如果能在书房里单独待一个晚上的话，应该会对我大有帮助。”

“单独待一个晚上！”

“我打算一会儿就到那里去。我已经跟可敬的埃姆斯商量好了，他对巴克的态度可怎么也算不上衷心拥护。我准备坐在那个房间里，看看那里的氛围能不能带给我一点儿灵感。我这个人是相信

地方有灵的[1]。笑什么笑，华生老兄。好啦，咱们走着瞧吧。对了，你把你那把大雨伞带来了吗？”

“带来了。”

“很好，麻烦你借我一用。”

“没问题——可是，这算是哪门子武器！要是遇上了什么危险——”

“没什么大不了的危险，亲爱的华生，要不我一定会请你出马的。不过，我还是要借用你的雨伞。眼下我只是在等咱们的同事从坦布里奇韦尔斯回来，他们正在那边查访，想知道谁才是那辆自行车的主人。”

天黑的时候，麦克唐纳督察和怀特·梅森总算是远征归来。看他俩那副兴高采烈的模样，我们的调查工作显然是大有进展。

“伙计，我承人（认）我之前还怀疑过外来人的存在，”麦克唐纳说道，“不过，那些怀疑都已经烟消云散了。有人认出了那辆自行车，还跟我们描述了嫌疑人的外貌特征，这一来，咱们就算是迈出了一个大步。”

“听你的口气，我怎么感觉马上就要结案了啊，”福尔摩斯说道。“说真的，我诚心诚意地向两位表示祝贺。”

“是这样，我首先注意到了这样一个事实，道格拉斯先生的不安举止似乎是从出事的前一天开始的，而他那天刚好去了一趟坦布里奇韦尔斯。这样看来，他是在坦布里奇韦尔斯意识到祸事临头的。随之而来的是一个显而易见的结论，如果有人骑着自行车来找他的晦气，多半就是从坦布里奇韦尔斯来的。我们带着自行车去了那里，拿到当地那些旅馆让人辨认。‘老鹰商旅客栈’的掌柜一眼就认了出来，自行车的主人名叫哈格雷夫，是在两天前住进客栈的，全部的行李就是那辆自行车和一个手提箱。登记住宿

[1]“地方有灵”的原文是“genius loci”（地精），地精是古罗马传说当中守护某个特定处所的精怪，类似于我国神话当中的土地公。

的时候，他没有留下具体的地址，只是说自己来自伦敦。那个手提箱的确产自伦敦，箱子里装的也都是英国货，主人却毫无疑问是个美国人。”

“好啊，好啊，”福尔摩斯乐呵呵地说道，“你们已经完成了一些扎扎实实的工作，我却跟我朋友坐在这里编造空洞的理论！这可真是一个教训，告诫咱们必须脚踏实地，麦克先生。”

“是啊，您说得对极了，福尔摩斯先生，”督察的口吻十分满意。

“这些都跟你的理论并不矛盾啊，”我插了一句。

“矛不矛盾还不一定呢。先把你们的发现讲完吧，麦克先生。这个人是什么身份，你们没找到什么线索吗？”

“这方面的线索少之又少，这个人显然是在千方百计地隐藏自己的身份。他的物品当中没有文件和信函，衣服上面也没有标记，卧房的桌子上则摆着一张本郡的自行车路线图。他是在昨天早饭之后骑车离开客栈的，此后就杳无音讯，到我们去查问的时候依然如此。”

“就是这一点让我想不通，福尔摩斯先生，”怀特·梅森说道。“这家伙既然不想惹上嫌疑，按理说就该跑回去，待在客栈里冒充老实本分的游客。他不可能不知道，如果是现在这种情况，客栈掌柜一定会向警方报告他失踪的事情，警方也一定会把他的失踪跟凶案联系起来。”

“按理说是这样。可是，不管怎么说，既然他依旧逍遥法外，说明他的选择到现在为止还算明智。对了，他的外貌特征——他长什么样呢？”

麦克唐纳翻了翻自己的记事本。“他们能提供的全部情况都在这里。看样子，他们对这个人并不是特别留意，不过，客栈的门房、账房和客房女佣一致同意，这个人的外貌特征大致是这样的：他身高大约五英尺九英寸，年纪五十上下，头发略见斑白，花白髭须，鹰钩鼻，面容嘛，他们的形容都是狰狞可畏。”

“咳，除了面容之外，这些特征倒跟道格拉斯先生本人非常吻合呢，”福尔摩斯说道。“他也是刚过五十，也长着斑白的头发和髭须，身高也大致是这个数字。你们还有别的发现吗？”

“这个人穿着一套厚实的灰色衣服，上身是海员式的双排扣外套，外加一件黄色的短大衣和一顶便帽。”

“那把霰弹枪呢？”

“那把枪还不到两英尺长，很容易就可以塞进他那个手提箱。带着它出门的时候，他完全可以把它藏在大衣下面。”

“按你的看法，这些发现对咱们的破案工作有什么帮助呢？”

“这个嘛，福尔摩斯先生，”麦克唐纳说道，“逮到犯人的时候，咱们肯定能有一个更加清楚的评判，而我可以跟您保证，听到这些特征之后不到五分钟，我就用电报通知了各处的警局。不过，即便只看现在的情况，咱们也显然是取得了很大的进展。咱们已经知道，两天之前，有个自称哈格雷夫的美国人跑到了坦布里奇韦尔斯，随身带着自行车和手提箱。这个人的手提箱里藏着一把锯短的霰弹枪，犯罪意图昭然若揭。昨天早上，他骑着自行车来到这里，霰弹枪就藏在他的大衣下面。根据目前掌握的情况，没有人看见他来到这里。不过，他不用经过村子就可以到达庭园的大门，与此同时，那条大路上有的是骑自行车的人。可想而知，进入庭园之后，他立刻把自行车藏了起来，地点正是人们后来发现自行车的那片月桂树丛。很有可能，他自个儿也埋伏在那片树丛里，眼睛盯着宅子，等着道格拉斯先生从里面出来。用在宅子内部，霰弹枪当然是一种不合常情的武器，可他本来的打算是在宅子外面下手，那样的话，霰弹枪就具有非常明显的优势，一是因为它不可能打不中，二是因为英格兰的乡区狩猎风行，枪声实属司空见惯，并不会引起人们的警觉。”

“这些都可以说是非常清楚，”福尔摩斯说道。

“然后呢，道格拉斯先生始终没有现身。接下来他又该怎么办

呢？他撇下自行车，借着暮色的掩护摸到宅子跟前，跟着就发现吊桥还架在城壕上，周围也没有人。他抓住机会闯进宅子，无疑还提前备好了一套说辞，被人撞见也可以蒙混过关。他什么人也没撞见，顺顺当当地溜进了他看见的第一个房间，藏到了窗帘后面。躲在那个地方，他可以看见吊桥被人收了上去，因此就知道自己只能趟过城壕往外逃。他一直等到十一点十五分，那个时候，照常进行夜间巡查的道格拉斯先生走进了那个房间。他开枪打死了道格拉斯，然后就按他之前看好的路线逃之夭夭。他意识到自行车会成为一条追查自己的线索，因为客栈里的人会向警方描述自行车的特征，所以他扔下自行车，通过其他的方法逃往伦敦，或者是他预先准备的某个可供藏匿的安全地点。您觉得我的推测怎么样，福尔摩斯先生？”

“呃，麦克先生，你这个推测本身可以说是非常好，而且非常清楚。话又说回来，这仅仅是你对这个故事的解读。我的解读是这样的，凶案发生的真实时间要比证人说的早半个小时，道格拉斯太太和巴克串谋掩盖了某些事情，他俩曾经帮助凶手逃走，至少也是在凶手逃走之前赶到了凶案现场，还有啊，他俩编造了凶手从窗子逃走的证据，实际呢，凶手十有八九是经由他俩亲手放下的吊桥逃走的。这就是我对前半部分案情的解释。”

两位探员摇起头来。

“呃，福尔摩斯先生，如果您说得没错的话，咱们就仅仅是把旧的谜团换成了新的而已，”伦敦警局的督察说道。

“从某些方面来说，新的比旧的更难解释，”怀特·梅森补充道。“那位女士一辈子都没去过美国，怎么可能跟一名来自美国的凶手扯上关系，进而向他提供庇护呢？”

“我完全承认，我这个解释存在种种疑点，”福尔摩斯说道。“今晚我打算独自进行一次小小的调查，赶巧了的话，就能对咱们的共同事业有所贡献。”

“需要我们帮忙吗，福尔摩斯先生？”

“不，不用！我需要的东西非常简单，一件是黑暗的环境，另一件是华生医生的雨伞。还有埃姆斯，忠心耿耿的埃姆斯，毫无疑问，他会给我行个方便的。条条思路都让我回到了同一个基本的问题，锻炼身体的时候，一名体育爱好者干吗要选用一件如此不合常理的器械，干吗要选用一只不成对的哑铃呢？”

深更半夜，单独行动的福尔摩斯终于调查归来。我俩合住的那个房间有两张床，已经是这家乡村小旅馆条件最好的房间了。他走进房间的时候，我迷迷糊糊地醒了过来。

“呃，福尔摩斯，”我咕哝了一句，“有什么发现吗？”

他拿着一支蜡烛，不言不语地站在我的床边。接下来，他冲我俯下了又高又瘦的身子。“我说，华生啊，”他低声说道，“如果跟你同住的人是个疯子，是个脑子里一塌糊涂的家伙，还是个六神无主的白痴，你会觉得害怕吗？”

“一点儿也不怕，”我惊愕地回答道。

“哦，那就好，”说完这话之后，当夜他就此噤声，再也不曾开口。

第七章 * 答案

第二天吃过早饭之后，我俩在本村的警局找到了麦克唐纳督察和怀特·梅森。他俩坐在警长的小会客室里，一边私下商讨，一边小心翼翼地整理堆在桌子上的一些信函和电报。其中的三封函电已经被他俩单独搁在了一边。

“还在追查那个骑自行车的狡猾疑犯吗？”福尔摩斯兴高采烈地问道。“那个恶棍有什么新消息吗？”

麦克唐纳恨恨不已地指了指自己面前的那堆函电。

“到这会儿，莱斯特、诺丁厄姆、南安普敦、德比、伊斯特汉姆、里奇蒙[1]和其他十四个地方都发来了他的消息。其中的三个地方——也就是伊斯特汉姆、莱斯特和利物浦——还找到了指控他的确凿证据，并且实实在在地逮捕了他。看样子，咱们国家到处都是穿黄大衣的逃犯啊。”

“我的天！”福尔摩斯满怀同情地叹了一声。“好了，麦克先生，还有您，怀特·梅森先生，我打算给你们提一条十分诚恳的建议。你们肯定还记得，刚刚跟你们一起介入这件案子的时候，我提了一个条件，也就是说，我不会向你们发表未经充分核实的推断，一定要把它们留在心里，按自个儿的思路继续查证，直到我断定它们正确无误为止。基于这个理由，眼下

[1] 莱斯特（Leicester）、诺丁厄姆（Nottingham）、南安普敦（Southampton）和德比（Derby）都是英格兰城市名，伊斯特汉姆（East Ham）和里奇蒙（Richmond）当时分别属于埃塞克斯郡和萨里郡，今天都是伦敦的一部分。

我还不打算把我全部的想法告诉你们。另一方面，我也答应过要跟你们讲规矩，依我看，如果我毫无必要地听任你们在徒劳无益的事情上浪费哪怕是一分一秒的时间，那就算不上是讲规矩。所以呢，今早我特意来给你们提个建议，简单说来，我给你们的建议可以概括为三个字——别查了。”

麦克唐纳和怀特·梅森目瞪口呆地看着这位声名卓著的同事。

“您觉得这事情没希望了！”督察叫道。

“我只是觉得你们的办案手法没希望，可我并不觉得，查明真相也没希望。”

“可是，那个骑自行车的人总不是无中生有的东西吧。我们掌握了他的外貌特征，还找到了他的手提箱和自行车。那家伙肯定是躲在某个地方。您为什么认为我们抓不到他呢？”

“是的，是的，他肯定是躲在某个地方，咱们也肯定能抓到他。可我不能眼睁睁地看着你们把力气浪费在伊斯特汉姆或者利物浦。我敢肯定，咱们能找到一条结案的捷径。”

“您有事情瞒着我们。这可算不上讲规矩啊，福尔摩斯先生，”督察生起气来。

“我的工作方法你是知道的，麦克先生。不过，我会尽量缩短瞒着不说的时间。我只是想通过一种非常简便的方法来验证一下细节，然后就会辞别你们返回伦敦，把我的全部成果留给你们。我要不这么做的话，那可就太对不起你们了，因为我还从来没碰上过比这更奇特、更有趣的案子呢。”

“这我就想不明白了，福尔摩斯先生。昨晚从坦布里奇韦尔斯回来之后，我们见到了您，当时您还是大致赞成我们的看法的。后来又发生了什么事情，让您对这件案子产生了截然不同的看法呢？”

“呃，既然你这么问，那我就告诉你，昨晚我把你们听我说过的那个计划付诸实施，上宅子里去待了几个小时。”

“那么，发生了什么事情呢？”

“哦，这个问题嘛，我暂时只能给你一个非常笼统的回答。顺便提一句，我一直在读一篇关于这座老宅的记述，记述虽然简短，但却称得上又清晰又有趣。这东西便宜极了，花一个便士就可以从本地的烟草铺子里买来。”

说到这里，福尔摩斯从马甲口袋里掏出了一本小册子，小册子的封皮上印着一幅粗糙的版画，画的正是那座古老的宅邸。

“亲爱的麦克先生，如果能对周遭的历史氛围心领神会，调查的热情就会空前高涨。别显得那么不耐烦嘛，我可以跟你打包票，即便是如此枯燥无味的记述也可以在某种程度上重现往昔的影像。容我给你举个例子，‘伯尔斯通宅邸建于詹姆斯一世在位的第五个年头[①]，矗立在一座远较自身古老的建筑旧址之上，为同时期围堑住宅的绝佳存世样板之一——’”

“您这是要我们呢，福尔摩斯先生！”

“啧，啧，麦克先生！——我看见了，你已经表现出了脾气发作的苗头。好吧，既然你们对这个话题反应这么强烈，那我就不打算一个字一个字地往下念了。不过，根据这篇记述，一六四四年，议会党的一名上校攻占过这座宅邸，内战期间，查理一世曾经在宅子里躲了几天，后来呢，乔治二世也访问过这座宅邸，[②]听了这些事情，你们想必会承认，这座老宅确实有一些引人入胜的地方。”

“这一点我绝不怀疑，福尔摩斯先生。可是，这跟咱们没什么关系。”

“没关系？真的没关系？亲爱的麦克先生，要干咱们这行，宽广的视野可是一项必备的素质啊。很多时候，咱们都格外需要举

[①] 即 1607 年，参见前文注释。

[②] 1642 至 1651 年间，英国的议会党和保皇党之间发生了一系列武装斗争，是为英国内战，其间英格兰国王查理一世于 1649 年遭到议会审判，随即因叛国罪被处斩首之刑；乔治二世（George II, 1683—1760）为 1727 至 1760 年间在位的英格兰国王。

一反三、旁征博引的手段。我说这些话你可别见怪，因为我虽然只是个研究罪案的业余行家，岁数却终归比你大得多，经验嘛，兴许也比你丰富一些。”

“您这些话我第一个就会同意，”探员恳切地说道。“您的意思非常清楚，这我绝不否认，只不过，您的表达方式确实是非常地拐弯抹角。”

“好啦，好啦，我这就抛开过去的历史，开始剖析眼前的事实。刚才我已经说了，昨晚我上宅子里去了一趟。我没有去找巴克，也没有去找道格拉斯太太，因为我觉得，打搅他们是一件毫无必要的事情。不过，我倒是非常欣慰地听说，这位女士并没有日益憔悴的迹象，晚饭也吃得相当不错。我去那里是为了拜访好心的埃姆斯先生，并且跟他进行了一些非常愉快的交流，以至于他没有征求其他任何人的意见，自作主张地允许我在书房里独处了一段时间。”

“什么！跟那东西待在一起吗？”我脱口而出。

“不，不是那样，房间已经拾掇好了。我听说是你同意他们这么做的，麦克先生。在那个已然恢复正常状态的房间里面，我度过了极富教益的一刻钟时间。”

“您在那里干什么呢？”

“呃，我并不打算拿这么简单的事情来弄什么玄虚，这就告诉你们，我在那里寻找那只失踪的哑铃。琢磨案情的时候，我始终觉得那只哑铃特别重要，结果呢，我把它找了出来。”

“在哪儿找到的呢？”

“噢，你这个问题已经把咱们推到了已知领域的边界，再往前就是未知领域了。容我再往前走一小步，再走非常非常小的一步，我答应你们，之后我就会把一切和盘托出。”

“好吧，我们只能由着您自行其是，”督察说道，“不过，您刚才叫我们‘别查了’，究竟是为了什么理由，您不让我们接着往下

查呢？”

“理由非常简单，亲爱的麦克先生，你们压根儿就不知道自己在查什么。”

“我们在查伯尔斯通宅邸约翰·道格拉斯先生遇害的案子啊。”

“是啊，是啊，你们确实在查这件案子。不过，请你们别再费神去查那位骑自行车的神秘绅士了。我可以跟你们打包票，那样做一点儿用也没有。”

“那么，您觉得我们应该怎么做呢？”

“如果你们愿意照办的话，我这就毫不含糊地告诉你们。”

“呃，说老实话，根据我以往的经验，您那些古怪行动都是有理由的。好吧，您怎么说我就怎么做。”

“您呢，怀特·梅森先生？”

乡村探员来来回回地看着我们几个，眼神之中一片茫然，因为他既不了解福尔摩斯这个人，也不了解福尔摩斯的办案手法。“呃，督察先生没意见的话，我也没意见，”他终于应了一句。

“好极了！”福尔摩斯说道。“这样的话，我建议两位来一次旷性怡情的乡间散步。我听他们说，站在伯尔斯通山梁上俯瞰‘大林地’，景色真是美不胜收。需要吃午饭的话，你们肯定能找到一家不错的客栈，当然喽，这一带我完全不熟，没法向你们推荐一家。黄昏时分，你们带着疲惫的身体和愉快的心情——”

“伙计，这个玩笑可有点儿过头了！”麦克唐纳一边嚷嚷，一边气冲冲地站了起来。

“好啦，好啦，那你就按你自个儿的心意来打发这个白天吧，”福尔摩斯一边说，一边乐呵呵地拍了拍督察的肩膀。“你们爱干什么就干什么，爱去哪儿就去哪儿，总之要赶在天黑之前上这儿来找我，不得有误——不得有误，麦克先生。”

“这话听着还像那么回事。”

“我那些话全都是非常不错的建议，可我也不会硬逼着你们接

受，只要求你们在我需要的时间赶到这儿来。还有啊，咱们分开之前，你得写张便条给巴克先生。”

“写什么呢？”

“你没意见的话，我来念，你来写。准备好了吗？

“亲爱的先生：

我觉得我们有责任排干城壕，希望能找到——”

“这件事情根本办不到，”督察说道。“我已经问过了。”

“啧，啧！亲爱的先生，只管按我说的写吧。”

“好吧，你接着念。”

“——希望能找到一些与本次调查相关的证物。我已经安排妥当，工人将会从明天清早开始疏导水流——”

“根本办不到！”

“——疏导水流。既有此等情况，我认为还是提前打个招呼比较好。

“好了，签上你的名字，下午四点左右派人送过去。到了那个时间，咱们就在这间屋子里碰头。在那之前，咱们可以自由活动，因为我可以跟你们保证，咱们别无选择，只能让调查工作暂时告一段落。”

我们再次碰面的时候，天渐渐地黑了下来。福尔摩斯的神情十分严肃，我的脸上写满了好奇，两位探员则显然是心有不甘、满腹怨言。

“好啦，先生们，”我朋友郑重其事地说道，“现在我请你们跟我一起去验证所有的事情，请你们自个儿判断一下，我观察到的那些情况能不能证明我得出的结论。今天晚上天气很冷，而我并不知道这次探险要持续多长的时间，所以我恳请你们穿上最保暖的衣服。咱们必须在天黑之前各就各位，这一点十分重要，你们

没意见的话，咱们就立刻出发。”

我们沿着包围宅邸庭园的栅栏走了一阵，从一个缺口溜进庭园，然后就在越来越浓的暮色之中跟着福尔摩斯往前走，最终走到了一丛月桂树跟前，差不多是在正对宅子大门和吊桥的位置。吊桥还没有收上去。福尔摩斯伏下身子，躲在了月桂树丛后面，我们三个也照此办理。

“呃，接下来该怎么办呢？”麦克唐纳没好气地问了一句。

“耐心等待，尽量不要发出声音，”福尔摩斯回答道。

“咱们到这儿来，到底是为了什么？依我看，您真的应该对我们坦诚一点儿。”

福尔摩斯笑了笑。“华生老是说，我这个人喜欢给现实生活增添一点儿戏剧色彩，”他说道。“我身上确实有那么一点儿艺术家的气质，它一刻不停地督促我去追求完美的舞台效果。当然喽，麦克先生，如果咱们不能隔三岔五地弄点儿排场来烘托办案成果的话，咱们的行当肯定会变得又乏味又凄惨。直截了当的指控、不由分说地冲上去拍人家的肩膀——这样的结局有什么意思呢？反过来，敏捷的演绎、巧妙的陷阱、对未来事件的机灵预测、对大胆假设的成功验证——这些东西，不正是咱们毕生工作的荣耀和酬报吗？此时此刻，悬疑的形势和等待猎物的焦灼让你激动不已。如果我表现得跟列车时刻表一样一目了然，那还有什么可激动的呢？我只需要你拿出一丁点儿的耐性，麦克先生，所有的事情马上就会水落石出。”

“好吧，我只是希望，荣耀、酬报和其余种种都能在我们大家活活冻死之前降临，”伦敦探员无可奈何地说了句俏皮话。

我们都有充分的理由与伦敦探员产生共鸣，因为这一次的守望实在是又漫长又难熬。阴影慢慢地罩住了老宅正面的阴沉长墙，城壕里涌出的冰冷潮气让我们寒彻骨髓、牙齿打战。宅子的门廊上方悬着一盏孤灯，厄运萦绕的书房里也有一团稳定的光晕，除

此之外，我们的周围一片黑暗、阒寂无声。

“咱们得等多久呢？”督察终于开口发问。“还有啊，咱们这是在等什么呢？”

“究竟要等多久，我并不比你们更清楚，”福尔摩斯回答道，语气多少有点儿尖刻。“当然喽，我倒是巴不得，所有的罪犯都能给自己的罪行排上火车时刻表一样的日程，这样的话，咱们大家确实可以省点儿事。要说咱们等的是什么嘛——喏，咱们等的就是**这个**！”

他话音未落，书房里的明亮黄光就被一个在灯前来回走动的人给挡住了。我们藏身的月桂树丛正对着书房的窗子，距离窗子还不到一百码。片刻之后，窗子“吱呀”一声打开了，我们依稀看到了一个男人头部和肩部的黢黑轮廓，看到他正在往黑暗的窗外张望。他鬼鬼祟祟地窥视了几分钟，似乎是想确定自己没有被人看见。这之后，他探出身来，紧张的寂静之中传来了水流动荡的轻柔声响。看情形，他正在用手里的什么工具搅动城壕里的水。突然之间，他把什么东西拖了上去，动作就像是渔人钓起了一条鱼。他拖上去的是个圆不溜秋的大东西，那东西穿窗而入的时候，书房里的灯光被它挡了个严严实实。

“快！”福尔摩斯叫道。“快！”

他飞快地跑过吊桥，把门铃拉得山响，我们不约而同地一跃而起，拖着僵硬的双腿，跌跌撞撞地跟了上去。门里面传来了拔去门闩的刺耳声音，转眼之间，大惊失色的埃姆斯出现在了门口。福尔摩斯二话不说，直接把埃姆斯推到一边，率领我们冲进了我们的监视对象适才所在的那个房间。

书房里的桌子上摆着一盏油灯，我们从外面看见的光晕就是这么来的。我们冲进房间的时候，塞西尔·巴克已经拿起油灯，冲着我们照了过来。灯光映出了他那张刮得干干净净的刚毅脸庞，还有他那双气势汹汹的眼睛。

“该死的，这都是怎么回事？”他大声喝问。“你们究竟想找什么？”

福尔摩斯飞快地扫视了一遍房间，跟着就猛然扑向写字台的下面，有人把一个绳子捆扎的包袱塞在了那里，包袱浸透了水。

“我们想找的就是这个，巴克先生，就是这个坠上了一只哑铃的包袱，也就是您刚刚从城壕水底捞上来的东西。”

巴克紧盯着福尔摩斯，表情十分惊讶。“天哪，您怎么会知道有这么一件东西呢？”他问道。

“道理非常简单，它是我放进水里的。”

“您放进水里的！您！”

“兴许我应该说，‘它是我重新放进水里的’，”福尔摩斯说道。“麦克唐纳督察，你肯定还记得吧，少了只哑铃的事情让我多少有点儿疑惑。我曾经提醒你注意这件事情，不过呢，你光顾着应付其他事情，没工夫好好考虑，所以就没能从这件事情演绎出什么东西。考虑到水流近在咫尺，眼前又少了一件重物，咱们如果推测有人把某件东西沉到了水里，并不能算是特别地牵强吧。再怎么说，这种推测终归值得检验一下。于是乎，昨天夜里，我靠着埃姆斯的帮助进入了这个房间，再用上华生医生的伞把，终于把这个包袱捞上来检查了一遍。

“不过，至关重要的事情是，咱们得设法证明，究竟是谁把包袱沉到了水里。咱们已经办到了这件事情，方法也十分粗浅，无非是宣布要在明天排干城壕。当然喽，听到这个消息之后，藏包袱的人十之八九会把它捞上去，天一黑就动手。我们有至少四名目击证人，都看见了利用这个机会打捞包袱的人究竟是谁，所以呢，巴克先生，我觉得您应该给我们一个解释。”

歇洛克·福尔摩斯把湿漉漉的包袱摆到桌上的油灯旁边，解开了捆扎包袱的绳子。他先从包袱里掏出一只哑铃，把它扔到角落里去跟另一只哑铃做伴，然后就拽出了一双靴子。“你们瞧，美

国产的，”他指着靴尖说了一句。接下来，他把一柄模样凶险的带鞘长刀放在了桌子上，最后又打开一个包裹，包裹里面是一整套衣物，包括内衣、袜子、一身灰色的花呢衣服和一件黄色的短大衣。

“这些衣物都很普通，”福尔摩斯如是指出，“只有这件大衣是个例外，它包含着许多很有意思的特点。”他轻轻地把大衣举到了灯光旁边[1]。“喏，你们瞧它的内袋，内袋在衬里下面延伸了很长的距离，完全容得下那把锯短了的鸟枪。大衣的衣领上绣着裁缝的标记——‘美国维尔米萨镇，尼尔成衣铺’。今天我在教区牧师的图书室里度过了一个富于教益的下午，由此了解到维尔米萨是美国的一个欣欣向荣的谷口小镇，所在山谷是美国最负盛名的煤铁矿区之一。巴克先生，我还记得您曾经提过，道格拉斯先生的前妻跟煤矿有点儿联系。既然如此，咱们当然可以得出一个不算十分牵强的推论，尸体旁边那张卡片上的‘V. V.’多半就是‘Vermissa Valley’（维尔米萨山谷），还可以进一步推测，这个派出杀手的山谷刚好就是咱们已有耳闻的那个‘恐怖谷’。这些都可以说是相当清楚。好啦，巴克先生，我觉得自己说得太多，已经妨碍到了您的解释工作。”

在这位大侦探发表上述见解的过程当中，塞西尔·巴克那张表情丰富的脸庞真是值得一看。愤怒、惊愕、恐慌、踌躇，种种表情次第浮现。到最后，他决定用一种多少有点儿刻薄的嘲讽神态来替自个儿扯个圆场。

“您既然知道了这么多情况，福尔摩斯先生，倒不如接着给我们讲好了，”他冷笑着说道。

“毫无疑问，巴克先生，我还有很多事情可以讲给您听。只不过，您自个儿来讲可能会体面一些。”

“噢，您是这么考虑的，是吗？好吧，我只能这么说，即便这

[1] 有一些版本当中，这句话后面还有一句，“又长又细的手指在衣服上指指点点”。

件事情当中隐藏着什么秘密，那也不是我的秘密，不是我有权公布的东西。”

“呃，巴克先生，如果您选择这种立场的话，”督察平心静气地说道，“那我们只能先把您看管起来，逮捕令一到就实施正式的拘捕。”

“你们爱他妈的怎么着就怎么着吧，”巴克毫不示弱地说道。

显而易见，我们对他的盘问已经无以为继。只需要看看他那张花岗石一般的面孔，谁都会立刻明白，再严厉的处罚也不能迫使他做出违心的事情。还好，一个女人的声音打破了眼前的僵局。说话的是道格拉斯太太，她已经站在虚掩的房门旁边听了一阵，这会儿便走了进来。

“你已经尽力了，塞西尔，”她说道。“不管将来会发生什么事情，总之你已经尽了力。”

“不光是尽了力，实际上还做过了头，”歇洛克·福尔摩斯郑重其事地说道。“夫人，我十分同情您的处境，并且恳请您对我国司法系统的判断力寄予信任，主动向警方坦白所有的事情。之前我没有理会您通过我朋友华生医生转达的暗示，兴许是有点儿考虑不周，话又说回来，当时我有充分的理由相信您直接卷入了犯罪活动。眼下呢，我已经断定事实并非如此，与此同时，我们还有很多细节需要澄清，因此我强烈建议，您还是把**道格拉斯先生**请出来，让他自己给我们讲讲他的故事吧。”

听了福尔摩斯的话，道格拉斯太太不由得惊叫一声。我和两位探员多半也有同样的反应，因为我们突然发现，一个男的似乎是一下子从墙里面冒了出来，眼下正从他现身的那个黑暗角落走向我们。道格拉斯太太转过身去，跟着就一把抱住了他，与此同时，巴克也跟他握起手来。

“还是这样好，杰克，”他的妻子开始反复念叨，“我敢肯定，还是这样比较好。”

“确实如此，没错，道格拉斯先生，”歇洛克·福尔摩斯说道，“我可以跟您保证，还是这样比较好。”

他站在那里，冲我们眨巴着眼睛，显然是因为刚刚从黑暗之中走到了亮处，一时之间有点儿眼花。他的长相真可谓引人注目，灰色的眼睛勇敢无畏，花白的髭须又短又浓，突出的下巴方方正正，嘴巴则显得开朗风趣。他仔细地打量了一下我们，接着就采取了一个让我惊讶万分的举动，径直走到我的面前，把一卷纸递给了我。

“久闻大名，”他的嗓音既不完全像英国人，也不完全像美国人，但却深沉圆润、悦耳动听。“您是这伙人当中的历史作家。好了，华生医生，我敢用我手头的最后一个美元跟您打赌，我交给您的这个故事绝对是您闻所未闻的东西。您可以按您自个儿的方式来讲，不过呢，事实都在这卷东西里面，手头有了这些事实，您根本不用担心读者不感兴趣。我已经关了两天的禁闭，并且利用光线好的时间——我是说，我藏身的那个老鼠洞里仅有的那点儿光线好的时间——把这些事情写成了文字。欢迎您来读一读，还有您的读者。我这些文字，讲的就是恐怖谷的故事。”

“那都是过去的事情，道格拉斯先生，”歇洛克·福尔摩斯平静地说道。“眼下呢，我们只想听您讲讲现在的故事。”

“我马上就讲，先生，”道格拉斯说道。“我可以边抽烟边讲吗？好的，谢谢您，福尔摩斯先生。如果我没记错的话，您自个儿也有抽烟的习惯，所以您可以想象，干巴巴地坐上两天，兜里有烟也不敢抽，怕的是烟味儿泄露秘密，那是一种什么样的滋味。”他靠到壁炉台上，贪婪地抽起了福尔摩斯递给他的雪茄。“我听说过您的大名，福尔摩斯先生，可我还真没想到，居然能跟您见上面。这么说吧，不等把那些东西读到结尾，”他冲着我手里的纸卷偏了偏脑袋，“您保准儿就会说，我的故事还是挺新鲜的。”

麦克唐纳督察一直在直勾勾地注视这个突然冒出来的人，神情惊讶得无以复加。“喂，这可真叫我想不明白！”他终于叫了起

来。“您如果是伯尔斯通宅邸的约翰·道格拉斯先生的话，那么，前两天我们是在调查谁的死因，您这又是打哪儿冒出来的呢？照我的感觉，您简直是跟那种装在盒子里的弹簧小人一样，一下子就从地板里面钻了出来。”

“噢，麦克先生，”福尔摩斯一边说，一边不以为然地晃起了食指，“我叫你读一读本地人关于查理一世藏身宅邸的那段精彩记述，可你就是不听。那些年月的人要想藏起来，那就必须得有一个非常隐秘的藏身之处，还有啊，以前的人用过的藏身之处，现在的人当然可以再用。所以呢，我早就已经断定，咱们可以在这座宅子里找到道格拉斯先生。”

“那您倒是说说，福尔摩斯先生，您在我们面前弄了多久的玄虚？”督察气冲冲地说道。“又让我们为一件您明知道愚蠢可笑的调查工作浪费了多长的时间？”

“一秒钟也没让你们浪费，亲爱的麦克先生。直到昨天夜里，我才对这件案子有了一个成形的结论。我的结论要到今天晚上才能得到验证，所以我才建议你和你的同事暂且放一天假。请问，我还能怎么做呢？我从城壕里捞起这套衣服的时候，事情已经一目了然，咱们发现的死者根本不可能是约翰·道格拉斯先生，只可能是从坦布里奇韦尔斯骑车过来的那个人，其他的说法都讲不通。既然如此，我必须设法查明约翰·道格拉斯先生本人的下落，与此同时，宅子既然为逃犯提供了这样的一种方便，他多半是在妻子和朋友的纵容之下躲在了宅子里，打算在风声不那么紧的时候展开最后的逃亡。”

“呃，您的推测基本正确，”道格拉斯赞许地说道。“那个时候，我一方面是觉得自己应该避开你们英国法律的纠缠，因为我不知道它会怎样看待我的行为，一方面又看到了一个机会，可以一劳永逸地甩掉那些追踪我的恶狗。您一定得记着，我自始至终都没有干过什么丢人现眼的事情，也没有干过什么我不愿意再干的事

情。当然喽，听了我的故事之后，你们也可以有你们自己的判断。您用不着警告我，督察，[1] 我已经打定了主意，要把真相原原本本地说出来。

“我不打算从头说起，之前的事情那里面都有，”他指了指我手里的纸卷，“你们肯定会发现，那里面的故事算得上匪夷所思。总而言之，那些事情造成了这么一个结果：世上有些人对我怀有理所当然的仇恨，即便是倾家荡产也要把我抓住。只要我跟他们都还活在世上，我就不会有太平的日子。他们从芝加哥把我撵到加利福尼亚，跟着又把我撵出了美国。不过，后来我结了婚，又搬到了这么个偏僻的地方，那时我心里想，这下子该有一个安安稳稳的余年了吧。

“我从来没跟我妻子说起过这些情况。干吗要把她扯进来呢？她要是知道了的话，以后就再也不会有心里踏实的时刻，肯定会成天提心吊胆。我觉得她已经知道了一些事情，因为我可能会时不时地说漏嘴。不过，直到昨天为止，直到你们诸位见到她的时候，她仍然不了解事情的真相。她已经把她知道的所有事情告诉了你们，巴克也是一样，因为那天晚上的事情发生得非常突然，我没有时间跟他们解释。现在她什么都知道了，而我觉得我应该早点儿告诉她，那样才是明智的做法。不过，亲爱的，以前我真的觉得你的问题不好回答，”他握了握她的手，“我的隐瞒完全是一片好心。

“是这样，先生们，出事之前的那一天，我去了一趟坦布里奇韦尔斯，在大街上瞥见了一个人的身影。虽然说只是匆匆一瞥，可我认人认得非常准，绝对不会弄错那个人的身份。那是我那些仇人当中最凶恶的一个，这些年来一直对我穷追不舍，就好像饿狼在追赶驯鹿。我知道祸事临头，于是就回家做了一些准

[1] 道格拉斯之所以这么说，应该是因为督察打算按惯例向他发出供词可能于己不利的警告。

备。当时我觉得，我可以单枪匹马地解决这个麻烦，怎么说呢，一八七六年左右，我的好运气可是在整个美国都出了名的。所以我深信不疑，这一次的运气也差不到哪里去。

“到了第二天，我整天都在留神戒备，始终没到庭园里去。幸亏我没出去，要不然的话，等不到我扑到他跟前，他那把霰弹枪已经要了我的命。傍晚吊桥收起之后，我心里总是会觉得踏实一些，所以呢，等到他们收起了吊桥，我就把这件事情置之脑后。可我万万没有想到，那个人竟然溜进了宅子，正在打我的埋伏。还好，当晚我虽然像平时一样穿着睡袍巡查宅子，可我一进书房就察觉到了危险的存在。依我看，经历过危险的人——我这辈子经历过的危险可比大多数人都要多哩——会产生一种第六感，它会在危险逼近的时候发出警报。当时我清清楚楚地看到了危险的讯号，只不过说不出到底是什么原因。紧接着，我瞥见了露在窗帘下面的一只靴子，到这个时候，原因当然是一目了然。

“房间里的光源只有我手上的蜡烛，可房门是开着的，门厅里的灯把书房照得很是亮堂。我放下蜡烛，冲过去抓我留在壁炉台上的那把锤子。与此同时，那个人也朝我扑了过来。我看见刀光一闪，便把手里的锤子向他抡了过去。我应该是打中了他，因为他的刀子咣当一声掉在了地上。他绕着桌子左躲右闪，动作快得跟鳗鱼一样。转眼之间，他已经把他的枪从大衣下面掏了出来。我听见他扳起了击铁，可我没等他开火就抓住了那把枪的枪管。我俩拼死拼活地争抢了一两分钟，谁要是松了手，谁就是死路一条。

“他倒是始终没有松手，就是不该老让枪管冲着上面。兴许是我扣动了扳机，兴许是我俩的扭打让那把枪走了火，总而言之，两筒弹药都打在了他的脸上，而我站在那里，直愣愣地看着地板上那个残缺不全的特德·鲍德温。那天在镇上的时候，我一眼就认出了他，之前他朝我扑过来的时候，我同样认出了他，可是，照我当时看见的那副模样，即便是他妈妈也没法把他认出来。血

腥的场面我见得不少，他那时的模样却让我差一点儿就吐了出来。

“巴克冲进房间的时候，我还在桌子边上靠着。我听到我妻子跑了过来，赶紧跑到门口去拦住了她，那样的景象可不适合女人。我跟她说我一会儿就去找她，又跟巴克说了几句，巴克已经一眼看清了面前的形势。这之后，我俩就待在书房里等其他的人过来。其他的人始终没有出现，我俩这才反应过来，他们什么也没听见，这一次的事情只有我们三个人知道。

“就是在那个时刻，我突然想出了一条妙计，一时间十分得意，简直有点儿忘乎所以。那个人的袖管滑到了胳膊上面，烙在前臂上的帮会标记露了出来。瞧瞧这个！”

据我们所知名为“道格拉斯”的这个人把自己的袖管撸了上去，露出了一个圆圈套三角形的褐色标记，跟我们在死者身上看到的标记一模一样。

“就是因为看到了这个标记，我才想出了那条妙计。刹那之间，一切似乎豁然开朗。那家伙的身高、头发和体形都跟我自个儿差不多，而他的脸又已经无法辨认，算他倒霉！我从楼上取来了我现在穿的这套衣服，不到一刻钟，我和巴克就把我的睡袍套到他身上，把他打扮成了你们发现时的模样。我俩把他的东西打成一个包袱，我又把当时能找到的唯一一件重物塞了进去，然后就把包袱扔进了窗外的城壕。那张卡片本来是他打算摆在我尸体旁边的东西，结果是摆在了他自己的尸体旁边。

“衣服之外，我还把自己的戒指套到了他的手指上，可是，轮到结婚戒指的时候，”他伸出了一只强健的手，“你们自己看吧，我遇上了一道无法逾越的障碍。这枚戒指从我结婚开始就一直戴在我的手上，不用上锉刀是取不下来的。再者说，我本来也不愿意舍弃这枚戒指，当然喽，这事情终归没法办到，就算我愿意也不行。这一来，我俩只能任由这个破绽留在那里，爱怎么样就怎么样吧。另一方面，我倒是从楼上取来了一块橡皮膏，把它贴在

了那家伙的脸上，因为我自个儿的脸上也有一块。福尔摩斯先生，您虽然精明过人，这个地方还是看走了眼，原因嘛，您要是能想到把那块橡皮膏揭下来看看的话，就会发现下面并没有伤口。

“好了，当时的情况就是这样。我本打算躲上一段时间，然后再跑到某个地方去等我的‘遗孀’，那样的话，我俩应该可以得到一个求之不得的机会，余生之中过上太平的日子。只要我还在人世，那些恶魔就会让我不得安宁，反过来，如果他们在报纸上看到鲍德温已经得手的话，我的麻烦就会彻底消失。之前我一直没时间跟巴克和我妻子详细解释，可他们已经对真相有了足够的了解，都愿意帮我的忙。我早就已经对宅子里的那个藏身之处了如指掌，埃姆斯也是一样，只不过，他始终都没有把藏身之处跟这次的事情联系起来。就这样，我躲进了那个地方，剩下的事情都交给巴克去处理。

“依我看，巴克干了些什么事情，你们自己也能够想象出来。他打开窗子，在窗台上摁了个鞋印，为的是让别人知道凶手是怎么逃走的。从窗子逃走并不怎么符合情理，可吊桥是收着的，要逃就只有这条出路。安排好所有事情之后，他铆足了劲儿拉起铃来。后来的事情嘛，你们都已经知道了。好啦，先生们，你们想怎么办就怎么办吧，反正我已经把真相告诉了你们，而且是全部的真相，老天可以作证！现在我只想问问你们，英国的法律会怎样看待我的行为呢？”

房间里一下子鸦雀无声，到最后，歇洛克·福尔摩斯终于打破了沉默。

“总体说来，英国的法律算得上公平合理。您不会因此受到什么有欠公允的处罚，道格拉斯先生。不过，我倒想问一问您，那个家伙怎么会知道您住在这里，怎么会知道该如何闯进您的宅子，又怎么会知道该躲在哪儿等您呢？”

“这我可一点儿也说不上来。”

福尔摩斯脸色苍白，神情十分严峻。“要我说，这件事恐怕还不算完呢，”他说道。“您面临的危险不光比英国法律可怕，甚至还比您那些美国仇人可怕。依我看，道格拉斯先生，您的麻烦可不小啊。您一定要接受我的建议，绝不能就此放松警惕。”

在我们这段变故迭生的旅程行将结束的时候，这个自称约翰·道格拉斯的人向我们讲述了以上的怪异故事。好了，耐性十足的读者诸君，现在我要请你们跟我一同上路，暂时远离萨塞克斯郡的伯尔斯通宅邸，远离我们踏上旅程的这个年头。我想请你们把时间回拨二十来年，把地点西移几千英里，以便我向你们呈上一个离奇恐怖的故事。这个故事无比离奇、无比恐怖，尽管我言之凿凿、尽管它确曾发生，你们依然会觉得它难以置信。

千万不要以为，我这是拿另一个故事来岔开一个还没讲完的故事。再往下读一读，你们就会发现事实并非如此。等到我讲完那些遥远的往事，等到你们澄清了关于过去的种种疑惑，咱们就会在贝克街的寓所里再次聚首，到那个时候，跟其他许多次精彩纷呈的奇遇一样，这一次的奇遇也会落下帷幕。

SHERLOCK HOLMES

恐怖谷

◎ 第二部 ◎

扫魂帮[1]

[1] 原文是“the Scowrers”，“Scowrer”为“scourer”的异体，后者曾经指那些夜间在街上四处游荡、为非作歹的流氓。此处为黑帮名称，故音义兼取译为“扫魂帮”。

第一章 * 某人

时间是一八七五年二月四日。这个冬天十分严酷，吉尔莫顿山脉的道道沟谷之中堆起了深深的积雪。不过，靠着蒸汽扫雪车的帮助，铁道依然畅通无阻。在那条连接各个煤铁矿区的漫长铁路上，喘息不止的晚班火车正慢慢地爬上一段段陡峻的斜坡。斜坡的底部是地处平原的斯德格维尔镇，顶部则是这一带的中心城镇，坐落在维尔米萨山谷谷口的维尔米萨镇。经过该镇之后，铁路急转直下，伸向巴腾斯道口和赫姆戴尔，以及单一从事农业的默顿县。这虽然只是一条单轨铁路，沿途却有无数条支线，每条支线上都有一列又一列满载煤炭和铁矿石的长长货车，诉说着此地丰富的矿藏。正是因为丰富的矿藏，熙熙攘攘的粗野人群和热火朝天的生活场景才出现在了全美国最荒凉的这个角落。[1]

这个角落着实荒凉！最早穿越此地的拓荒者怎么也不会想到，这片黑崖耸峙、密林如织的阴沉土地竟然会让那些最为美丽的草原和水草最为丰美的牧场显得一钱不值。这片土地的两侧都是白雪皑皑、怪石嶙峋的荒芜山峰，高高地耸立在几乎无法穿越的黑暗丛林之上，中央则是一道蜿蜒曲折的漫长山谷。此时此刻，这列小小的火车正在山谷之中慢慢攀升。

打头的一节载客车厢刚刚点起了油灯，长长的车厢里没有任何装饰，乘客也只有二三十个。大多数乘客都是下班回家的工人，刚刚在山谷的低处辛辛苦苦

[1] 这一段当中的所有地名皆为虚构。

地工作了一天。矿工少说也有十二个，沾满煤灰的脸庞和随身携带的安全提灯表明了他们的身份。他们坐在一起，一边抽烟，一边轻声交谈，时不时地还会冲车厢对面的两个人瞥上一眼。那两个人穿着制服，佩着徽章，一看就知道是警察。

车厢里还有几个工人阶层的妇女，以及一两个看着像是当地小店主的乘客，此外就只有一个独自坐在角落里的小伙子。这个人就是我们关注的焦点。好好看看他吧，因为他值得我们多看两眼。

这个小伙子容光焕发，中等身材，年纪大约是三十岁。他那双灰色的大眼睛显得又敏锐又风趣，时不时地隔着眼镜扫视周围的人群，闪出满含好奇的光芒。显而易见，他这个人喜好交际，兴许还有点儿头脑简单，急于向所有的人表白自己的友善态度。随便哪个人都可以一眼看出，他喜欢热闹、天生健谈、口齿伶俐、逢人便笑。不过，看得仔细一点儿的话，你兴许会发现他的下巴带着一种刚毅，嘴唇也显得冷峻果决。这样一来，你就会心生警惕，意识到这个讨人喜欢的爱尔兰褐发青年并不像表面看起来那么简单，不管是好是歹，也不管接纳他的是一个什么样的圈子，他总归会在圈子当中留下自己的印记。

这名乘客跟坐得最近的那个矿工搭讪了几句，得到的只是简短粗暴的回答，于是便心不甘情不愿地陷入了沉默，闷闷不乐地冲着越来越暗的窗外景色发起呆来。

窗外的景色并不让人心情愉悦。山坡上的一座座炼铁高炉在越来越浓的暮色之中闪着红光，铁路两边都是堆积如山的矿渣和煤渣，比这些垃圾堆还要高的则是煤矿场里的一座座高塔。沿线散布着一片又一片挤作一团的粗陋木屋，次第点亮的灯火刚刚开始把木屋窗子的轮廓勾勒出来。火车频繁靠站，每个站点都挤满了黑炭似的居民。

维尔米萨地区的煤铁山谷绝不是有闲阶层或者风雅之士的休养胜地，这里处处都是各式各样的阴沉印迹，印迹来自最为原始

的生存斗争，来自种种粗蛮的活计，来自以此为业的那些粗蛮壮健的工人。

年轻的乘客凝视着窗外这片凄惨的土地，脸色又是厌恶又是好奇，显然是头一次看到这种景象。他时不时地从兜里掏出一封厚厚的信，一边翻看，一边在信纸边缘写下一些潦草的笔记。其间有一次，他从背后掏出了一样东西。那东西跟他那副无比温文的神态格格不入，竟然是一把最大号的“海军”左轮手枪[①]。当他让手枪侧对光线的时候，弹仓里那些黄铜弹壳的边缘闪出了光芒，说明手枪里装满了子弹。他飞快地把手枪放回了背后那个隐秘的口袋，但却还是被邻座的一个工人看在了眼里。

“喂，老兄！”工人说道。“你好像带了家伙嘛。”

小伙子笑了笑，神情有点儿尴尬。

“是啊，”他说道，“在我来的那个地方，有时候用得着这种东西。”

“那个地方是哪里呢？”

“我的上一站是芝加哥。”

“没来过这边吧？”

“没来过。”

“在这边你也用得着它的，”工人说道。

“啊！真是这样吗？”小伙子似乎非常关心这个问题。

“你没听说过这边的事情吗？”

“没听说过什么出格的事情。”

“是嘛，我还以为这边的事情已经传遍全国了哩。不过不要紧，你很快就会听说的。你来这儿干吗呢？”

[①]“海军”左轮手枪（navy revolver）不详所指。为了向“孤星共和国”的得克萨斯海军示好，美国的柯尔特专利火器制造公司（Colt’s Patent Fire-Arms Manufacturing Company）曾在1850至1873年间制造过名为“海军”的左轮手枪，不过都是点三六口径，似乎没有大小之分。

“我听人家说，只要你愿意干，这地方总是有活干的。”

“你是工会的会员吗？”

“当然。”

“这样的话，我看你应该能找到活计。你在这儿有朋友吗？”

“暂时没有，可我有办法交到朋友。”

“是吗，什么办法呢？”

“我是‘尊贵自由人会’的会员，随便哪个镇子都有这个会的分会，只要有分会，我就能交到朋友。”

听了这句话，小伙子的旅伴产生了一种古怪的反应，疑神疑鬼地看了看车厢里的其他乘客。矿工们仍然在低声交谈，两名警察则在打瞌睡。于是他走了过来，坐到小伙子的身边，伸出了一只手。

“伸过来，”他说道。

两个人按一种奇特的方式握了握手。

“我知道你没说假话，”工人说道。“只不过，确定一下也没什么不好。”他把右手举到了右边的眉梢，小伙子立刻把左手举到了左边的眉梢。

“黑夜不宜——”工人说道。

“是的，——生人行路，”小伙子应道。

“这就行了。我是维尔米萨山谷三百四十一分会的斯坎伦兄弟，很高兴在这边见到你。”

“谢谢你。我是芝加哥二十九分会的约翰·麦克默多兄弟，会首是 J. H. 斯科特。一来就碰上了会里的兄弟，我的运气可真是不错。”

“怎么说呢，这边的兄弟多极了。咱们会在维尔米萨山谷发展得特别好，全美国也没有哪个地方能跟我们这儿比。不过，你这样的伙计我们还是欢迎的。我真是想不通，在芝加哥那个地方，一个身手利落的工会会员竟然找不到活计。”

“我找到的活计多着呢，”麦克默多说道。

“那你干吗要离开呢？”

麦克默多冲警察的方向偏了偏脑袋，笑了起来。“依我看，我离开的原因，那些家伙肯定很想知道，”他说道。

斯坎伦满怀同情地叹了一声。“遇上麻烦啦？”他悄声问道。

“大麻烦。”

“抓住了就得进班房？”

“还不止呢。”

“你不会是杀了人吧！”

“现在谈这些还早了点儿，”麦克默多说道，看架势是有点儿后悔，后悔自己被人猝不及防地问出了一些本来不想说的事情。“总之我有一些非常充足的私人理由，不得不离开芝加哥，其他的你就别问了吧。你到底是干吗的，干吗要死乞白赖地打听这些事情呢？”突然之间，他那双灰色的眼睛从眼镜后面射出了愤怒的凶光。

“好啦，老兄，我没有什么恶意。不管你干过些什么，兄弟们都不会对你有什么看法的。眼下你打算上哪儿去呢？”

“维尔米萨镇。”

“第三站就是。你打算住哪儿呢？”

麦克默多掏出一个信封，把它凑到了昏暗的油灯旁边。“喏，这上面就是地址——谢里丹街，雅各布·沙夫特。这是一家寄宿公寓，是我在芝加哥的一个熟人介绍给我的。”

“呃，我不知道这个地方。怎么说呢，维尔米萨本来就不是我的地盘。我住在霍布森帕奇，下一站就是。对了，咱俩分别之前，我想给你一个小小的建议：如果你在维尔米萨遇上了麻烦的话，直接到‘团结会馆’去找麦金提头领好了。他是维尔米萨分会的会首，这边的所有事情都得经过‘黑杰克’[1]麦金提的同意。再见，老兄！

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[1] 黑杰克（Black Jack）是扑克牌当中的黑桃J，也是美国西部著名匪徒托马斯·凯彻姆（Thomas Ketchum, 1863—1901）的绰号。《福尔摩斯冒险史》的《博斯库姆溪谷谜案》当中的约翰·特纳也曾有这个绰号。

说不定哪个晚上，咱们就能在会里见上面呢。不过，你一定得记住我的话：要是遇上了麻烦，只管去找麦金提头领。”

斯坎伦下了车，麦克默多再一次开始独自沉思。夜幕已经降临，比比皆是的高炉火焰在黑暗之中嘶吼跳跃。鲜红的火光映出了一些黑黢黢的身影，随着辘轳或者绞盘的律动或屈或伸、或扭或转，应和着铿锵声与轰鸣声交织而成的无尽节拍。

“依我看，地狱里应该就是这种景象吧，”一个声音说道。

麦克默多转过头去，看到一名警察已经在自个儿的座位上换了个姿势，这会儿正在观望外面那片烈火熊熊的蛮荒之地。

“你说那个啊，”另一名警察说道，“我同意你的看法，地狱里应该**就是**这种景象。要说地狱里还有什么妖魔比咱们知道的那些更可怕的话，那我可真是不敢相信。要我说，你应该是新来的吧，小伙子？”

“呃，新来的又怎么着？”麦克默多没好气地回答道。

“不怎么着，先生，我只是想劝你一句，交朋友的时候得小心一点儿。我要是你的话，交朋友的时候就不会从迈克·斯坎伦和他那帮子人开始。”

“我跟谁交朋友，关你什么屁事？”麦克默多吼了起来，声音大得把车厢里所有的人都变成了这场口角的见证。“我请你给我提建议了吗，还是你觉得我是个三岁小孩，没有你的建议就寸步难行呢？别人没搭理你的时候，你不要自讨没趣，可你要想等我搭理你的话，老天爷，那你就等得久了！”他探出头去，冲着两名警察龇牙咧嘴，活像一头狺狺狂吠的恶狗。

两名警察都是性情温和的大老粗，看到自己的友好搭讪换来了如此暴烈的拒斥，一时间有点儿摸不着头脑。

“别见怪，外乡人，”其中一个说道。“我们的忠告也是为你好，原因嘛，从你自个儿的表现来看，你显然是不了解这个地方。”

“我确实不了解这个地方，可我了解你们，了解你们这种货

色！”麦克默多叫道，似乎是好不容易才压住了心头的熊熊怒火。“要我说，你们这种货色到了哪儿都是一样，就知道觍着脸兜售你们那些没人要的忠告。”

“说不定，咱们很快就会再次碰面的，”一名警察说道，咧开嘴笑了笑。“我要没看错的话，你可真是个百里挑一的主儿。”

“我看也是这样，”另一名警察说道。“咱们肯定会再次碰面的。”

“我可不怕你们，想吓唬我，门儿都没有！”麦克默多叫道。“我名叫杰克·麦克默多，记清楚了吗？我住的是雅各布·沙夫特开的那家寄宿公寓，公寓就在维尔米萨镇的谢里丹街，要来你们尽管来。瞧啊，我没想躲着你们，对不对？白天晚上我都不怕跟你们这种货色眼对眼——你们可得记好了！”

看到这个新来者的大胆举动，矿工们发出了满怀同情与钦佩的低声咕哝，与此同时，两名警察耸了耸肩膀，顾自交谈起来，退出了这场口角。

几分钟之后，火车驶入了灯光昏暗的维尔米萨车站。车上的人纷纷下车，因为维尔米萨是这条线路上迄今为止最大的一个镇子。麦克默多拎起自己的小皮箱，正准备踏进黑乎乎的站台，一名矿工却跟他搭起话来。

“我的天，老兄！你可真会跟警察说话，”矿工的声音充满了敬佩。“听你说话可真带劲儿。我来帮你拿箱子，帮你指路吧。我准备回我自个儿的破屋，正好要从沙夫特家经过。”

他俩走出站台的时候，其他的矿工齐声道了一句亲切友好的“晚安”。双脚还没踏上维尔米萨镇的土地，“捣蛋鬼”麦克默多就已经变成了镇上的一号人物。

之前路过的乡野已经称得上阴沉可怖，眼前的镇子却具有一种更加让人压抑的特色。下方那道长长的山谷点缀着升腾的火焰和飘舞的浓烟，人类在山里掘出了一个个硕大无朋的洞穴，又在洞穴旁边为自己的力量和勤勉树起了一座座恰如其分的纪念碑，

那样的景象至少还有一种苍凉的壮美。相形之下，这个镇子却将卑贱、丑陋、肮脏和贫穷诠释得淋漓尽致。行人和车辆将积雪覆盖的宽阔大街搅成了一片辙印纵横、污秽不堪的泥泞，狭窄的人行道崎岖不平，旁边则是一长溜露台临街的木屋。街上虽然点着无数的煤气灯，作用却只是将这些肮脏凌乱的木屋映照得格外鲜明。

他俩走近镇子中心的时候，一排灯火通明的店铺为阴沉的景象增添了一点儿生气，更显得生机勃勃的则是几家连成一片的酒廊和赌馆，那些地方就是矿工们的销金窟，他们的工钱虽然来之不易，却也为数不菲。

“那就是团结会馆，”向导指着一间高度几乎可以跟旅馆媲美的酒廊说道。“会馆的头领是杰克·麦金提。”

“他是个什么样的人呢？”麦克默多问道。

“什么！这位头领你都没听说过吗？”

“你也知道我刚刚才从外地来到这里，怎么可能听说过他呢？”

“呃，我还以为全国都知道他的名字呢。他的名字经常都会上报啊。”

“为什么上报呢？”

“呃，”矿工压低了嗓门儿——“因为一些事情。”

“什么事情？”

“我的天，先生！我没有冒犯你的意思，可你这个人确实有点儿怪。我们这边只有一种事情可以上报，那就是扫魂帮的事情。”

“还真是，我在芝加哥也好像听说过扫魂帮这个名字。他们是一伙杀人凶手，对吧？”

“嘘，小心你的性命！”矿工叫道，一动不动地站在那里，惊慌失措地盯着自己的同伴。“伙计，你要是把这种话拿到大街上去宣扬的话，那你在这儿可活不了多久。好些个被他们打得半死的人，惹的祸事还没有你这么严重呢。”

“呃，我对他们一无所知，刚才的话也只是听来的。”

“我倒不是说，你说的不是实情，”矿工一边说，一边慌里慌张地东张西望，使劲儿地窥视那些黑暗的地方，似乎是担心暗处潜藏着什么危险。“如果杀了人就算凶手的话，老天爷可以作证，这儿的凶手多的是。可是，外乡人，你可千万别把这些事情跟杰克·麦金提扯在一起，因为所有的悄悄话都会传进他的耳朵，而他并不是一个听过就算完的人。好了，那就是你要找的房子，就是跟街道稍微有点儿距离的那一座。去了你就知道了，公寓的东家老雅各布·沙夫特非常正派，不比镇上的任何一个人差。”

“谢谢你，”麦克默多说道，跟这位新相识握手作别，然后就拎过皮箱，沿着积雪覆盖的小径吃力地走向那座住宅。走到门口的时候，他把门拍得山响。

完全出乎他意料的是，出来应门的是一个漂亮得出奇的年轻女子。她看着像是日耳曼血统，肤色白皙，头发金黄，色彩跟她那双美丽的黑眼睛形成了鲜明的对比。她上下打量着眼前的陌生人，神情有一点儿惊讶，又有一点儿惹人怜爱的腼腆，苍白的脸庞泛起了一抹亮色。她的身影映现在灯火辉煌的门廊之中，麦克默多顿时觉得，自己从来都没有见过比这更美的图画，这样的图画出现在污秽阴郁的背景之中，更是让人心向神往。即便是矿区某一堆黑黢黢的矿渣里长出了一枝娇艳的紫罗兰，效果也不会比此时此刻更加让人惊叹。他看得出了神，只知道目瞪口呆地站在那里，还得靠她来打破现场的沉默。

“我还以为是我父亲回来了呢，”她说话带着一点儿讨人喜欢的德国口音。“您是来找他的吗？他这会儿在镇上，随时都会回来。”

麦克默多继续盯着她看，毫不掩饰自己的倾慕之情，看得她垂下了眼睛，不知道该怎么应付这个气势逼人的访客。

“不是，小姐，”麦克默多终于开了口，“我并不急着见他。只不过，有人向我推荐了你们家的寄宿公寓。本来嘛，我觉得你们

完全出乎他意料的是，出来应门的是一个漂亮得出奇的年轻女子。

的公寓应该合适——现在我知道了，肯定合适。”

“您的主意拿得也太快了吧，”姑娘微笑着说道。

“只要眼睛不瞎，谁都可以拿这么快，”对方回答道。

这句恭维逗得姑娘笑了起来。“请进，先生，”她说道。“我是沙夫特先生的女儿，名叫伊蒂·沙夫特。我母亲已经过世了，我负责料理家务。您就在前屋的炉子边上坐着吧，等我父亲回来——啊，他已经回来了！您可以直接跟他谈租房子的事情。”

小径上出现了一个身材高大的老人，吭哧吭哧地走了过来。麦克默多三言两语地讲明了自己的来意，在芝加哥的时候，一个名叫墨菲的人给了他这个地址，墨菲又是从别的某个人那里听说的。老沙夫特非常乐意承揽这笔生意，外乡人也是一点儿都不挑，立刻答应了所有的条件，一看就知道手头十分阔绰。具体的条件呢，一个星期七块钱，管吃管住，租金预付。

就这样，自承不讳的逃犯麦克默多住进了沙夫特的公寓，由此引出了一连串阴沉可怕的事件，种种事件绵亘多年，最后才在遥远的异乡写下终篇。

第二章 * 会首

麦克默多是个出风头出得很快的人物，不管他到了哪儿，周围的人都会迅速意识到他的存在。不到一个星期，他已经变成了沙夫特的公寓里最最重要的人物，地位与其他的住客不可同日而语。公寓里还有十来个租客，可他们要么是老老实实的工头，要么就是普普通通的店员，做派跟这个爱尔兰小伙子大不相同。大家晚上聚在一起的时候，他的笑话总是最现成，他的口齿总是最伶俐，他的歌喉也总是最动听。他生来就适合跟人交朋友，身上带着一种磁力，足以吸引身边所有人的好感。

美中不足的是，就像在来时的火车里那样，他一次又一次地让大家认识到，他可能会在突然之间大发雷霆，迫使那些跟他有交道的人不得不对他礼让三分，甚而至于心生畏惧。还有呢，对于法律本身，以及法律行当的各色人等，他表现出了一种恨之入骨的轻蔑，这样的态度让一些租客喜闻乐见，又让另一些租客惊恐不已。

从一开始，他就通过公开的倾慕向大家表明，第一眼看到房东女儿的绰约丰姿，他的心就不再属于自己。他可不是那种羞羞答答的追求者。住进公寓的第二天，他迫不及待地向姑娘挑明了自己的爱意，打那以后，他总是不厌其烦地重复着同样的表白，完全不管姑娘会说些什么样的话来扫他的兴。

“还有别人？”他总是这么嚷嚷。“是吗，叫那个别人见鬼去吧！让他给我小心点儿！这是我一生一次

的机会，是我这辈子最大的愿望，难道我会拱手让人吗？你只管接着说‘不’好了，伊蒂，总有一天你会说‘好’的，反正我年轻，等得起。”

他拥有爱尔兰人的伶牙俐齿，而且特别擅长哄人开心，着实是个难以抵挡的追求者。除此之外，他见多识广、神秘莫测，这样的魅力足以赢得女人的注意，最终还可以赢得她们的爱情。他会谈起他家乡莫纳亨郡[1]的迷人山谷，谈起那个远在天边的可爱岛屿，谈起那些低矮的山丘和葱绿的牧场。身处眼下这片满布煤灰的冰天雪地，想象力自然会让那些地方显得格外美丽。

接下来，他又会滔滔不绝地谈起北方那些城市的生活场景，谈起底特律，谈起密歇根州的那些伐木营地，最后还有芝加哥，他在那里的一家木材加工厂上过班。再下来，他开始渲染传奇氛围，隐隐约约地暗示他在那个大城市里遇上了一些怪事，那些事情十分古怪、十分私隐，以至于他提都不应该提。这边厢，他郁郁不乐地说起自己突然离开，斩断过去的种种纽带，遁入一片陌生的土地，最终来到了这么一个荒凉阴郁的山谷，那边厢，伊蒂凝神细听，闪闪发亮的黑眼睛里装满了惋惜与同情——这两种情愫都可以衍生爱情，需要的只是一个十分短暂、十分自然的转变过程。

麦克默多受过很好的教育，很快就找到了一份帮人记账的临时工作。这一来，白天他大多数时间都在外面上班，一直没工夫去尊贵自由人会的分会会首那里报到。不过，一天晚上，迈克·斯坎伦跑来找他，提醒他不应该这么大意。斯坎伦就是他在火车上遇到的那个同门兄弟，身材矮小、尖脸庞、黑眼睛，为人有点儿大惊小怪。再次见到他，斯坎伦显得非常高兴。一两杯威士忌下肚之后，斯坎伦挑明了自己的来意。

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[1] 莫纳亨郡（County Monaghan）是爱尔兰东北部的一个郡。后文中的“可爱岛屿”应该是指爱尔兰岛。

“我说，麦克默多，”他说道，“我记住了你的地址，所以才冒昧过来找你。你居然没去找会首报到，真是让我吃惊。你干吗还不去见麦金提头领呢？”

“呃，我得先找工作啊。这一阵，我一直都没有工夫。”

“别的你都可以没工夫，找他的事情必须得有工夫。我的天，伙计！你居然没有赶在刚来的第一天早上到团结会馆去挂个号，简直是缺心眼儿！你要是让他给撞见了——呃，你肯定是没让他撞见，撞见就完啦！”

麦克默多显得有些惊讶。“我入会已经两年多了，斯坎伦，可我从来都没听说过，会里的义务有你说的这么刻不容缓。”

“芝加哥的情况可能不同吧。”

“可是，这里的不也是同一个会嘛。”

“是吗？”斯坎伦盯着他看了好一阵子，眼神之中带着威胁。

“不是吗？”

“过上一个月，你再来告诉我是不是吧。听人说，我下车之后，你跟那两个警察谈了谈。”

“这你是怎么知道的呢？”

“咳，这事情已经传开了啊。在咱们这个地方，不管是好是歹，事情反正是传得特别快。”

“哦，好吧。我只是跟那些狗腿子说了说我对他们的看法。”

“我的天，麦金提就喜欢你这样的人！”

“怎么，他也恨警察吗？”

斯坎伦放声大笑。“你去见见他吧，我的小伙计，”他一边说，一边起身告辞。“你要是不去的话，那他就不恨警察，改成恨你啦！好了，听听我这个朋友的忠告，赶紧去见他吧！”

事有凑巧，同一天晚上，麦克默多又赶上了另一次会面，这次会面以更为紧迫的方式驱使他按照斯坎伦的建议行事。事情的起因可能是他对伊蒂的好感比以前还要一目了然，也可能是他的

好感渐渐触动了好心肠的德国房东那根不太敏感的神经，不管是什么原因吧，房东反正是把小伙子叫进了自个儿的房间，直截了当地谈起了这件事情。

“依我看，先生，”他说道，“你好像盯上了我的伊蒂。有这回事吗，该不会是我弄错了吧？”

“是的，有这回事，”小伙子回答道。

“那么，我现在就告诉你，你这完全是白费心思。有人已经抢在了你的前头。”

“她也是这么跟我说的。”

“那你只管相信，她的话一点儿也不假。不过，她跟你说过那个人是谁吗？”

“没有，我问过她，可她不愿意告诉我。”

“我看她也不愿意告诉你，可怜的小东西！兴许她是怕把你吓跑了吧。”

“吓跑我！”麦克默多的火气一下子蹿了上来。

“唉，是啊，我的朋友！吓跑了也很正常，并不是什么丢脸的事情。那个人就是特德·鲍德温啊。”

“那个该死的究竟是干吗的呢？”

“他是扫魂帮的一个头目。”

“扫魂帮！以前我也听说过他们。到处都有人说起扫魂帮，说的时候都跟讲悄悄话似的！你们大家都在怕什么？扫魂帮究竟是干吗的呢？”

房东本能地压低了嗓门，说到这个恐怖帮会的时候，所有的人都是如此。“扫魂帮，”他说道，“就是尊贵自由人会！”

小伙子瞪大了眼睛。“什么，我也是自由人会的会员啊。”

“你！早知道你也是的话，我绝对不会让你住进我的房子，就算你一个星期给一百块也不行。”

“这个会有什么不对吗？它的宗旨可是博爱和友谊啊，会规就

是这么说的。”

“它在有些地方也许是这样吧，在这里可不是！”

“在这里是什么样呢？”

“不是什么别的，就是个杀手帮会。”

麦克默多笑了起来，仿佛是听到了天方夜谭。“你这种说法有证据吗？”他问道。

“证据！五十件凶案不是明明白白地摆在那里吗？米尔曼和范·肖斯特、尼科尔森一家、海厄姆老先生、年轻的比利·詹姆斯，还有其他的那些人，他们都是怎么死的呢？证据！这些事情，这个山谷里的男男女女有哪个不知道呢？”

“听我说！”麦克默多一板一眼地说道。“我希望你收回刚才的话，要不就给我一个确切的证明。在我走出这个房间之前，两样之中你必须选一样。你站在我的立场上想想吧。我是个初来本镇的外乡人，属于一个据我所知无可指责的帮会，全美国到处都有它的分会，哪里的分会都是无可指责。眼下呢，我正打算上本镇的分会去报到，可你竟然告诉我，它跟一个名为扫魂帮的杀手帮会是一回事。照我看，你要么得给我赔个不是，要么就得跟我说个明白，沙夫特先生。”

“我可以告诉你一个人人都知道的事实，先生。这个会的头目就是那个会的头目，如果你得罪了这个会，那个会就会来找你算账。这样的事情我们见得太多了。”

“那些都只是传言，我要的是证据！”麦克默多说道。

“你在这儿待得久了，自然就会看到证据。对啊，我倒是忘了，你自个儿也是他们当中的一员嘛。用不了多久，你就会变得跟其他的人一样坏。不过呢，你还是换个地方住吧，先生，我这儿没法留你了。他们当中的一个缠上了我的伊蒂，而我又不敢回绝，难道说这还不够糟糕，我非得再招一个来当房客吗？没错，只能这样，今晚之后，你就请便吧！”

这些话等于是宣判了麦克默多的流放之刑，他不光要失去舒适的住处，还得失去心爱的姑娘。

同一个晚上，他看到姑娘独自坐在起居室里，于是就向她倾诉了心里的苦闷。

“真的，你父亲已经向我下了逐客令，”他说道。“房子的事情我倒无所谓，可是说真的，伊蒂，我认识你虽然只有一个星期，可你已经是我赖以为生的空气，没有你我根本没法活啊！”

“噢，别这么说，麦克默多先生，别这么说话！”姑娘说道。“我告诉过您，您来得太晚了，不是吗？另外还有一个人，我虽说没有答应马上跟他结婚，总归也没法答应别人。”

“要是我先来的话，伊蒂，你会给我一个机会吗？”

姑娘用双手捂住了脸。“老天在上，我真希望先来的是您啊！”她抽泣起来。

麦克默多立刻跪倒在她的面前。“看在上帝分上，伊蒂，就当先来的是我好了！”他大声说道。“你难道愿意为了那个承诺毁掉你我的生活吗？照你自个儿的心意办吧，小心肝儿[1]！跟那些你根本没想清楚的承诺比起来，还是你自个儿的心意更靠得住啊。”

他那双强健有力的褐色大手已经抓住了伊蒂那只雪白的小手。

“告诉我，你是我的人，咱俩可以一起闯过所有的难关！”

“不会是在这儿吧？”

“是的，就在这儿。”

“不，不行，杰克！”他的双臂已经环住了她。“在这儿是不行的。你能带我去别的地方吗？”

矛盾的神色从麦克默多的脸上一闪而过，跟着就变成了花岗岩一般的坚定表情。“不，就在这儿，”他说道。“就算整个世界都跟我作对，我也要跟你在一起，伊蒂，就在这个地方，哪儿也不去！”

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[1] 这个称呼的原文是爱尔兰语“acushla”，原义为“心跳”，转义为“爱人”。

“咱们干吗不一起离开呢？”

“不行，伊蒂，我不能离开这儿。”

“为什么呢？”

“要是我觉得自己被人赶走了的话，那我一辈子都会抬不起头的。还有啊，咱们有什么可害怕的呢？咱们难道不是自由国家里的自由公民吗？你爱我，我也爱你，谁敢来阻挡咱们呢？”

“你还不了解，杰克。你来这里的时间太短了。你不了解这个鲍德温，也不了解麦金提，还有他那个扫魂帮。”

“是的，我确实不了解他们，可我并不害怕他们，也不相信他们能把我怎么着！”麦克默多说道。“以前我也在暴徒当中待过，亲爱的，到头来都不是我怕他们，而是他们怕我——哪一次也不例外，伊蒂。一眼看上去，这里的事情简直是荒唐透顶！如果像你父亲说的那样，那些人在这个山谷里制造了一件又一件罪行，所有的人又都说得出他们的名字，为什么他们通通逍遥法外，没有哪个受到制裁呢？你跟我说说是怎么回事，伊蒂！”

“因为谁也不敢出面指证他们，如果出面的话，这人就活不过一个月。还因为他们总是会让其他的同伙去发誓作证，证明那个遭到指控的同伙跟犯罪现场离着十万八千里。当然喽，杰克，我说的事情你肯定都读到过。据我所知，全国所有的报纸都报道过这些事情。”

“呃，说真的，我倒是读到过一些报道，不过呢，以前我觉得这都是虚构的故事。说不定，那些人的行为也有一定的理由，说不定，他们是受了什么冤屈，走投无路才这么干的吧。”

“噢，杰克，这些话我可不爱听！他就是这么说的——另外那个！”

“你是说鲍德温——他也这么说，对吗？”

“就是因为这个，我才这么讨厌他。噢，杰克，到了现在，我可以跟你说说心里话了。我打心眼儿里讨厌他，同时又害怕他，

怕他害我，最主要是怕他害我父亲。我心里明白，如果我胆敢说出自己的真实感受的话，我们家就会遇上巨大的灾祸，所以我才半推半就地敷衍着他。说真的，在这之前，我们家只有这么一条活路。现在呢，杰克，你要愿意跟我一起走的话，咱们就可以带上我父亲，远远离开那些恶人的势力范围，一辈子也不回来。”

矛盾的神色再一次浮现在麦克默多的脸上，跟着又再一次变成了花岗岩一般的坚定表情。“我不会让你受到伤害的，伊蒂，还有你的父亲。至于那些恶人嘛，在咱们闯过难关之前，你一定会发现，他们当中最恶的人也恶不过我。”

“不，不会，杰克！我决不相信你是那样的人。”

麦克默多露出了苦涩的笑容。“我的天！你真是不了解我！你的心那么纯洁，亲爱的，我心里的一些事情你连猜都猜不到。我说，嘿，刚来的这位是谁呢？”

房门突然打开，一个小伙子大摇大摆地走了进来，整个儿是一副主人回家的架势。他长相英俊、打扮时髦，年纪和身材都跟麦克默多相去不远。他戴着一顶黑色的宽边呢帽，帽子下面是一张俊秀的脸庞、一双盛气凌人的狞恶眼睛和一个鹰钩鼻子。进来之后，他并没有劳神摘掉帽子，只是恶狠狠地打量着火炉旁边的这对男女。

伊蒂已经跳了起来，神色十分慌乱。“很高兴见到您，鲍德温先生，”她说道。“您来得可比我想的早啊，过来坐吧。”

鲍德温双手叉腰，站在那里紧盯着麦克默多。“这个人是谁？”他毫不客气地问道。

“是我的一个朋友，鲍德温先生，一个刚刚住进来的房客。麦克默多先生，容我向您介绍一下鲍德温先生，可以吗？”

两个小伙子没好气地冲对方点了点头。

“我们俩是什么关系，伊蒂小姐兴许已经告诉你了吧？”鲍德温说道。

“我倒不知道你们俩有什么关系。”

“不知道吗？很好，那你现在就算是知道了。不怕告诉你，这位小姐是我的，你呢，今天晚上天气好得很，赶紧散步去吧。”

“谢谢你，可惜我没有散步的心情。”

“没有吗？”鲍德温的狞恶眼睛里腾起了熊熊的怒火。“我看你是有打架的心情吧，房客先生！”

“说得对！”麦克默多大喊一声，一下子跳了起来。“你说了这么多，就这一句说到了我的心坎儿里。”

“看在上帝分上，杰克！噢，看在上帝分上！”可怜的伊蒂惊慌失措地叫了起来。“噢，杰克，杰克，他会伤到你的！”

“噢，这位原来是‘杰克’，对吗？”鲍德温说道，不干不净地骂了一句。“你们已经熟到了这种程度，对吗？”

“噢，特德，讲讲道理吧——发发慈悲吧！就当是为了我，特德，如果你真的爱我的话，那就大度一点儿，别跟他计较吧！”

“依我看，伊蒂，你不如让我们俩单独待一会儿，这件事情自然可以解决，”麦克默多平静地说道。“要不然，鲍德温先生，兴许你可以跟我一起到街上去走一趟。今天晚上天气不错，隔壁街区前面就有一片空场。”

“用不着弄脏自个儿的手，我就可以干掉你，”他的仇敌说道。“等不到我把账跟你算清楚，你就会希望自己从来没有踏进过这座房子！”

“眼下就是算账的好时候，”麦克默多叫道。

“我的时候我自己挑，先生。你慢慢等着好了。瞧瞧这个！”他突然卷起袖管，露出了前臂上的一个古怪标记，图案是一个圆圈套着一个三角形，看着像是烙上去的。“你知道这是什么意思吗？”

“我不知道，也不想知道！”

“是吗，你会知道的，我可以跟你打包票。知道的时候，你的

年岁也不会比现在大多少。说不定，伊蒂小姐可以跟你说说它的意思。至于你，伊蒂，你会跪着爬回我身边的——听见了没，小妞？——跪着爬回来——然后我才会告诉你，你该接受什么样的惩罚。你们既然撒了种子——老天作证，我会让你们有收获的！”他怒不可遏地扫了他俩一眼，转过身去，片刻之后就“砰”的一声摔上了大门。

麦克默多和姑娘默不作声地站了一会儿，接下来，她伸出双臂抱住了他。

“噢，杰克，刚才你可真是勇敢！只可惜勇敢也没有用，你一定得马上逃走！今晚就走——杰克——今晚！这是你唯一的一条活路。他一定会要你的命，他那双可怕的眼睛就是这么说的。他们有十几个人，背后还有麦金提头领和整个帮会的势力，你怎么斗得过呢？”

麦克默多挣脱她的怀抱，亲了亲她，轻轻地把她推到一把椅子上。“好啦，小心肝儿，好啦！用不着为我担惊受怕。我自己也是自由人会的会员，这我已经跟你父亲说过了。说不定，我跟他们也没什么两样，所以呢，你千万不要把我想成一个圣人。听我说了这件事情，你会不会连我一起恨呢？”

“恨你吗，杰克？这辈子我也不会恨你的！我听人说过，除了这里之外，其他地方的自由人会会员都不是什么坏人。所以啊，我干吗要为这件事情怪罪你呢？不过，杰克，既然你是他们的会员，干吗不去跟麦金提头领交个朋友呢？噢，赶紧去，杰克，赶紧去吧！你得抢先跟他说个明白，要不然，那些恶狗就要来追你了啊。”

“我正这么打算呢，”麦克默多说道。“我现在就去解决这件事情。你跟你父亲说一下，今晚我还在这儿住，明早就另找地方。”

麦金提那家酒廊的酒吧间跟往常一样人山人海，因为镇上所有的歹徒恶棍都喜欢到这儿来消磨时间。这家伙很受众人的拥戴，因为他有一种粗犷的快活劲儿，像面具一样盖住了他身上的许多

东西。除了受人拥戴之外，他带来的恐惧笼罩了整个镇子，实际上还笼罩了长达三十英里的整个山谷，再加上山谷两边的地区。单是这样的恐惧就足以让他的酒吧间人满为患，只因为谁也承担不起怠慢他的后果。

大家都知道他掌握着一些隐秘的权力，而且会毫不留情地行使这些权力。与此同时，他还是一名地位显赫的官员，顶着地方议会议员和路政专员的头衔，选他的都是些指望从他手里换到好处的恶棍。在这个地方，苛捐杂税名目繁多，公共事业的荒废情状臭名远扬，收了黑钱的审计人员对账目不闻不问，正派的居民被迫缴纳打着公益旗号的勒索款项，同时还不敢口出怨言，怕的是惹上更大的祸殃。

就这样，年复一年，麦金提头领的钻石领针越来越醒目，越来越华丽的马甲上垂挂着越来越沉重的黄金表链，名下的酒廊也越来越大，眼看着就要把集市广场的一侧整个儿地揽入怀中了。

麦克默多推开酒廊的挡板门，挤过人群往里走。酒廊里烟雾弥漫、酒气熏天，四壁都是镀了厚厚一层金的巨大镜子，将辉煌灯火映照得越发地纸醉金迷。一圈儿闲人围坐在黄铜镶边的宽大吧台四周，几个光穿衬衫的酒保正在给他们调酒，忙得不亦乐乎。

吧台的远端站着一个又高又壮、身材健硕的男人，身子靠在吧台上，嘴角斜斜地支棱着一支雪茄，不会是别的什么人，只可能是大名鼎鼎的麦金提。这是一头披着黑色鬃毛的巨兽，络腮胡子蔓延到了颧骨的位置，蓬乱的黑发也耷拉到了衣领上。他的肤色跟意大利人一样黝黑，眼睛则是一种死沉沉的古怪黑色，再加上他还稍微有点儿斜视，整张脸就显得格外邪恶。

这个人身上的其他特征，匀称的体形也好，俊秀的五官也好，率直的做派也好，倒都跟他假装出来的那种乐乐呵呵的诚挚性情十分吻合。看到他的时候，你兴许会说，这是个大大咧咧的老实人，不管他说起话来有多么粗野，心眼儿终归是不错的。要到他用那

双漆黑无光、深邃无情的眼睛紧盯着你的时候，你才会心里发紧，觉得自己面对的是一个深藏不露、无恶不作的魔头，力量、胆色和智谋一样也不缺，百倍地增添了他的歹毒。

把目标打量清楚之后，麦克默多拿出那种胆大包天的惯有架势，推推搡搡地穿过人群，又从一小群献媚讨好的马屁精当中挤了过去，那群人正在卖力地奉承这位显赫的头领，头领最最无聊的笑话也能让他们哄堂大笑。挤到近前之后，看到那双歹毒的黑眼睛陡然转到了自己身上，外乡青年那双张狂的灰色眼睛无所畏惧地透过镜片迎了上去。

“呃，年轻人，你这张脸我好像没有见过哩。”

“我是新来的，麦金提先生。”

“虽说是新来的，应该也知道用恰当的头衔来称呼一位绅士吧。”

“这位是麦金提议员，年轻人，”一名马屁精说道。

“对不起，议员，我还不清楚这边的规矩。不过，有人建议我来见您。”

“是吗，你已经见到了，整个人都摆在你的眼前呢。你觉得我怎么样呢？”

“呃，现在说还有点儿早。如果您的肚量跟身量一样宽大、心地也跟长相一样受看的话，那我就没什么可挑的了，”麦克默多说道。

“我的天！不管怎么说，你脑袋上确实长了一张爱尔兰人的快嘴，”酒廊东家嚷嚷起来，说不好是在附和这个胆大包天的访客，还是在竭力维护自己的威严。“这么说，你已经大人大量地认可了我的长相喽？”

“那是当然，”麦克默多说道。

“有人叫你来见我？”

“是的。”

“谁叫你来的呢？”

“维尔米萨三百四十一分会的斯坎伦兄弟。这一杯祝您身体健康，议员，也祝我们更多地了解对方。”他把其他人递过来的一只酒杯举到唇边，喝酒的时候还把小指翘了起来。

麦金提一直在仔仔细细地打量他，这会儿便扬起了乌黑的浓眉。“嗯，看着倒挺像那么回事，不是吗？”他说道。“我还得再看仔细一点儿，这位——”

“麦克默多。”

“还得再看仔细一点儿，麦克默多先生，我们这里可不会随随便便地接收新人，也不会听到什么就信什么。进去待一会儿吧，就在吧台后面。”

吧台后面有一个小房间，墙边上摞满了酒桶。麦金提小心翼翼地关上房门，然后就坐到一只酒桶上，若有所思地咬着雪茄，眼睛在同伴的身上转来转去，一声不吭地坐了足足两三分钟。麦克默多乐呵呵地接受了对方的目测，一只手揣在大衣口袋里，另一只手捻着自个儿的褐色髭须。突然之间，麦金提猛一猫腰，掏出了一把恶形恶状的左轮手枪。

“听着，小家伙，”他说道，“要是我觉得你跟我们耍花招的话，那你的花招可耍不了太久。”

“自由人会的分会会首用这种方法来欢迎外来的兄弟，”麦克默多愤愤不平地回答道，“还真是挺新鲜的呢。”

“是吗，可你必须证明你的确是外来的兄弟，”麦金提说道，“证明不了的话，愿上帝保佑你吧！当初你加入的是哪个分会？”

“芝加哥二十九分会。”

“什么时间？”

“一八七二年六月二十四日。”

“会首是谁？”

“詹姆斯·H. 斯科特。”

“你们的地区总会首是谁？”

“巴塞洛缪·威尔逊。”

“嗯！你答题答得还挺顺溜的嘛。来这里干什么呢？”

“干活呗，跟您一样，只不过差事没您那么好而已。”

“你回嘴倒回得挺快的。”

“是啊，我嘴巴一直都挺快的。”

“动起手来也快吗？”

“了解我的人都这么说。”

“那好，考验你这句话的时刻兴许会来得比你想象的快。你听说过关于这个分会的什么传言吗？”

“我听说它只接收真正的男子汉。”

“算你说对了，麦克默多先生。你为什么离开芝加哥呢？”

“我要是告诉你，那可就真是见了鬼啦！”

麦金提瞪大了眼睛。居然有人用这种方式来回答他的问题，他不光觉得新鲜，而且觉得有趣。“你为什么不肯告诉我呢？”

“因为兄弟之间是不能说假话的。”

“也就是说，真话糟糕得没法说，对吗？”

“您愿意这么想的话，那就这么想好了。”

“听着，先生，我是这儿的会首，你可别指望我接收一个连自个儿的来历都说不清楚的兄弟。”

麦克默多显得很是为难。接下来，他从衣服的内袋里掏出了一张破破烂烂的剪报。

“您不会去告发我吧？”他说道。

“你要是再敢对我说这种话，那我就赏你几个嘴巴！”麦金提气冲冲地嚷了一声。

“您教训得是，议员，”麦克默多低声下气地说道。“我应该给您赔个不是，刚才的话没经过脑子。好吧，我知道我可以放心地把秘密交托给您。瞧瞧这张剪报吧。”

麦金提大致扫了一眼，剪报上说的是一个名叫乔纳斯·平托的人遭到枪杀的事情，事情发生在芝加哥市集市街的湖畔酒廊，时间则是一八七五年新年前后的那个星期。

“你干的？”他问道，把剪报还了回去。

麦克默多点了点头。

“你为什么要杀他呢？”

“以前我一直在帮着山姆大叔铸造美元金币，我铸的成色兴许没有他铸的那么好，看起来却一样好使，铸造的成本也比较便宜。这个名叫平托的家伙本来在帮我花这些怪钱——”

“帮你做什么？”

“呃，意思就是帮我把我铸的美元弄到市面上去。后来呢，他说他要去告发我。不知道他是不是真的告发了我，总之我没有等着看下文，直接结果了他，然后就撒开双腿跑到煤区来了。”

“为什么要往煤区跑呢？”

“因为我看报纸上说，这边的人不那么爱挑毛病。”

麦金提笑了起来。“你首先是个造假币的，后来又杀了人，眼下却跑到我们这里来，还觉得我们会对你表示欢迎。”

“差不多就是这么回事，”麦克默多回答道。

“呃，我看你前途无量啊。对了，眼下你还能造出美元来吗？”

麦克默多从口袋里掏出了六枚金币。“这些就不是从费城造币厂[1]出来的，”他说道。

“不会吧！”麦金提伸出像猩猩爪子一样的多毛大手，把金币举到了灯前。“要我看，这可跟真的一模一样啊。我的天！你这样的兄弟对我们大有帮助，我就是这么想的！我们这里容得下一两个坏蛋，麦克默多老弟，因为有些时候，我们自己也不得不犯点儿坏。要是不把那些逼过来的人推回去的话，我们很快就会被人

[1] 费城铸币厂（Philadelphia Mint）成立于1792年，是美国历史最悠久、规模也最大的铸币厂。

逼上绝路的。”

“呃，按我看，我也可以出点儿力，帮着大家一起推。”

“看样子，你的胆量挺大的嘛。刚才我用这把枪指着你，你居然动都不动。”

“刚才那个时候，面临危险的人并不是我。”

“不是你又是谁呢？”

“是您，议员，”麦克默多穿的是一件双排扣短大衣，这会儿就从侧兜里掏出了一把扳好击铁的手枪。“刚才我一直都瞄着您呢，按我看，我开枪的速度应该不比您慢。”

“我的天！”麦金提气得满脸通红，跟着就爆发出了一阵响亮的笑声。“咳，我们可有好些年没见过你这样的坏小子啦。依我看，本地的分会肯定会以你为荣的……喂，你究竟想干什么？你有什么事情非得闯进来，就不能让我跟一位绅士清清静静地聊几分钟吗？”

酒保手足无措地站在那里。“对不起，议员，是特德·鲍德温叫我来的。他说他一定要马上见您。”

酒保的通报完全是多余的，因为鲍德温本人正在隔着酒保的肩膀往房间里看，面容又阴沉又冷酷。他一把将酒保搡了出去，跟着就重重地摔上了房门。

“这么说，”他一边说，一边恶狠狠地瞪了一眼麦克默多，“你倒是抢在了头里，对吗？我想跟您说点儿事，议员，关于这个人的事。”

“那就趁眼下这个机会，当着我的面说呗，”麦克默多叫道。

“我要在我自个儿觉得合适的时间、按我自个儿的方法来说，轮不到你来多嘴。”

“啧！啧！”麦金提一边说，一边从酒桶上跳了下来。“这样子可不行。这是个新来的兄弟，鲍德温，咱们可不能用这种方式来欢迎他。把你的手伸出来，伙计，就这么拉倒吧！”

“没门儿！”鲍德温怒不可遏地吼道。

“要是他觉得我对不住他，我已经说了可以跟他决斗，”麦克默多说道。“我可以凭拳头跟他决斗，他要是不满意的话，我还可以按他挑选的任何一种方式跟他决斗。好了，议员，眼下就请您以会首的身份给我俩作个裁决吧。”

“那么，究竟是什么事情呢？”

“为了一位年轻的女士，她是有选择爱人的自由的。”

“她有吗？”鲍德温吼道。

“如果双方都是本会兄弟的话，我看她是有的，”头领说道。

“是吗，这就是您的裁决，对吗？”

“没错，这就是我的裁决，特德·鲍德温，”麦金提说道，恶狠狠地瞪了鲍德温一眼。“难不成，你还有什么异议吗？”

“为了一个你这辈子头一次见的人，你就要抛弃一个跟了你整整五年的兄弟吗？你不可能当一辈子会首的，杰克·麦金提，老天作证！等到选举的时候——”

议员像猛虎一般扑到鲍德温的身上，一只手紧紧地扼住他的咽喉，把他搡到了一只酒桶上。要不是麦克默多出手干预的话，议员保准儿会在狂怒之中把鲍德温活活扼死。

“算了，议员！看在老天分上，算了吧！”麦克默多一边叫喊，一边把议员往后拖。

麦金提松了手，鲍德温直挺挺地坐到了顶在他身后的那只酒桶上，整个人吓得魂不附体，大口大口地喘着粗气，四肢也瑟瑟发抖，一看就是刚刚在鬼门关上走了一遭。

“好些天以来，你一直在自找这种没趣，特德·鲍德温——眼下你算是找着了！”麦金提吼道，宽阔的胸膛不停起伏。“你兴许以为，我要是没选上会首的话，你自个儿就可以坐上我这把交椅。这事情得由会里说了算。不过我告诉你，我一天当着会首，一天就不会允许任何人扯着嗓子反对我本人，反对我的裁决也不行。”

“我可没有反对您的意思，”鲍德温摸着自己的咽喉咕哝了一句。

“那么，很好，”会首叫道，立刻恢复了先前那种大大咧咧的快活模样，“这件事情到此为止，咱们接着做咱们的好朋友。”

他从架子上拿过一瓶香槟，拧开了瓶塞。

“好了，”他给三只高脚杯斟上了酒，接着说道。“咱们这就按照本会的和好规矩干一杯。你们两个肯定知道，干完这杯之后，谁也不能怀恨在心。好了，把左手放到我的喉结上。我来问你，特德·鲍德温，因何得罪，先生？”

“乌云盖顶，”鲍德温回答道。

“虽然盖顶，终将消散。”

“终将消散，我可起誓！”

两个人干了一杯，接下来，鲍德温和麦克默多又把同样的仪式重复了一遍。

“好极了！”麦金提搓着双手叫道。“之前的怨恨就算是一笔勾销。你要是怀恨在心，那就是破坏了本会的规矩，这边的规矩可比较严，鲍德温兄弟是知道的——你自己也很快就会发现，麦克默多兄弟，如果你自找麻烦的话！”

“您放心好了，我并不急着自找麻烦，”麦克默多说道。接下来，他把一只手伸到了鲍德温的面前。“我这个人火气来得快，心里的疙瘩去得也快，人家告诉我，这是因为我身上流着爱尔兰人的热血。好啦，这事情在我这儿就算是过去了，我不会记着的。”

面对可怕头领的凶恶目光，鲍德温不得不握住了麦克默多的手。不过，他那张铁青的脸说得明明白白，对方的话压根儿就没有对他造成丝毫触动。

麦金提拍了拍他们两个的肩膀。“啧！这些姑娘！这些姑娘可真是的！”他叫道。“想想吧，这些穿裙子的小东西竟然能让我的两个哥们儿闹起架来！真是活见了鬼！好啦，还是让这些小妞自

个儿拿主意吧，这种事情可不归会首管——谢天谢地！咱们的事情够多的了，用不着让女人来添乱。你必须加入三百四十一分会，麦克默多兄弟。我们有我们自个儿的规矩和办法，跟芝加哥不太一样。星期六晚上是我们开会的时间，你要愿意来的话，我们就会让你终身享有维尔米萨山谷的所有特权。”

第三章 * 维尔米萨三百四十一分会

经历过晚间的诸多奇遇之后，麦克默多第二天就搬出了老雅各布·沙夫特的公寓，在寡妇麦克纳马拉那座位于镇子最边缘的房子里找了个住处。没隔多久，他在火车上认识的斯坎伦也因为某种缘故要搬到维尔米萨镇来住，两个人就住到了一起。房子里没有其他租客，房东又是个生性随和的爱尔兰老妇人，完全不干涉他俩的事情，这一来，他俩说话做事都不用有什么顾忌，对于两个拥有共同秘密的人来说，这倒是再合适不过了。

老沙夫特十分厚道，竟至于允许麦克默多随时上自己家里去吃饭，这样一来，麦克默多和伊蒂之间的交往完全没受任何影响。恰恰相反，日子一周一周地过去，他俩走得越来越近，关系也越来越亲密了。

麦克默多觉得新居非常安全，于是就把铸造金币的模具拿了出来，堂而皇之地摆在自个儿的卧室里。有了无数个守秘誓言的担保之后，他还允许会里的一些兄弟到他的卧室里来看模具，每个人走的时候都揣上了几枚假币。他的假币铸造得十分精美，用的时候从来没遇上过哪怕是一丁点儿障碍或者危险。同伴们总是迷惑不解，身怀如此绝技，麦克默多干吗还要委屈自己，干吗还要上什么班呢；不过，只要有人提出这个问题，麦克默多总是说得非常清楚，要是他没有看得见的收入来源的话，很快就会被警察盯上的。

千真万确，有个警察已经盯上了他。幸运的是，这件事情非但没有损伤到这个胆大妄为的家伙，反倒

是给他带来了莫大的好处。见过第一次面之后，他差不多天天都上麦金提的酒廊去报到，为的是跟那些“哥们儿”打成一片。在这个肆虐本地的危险帮派当中，成员之间用的就是“哥们儿”这个亲热的称呼。他举手投足锋芒毕露，说起话来也是无所顾忌，所有人都觉得他讨人喜欢。除此而外，他又在一次“全武行”的酒吧格斗当中干脆利落地放倒了对手，由此赢得了这个粗野群体的尊敬。这还不算完，因为另外一件事情，他在这帮人心目当中的地位进一步水涨船高。

一天晚上，正好是人最多的时候，酒廊的门突然开了，进来的是一名身穿暗蓝色制服、头戴大檐帽的矿警。矿警是铁路当局和煤矿主合力组建的一支队伍，为的是向地方上的警察部队提供支援，因为地方警察已经束手无策，只能听任各种有组织暴力活动在本地制造恐怖气氛。矿警进门之后，酒廊里一下子静了下来，大家纷纷向矿警投去了好奇的目光。不过，在美国的有些地方，警察和罪犯之间的关系有点儿异乎寻常，这样一来，看到警察跑来光顾自己的酒廊，站在吧台后面的麦金提并没有流露出丝毫惊讶。

“来一杯不加水的威士忌，挡一挡今天晚上的寒气，”警官说道。“咱们以前没见过面吧，议员？”

“你就是新来的队长喽？”麦金提说道。

“没错。为了维持本镇的法律和秩序，议员，我们都指望着您和其他的头面人物出手相助呢。我的名字叫做马文。”

“没有你们的话，我们还能维持得更好，马文队长，”麦金提冷冷地说道，“本镇有自己的警察，并不需要什么进口货。你们不就是资本家花钱买来的工具，不就是他们雇来用棍棒和枪支对付穷苦市民的走狗吗？”

“好啦，好啦，咱们用不着争论这个问题，”警官和颜悦色地说道。“依我看，咱们都会按自己的理解来履行职责，只不过，咱

们对职责的理解不可能完全一样。”他已经喝干了杯里的酒，正准备转身离去，却在突然之间瞥见了杰克·麦克默多的脸。麦克默多就在他的身边，正冲他怒目而视。“嘿！嘿！”他一边吆喝，一边上上下下地打量麦克默多。“这儿还有一位老熟人哩！”

麦克默多往后退了一步。“我可不是你的朋友，这辈子也没跟任何一个该死的警察交过朋友，”他说道。

“熟人也不一定是朋友嘛，”警察队长说道，咧开嘴笑了起来。“你就是芝加哥的杰克·麦克默多，错不了，你可别想抵赖！”

麦克默多耸了耸肩。“我本来就没想抵赖，”他说道。“难道你以为，我会为自个儿的名字觉得丢人吗？”

“不管怎么说，你确实应该觉得丢人。”

“你这句屁话是什么意思？”麦克默多大吼一声，双手攥成了拳头。

“行啦，行啦，杰克，跟我咋唬是没有用的。钻进这座该死的煤窑之前，我在芝加哥当过警察，芝加哥的恶棍可逃不过我的眼睛。”

麦克默多脸色一沉。“你可别告诉我，你就是芝加哥中央警局的那个马文！”他嚷了一声。

“正是您以前认得的那个特迪·马文，随时为您效劳。乔纳斯·平托被人枪杀的事情，我们那边的人还记着呢。”

“他可不是我杀的。”

“真的不是？你这是一句天地良心的可靠证词，对吗？哼，对你来说，他的死可真是不一般地及时啊，要不然，他们就能以花怪钱的罪名把你逮起来。好啦，那件事情过了也就过了，原因嘛，咱俩私下说吧——当然喽，这么说兴许跟我的职责有点儿冲突——他们弄不到指控你的明确证据，明天你就可以回芝加哥去了。”

“我在这儿待得挺舒服的。”

“是吗，我好心好意地提醒你，你要连句谢谢都不说的话，那

可就真是只乱咬一气的疯狗了。”

“呃，我看你确实是好意，我真该谢谢你才是，”麦克默多的口气并不怎么友好。

“只要你不走歪道，我就不会再说你什么不是，”队长说道。“不过，老天作证！你要是还敢乱来的话，那可就不一样了！好了，晚安——晚安，议员。”

走出酒吧间的时候，警官已经为本地增添了一位英雄人物。在这之前，大家一直在悄悄谈论麦克默多在遥远的芝加哥做下的种种事情，而他本人总是微笑着避开与此相关的所有问题，神态就跟那些不想往自个儿脸上贴金的人一样。眼下呢，他的事迹已经得到了官方的确认。酒吧里的闲人把他团团围住，热情地跟他握手，就从这一刻开始，他彻底变成了这帮人当中的一员。他本来非常能喝，而且面不改色，这天晚上呢，幸亏他同屋的斯坎伦也在现场，可以领他回家，如其不然，这个领受众人款待的英雄肯定得在吧台下面过夜了。

某个星期六的晚上，麦克默多正式加入了本地的分会。他本来以为，自己既然在芝加哥入过会，这一次就用不着什么仪式，没想到，维尔米萨分会自有一套引以为豪的典礼，所有的新会员都得走完这个过场。团结会馆有一个专门用来举办这类典礼的大房间，分会的会员就在这里聚集。参加维尔米萨分会集会的一共有大约六十人，可这远远不能反映这个帮会的真正实力。山谷里的其他地方还有几个分会，山谷两边那些山峰的背面也有，要办什么大事情的时候，分会之间往往会交换会员，这样一来，实施罪行的人往往都是当地人不认识的外来人。算在一起的话，散布在煤区各处的会员至少也有五百人。

集会的房间里没有什么陈设，所有的人围坐在一张长桌的四周。墙边上还有一张长桌，上面摆满了酒瓶和杯子，有一些与会者已经瞄上了那些东西。麦金提坐在上首，蓬乱的黑发上面扣着

一顶扁平的黑丝绒帽子，脖子上搭着一条紫色的绶带，看起来倒像是一名祭司，正在主持某种邪恶的仪式。坐在他左右两侧的是一些地位较高的会员，特德·鲍德温那张冷酷无情的英俊面孔也在其中。这些人都佩戴着各式各样的绶带或者徽章，以此标明各自的地位。

大多数高级会员已经步入中年，其余会员则都是十八岁到二十五岁之间的小伙子，他们会忠实地执行高级会员的命令，既有本领，也有决心。中年人当中有很多都是面目狰狞，足以表明他们目无法纪的虎狼之性，可是，看一看在场的普通会员，你实在没法相信，这些热切坦荡的小伙子确确实实是一帮可怕的凶手，是非观念已经全然颠倒，不光对自己的作恶本事产生了一种令人咋舌的自豪，更对那些以他们所说的“干净活计”著称的家伙佩服得五体投地。

天性既已扭曲，他们就把自告奋勇地完成杀人任务当成了一种彰显英雄气概的侠义行为，杀害的对象全都是从来没有得罪过他们的人，很多情形之下还是他们从来没有见过的人。实施罪行之后，他们会为到底是谁发出致命一击的问题争论不休，还会把死者挣扎哀号的惨状挂在嘴边，用作相互戏谑、娱乐会众的笑料。

刚开始的时候，他们用的还是遮遮掩掩的手法，到了故事当中的这个时节，他们的犯罪活动已经发展到了明目张胆、令人侧目的程度，因为他们眼看着法律一再失灵，由此便认识到，一方面，没有人敢于出面指证他们的罪行，另一方面，他们不光拥有无数名随传随到的铁杆证人，还拥有一个塞得满满的钱袋，足以买来本州最优秀的法学天才。长达十年的漫长岁月当中，无恶不作的扫魂帮从来不曾有哪怕一名成员得到有罪的判决，唯一能对他们构成威胁的只有受害人自己——受害人虽然寡不敌众、猝不及防，终归还是有可能让杀手尝到一点儿苦头，偶尔也实实在在地做到了这件事情。

有人已经警告过麦克默多，入会仪式当中存在某种考验，与此同时，谁也不肯告诉他，考验究竟是什么形式。眼下，两名神色肃穆的兄弟把他领进了会场的外屋。他听见许多人在隔壁的会场里交谈，声音嗡嗡嗡地响成了一片，有一两次还提到了他的名字，想来是正在讨论他入会的问题。接下来，一名斜挎金绿两色绶带的内场警卫走进了外屋。

“会首有令，给他加上绑缚，蒙住他的双眼，然后再将他带入会场，”警卫说道。

三个人一齐动手，脱去他的大衣，挽起他右手的袖管，又把一根绳子绕到他的身上，牢牢地绑在了他双肘上侧的位置。接下来，他们用一顶厚实的黑帽子扣住他的脑袋和上半边脸，确保他什么也看不见，这才把他领进了会场。

戴着这样的一顶帽子，他眼前一片漆黑，心里也十分压抑。他听见了周围人群的窸窣响动和窃窃私语，紧接着，麦金提的低沉声音透过帽子传进了他的耳朵，听起来十分遥远。

“约翰·麦克默多，”那声音说道，“你已经是尊贵自由人会的会员了吗？”

他欠身表示“是”。

“你属于芝加哥二十九分会吗？”

他再一次欠了欠身。

“黑夜不宜——”那声音说道。

“是的，——生人行路。”他回答道。

“乌云盖顶——”

“是的，——风暴将临。”

“兄弟们满意了吗？”会首问道。

会场里响起了一片赞同的嗡嗡声。

“兄弟，既然你对上了切口，我们已经知道你确实是自己人，”麦金提说道。“不过，我们必须让你知道，本县以及本地区的其他

县份有一些特殊的仪式，还有一些好汉才能担当的特殊义务。你准备好接受考验了吗？”

“准备好了。”

“你的心是否坚如磐石？”

“是的。”

“往前跨一大步，证明给我们看看。”

话音刚落，他立刻感觉到，有两个坚硬的尖头紧紧地顶住了自己的双眼，似乎他一旦往前挪动，双眼就必然会被戳瞎。尽管如此，他依然鼓起勇气，毅然决然地迈步向前，顶在眼睛上的东西瞬间消失，会场里响起了一阵低低的喝彩声。

“他的心的确坚如磐石，”那个声音说道。“你能忍受痛苦吗？”

“别人能忍的我都能忍，”他回答道。

“试试他！”

一阵摧肝裂胆的痛楚贯穿了他的前臂，他用尽全部的自制力才没有叫出声来。突然袭来的剧痛差点儿让他晕了过去，可他咬住嘴唇、握紧拳头，硬生生地把极度的疼痛憋在了心里。

“比这更厉害的我也忍得了，”他如是说道。

这一次的喝彩声响亮震耳。在这个分会的历史上，从来没有哪个会员的初次亮相能比他这次更加精彩。大家纷纷伸手去拍他的后背，还有人帮他摘掉了帽子，他站在那里眨巴着眼睛，微笑着接受兄弟们的祝贺。

“最后一句话，麦克默多兄弟，”麦金提说道。“你已经宣誓保守秘密、效忠本会，同时也已经知道，违背誓言的处罚就是立刻兑现、绝无宽贷的死亡，是吗？”

“是的，”麦克默多说道。

“你愿意无条件服从现任会首的命令吗？”

“愿意。”

“那么，我代表维尔米萨三百四十一分会欢迎你分享本会特权、

参与本会事务。把酒端到桌子上来吧，斯坎伦兄弟，我们来为这位可敬的兄弟干一杯。”

有人替麦克默多拿来了大衣。穿上大衣之前，他看了看仍然痛得钻心的右臂。烙铁在他的前臂上留下了一个深深的红色印记，图案是一个圆圈套着一个三角形。坐在他旁边的一两个人撸起了自己的袖管，把自己胳膊上的分会标记亮给他看。

“所有人的胳膊上都有这个标记，”其中一个说道，“只不过，烙上这个标记的时候，并不是所有的人都表现得像你这么勇敢。”

“咳！这可不算什么，”他嘴里说得轻描淡写，胳膊却仍然疼得火烧火燎。

入会仪式之后的饮酒庆典终于结束，其他的会务随即提上日程。麦克默多只见识过芝加哥分会的枯燥议程，接下来的事情便让他听得双耳直竖、暗自心惊，只不过不敢完全表露出来而已。

“现在进入第一项议程，”麦金提说道，“宣读默顿县二百四十九分会区域会首温德尔写来的信函。温德尔是这么说的：

> “亲爱的先生：
>
> 眼下有一件活计，目标是此地左近雷-斯特马什煤矿的矿主安德鲁·雷。你们想必记得，贵会尚欠我会一个人情，此因去年秋季，我会曾有两名兄弟协助贵会处理警察一名。请贵会派来两名好手，由本会司库希金斯负责接应，希金斯的地址，贵会谅已知悉。他会把行动的时间地点通知贵会兄弟。
>
> 你们的同门兄弟，
>
> 尊贵自由人会区域会首，J. W. 温德尔

“咱们需要借用一两个帮手的时候，温德尔从来没有拒绝过咱们，所以呢，咱们也不能驳他的面子。”麦金提顿了一顿，用他那双暗淡无光的歹毒眼睛扫视着整个会场。“谁愿意主动承揽这件活计？”

几个小伙子把手举了起来，会首看着他们，脸上露出了赞许的笑容。

“你可以去，‘老虎’科马克。你要能办得跟上次一样漂亮的话，事情就不会有什么岔子。你也可以，威尔逊。”

“我还没有手枪呢，”说话的是那名自告奋勇的会员，一个还不到二十岁的孩子。

“这是你的第一件活计，对吗？很好，反正你迟早也要接受鲜血的洗礼。对你来说，这肯定会是一个了不起的开端。手枪的事情嘛，如果我没弄错的话，它正在等着你呢。你们星期一去那边报到，时间足够了。回来的时候，大家会隆重地欢迎你们的。”

“这一次有什么奖赏吗？”科马克问道。这是个大块头、黑脸膛、长相凶蛮的小伙子，靠着残忍的手段挣来了“老虎”的诨名。

“别去想什么奖赏，你们做这件事情仅仅是为了荣誉。事成之后，兴许会有那么几块压箱底儿的赏钱吧。”

“这个人干了些什么呢？”年纪尚小的威尔逊问道。

“这个人干了些什么，显然不是你这样的人该问的问题。那边的人已经对他作出了裁决，轮不到咱们来管。咱们要做的事情仅仅是执行他们的裁决，就跟他们执行咱们的裁决一样。说到这个问题嘛，下星期就会有两个默顿分会的兄弟来找咱们，要在咱们这里办点事。”

“来的是谁呢？”有人问了一句。

“说真的，你最好不要问。如果你什么都不知道，作证的时候就什么也不用说，什么麻烦也不会有。不过，他俩干起活来都是很利落的。”

“而且很及时！”特德·鲍德温叫道。“这一带的人已经有点儿不听管教了。就在上个星期，工头布莱克还开除了三个咱们的人。他早就该尝点儿厉害了，这回得给他尝点儿实在的。”

“尝点儿什么？”麦克默多悄声问他的邻座。

“一颗大号的铅弹呗！”邻座嚷了一句，大声地笑了起来。“你觉得我们的办法怎么样，兄弟？”

看情形，麦克默多虽说是刚刚加入这个邪恶的帮会，会里的气氛却已经深深地触动了他身上的犯罪神经。“我觉得挺不错的，”他说道。“有胆量的小伙子就该上这儿来。”

周围的几个人听见了他的话，纷纷喝起彩来。

“什么事情？”桌子的尽头传来一声喝问，发话的正是那位顶着黑色鬃毛的会首。

“是咱们这位新来的兄弟，先生，他觉得咱们的办法很对他的胃口。”

麦克默多站起身来，开口说道：“尊贵的会首，我想说的是，如果会里需要用人，获得委派就是我的荣幸。”说完之后，他重新坐了下去。

这句话博得了满堂大彩。恍惚之间，一轮新鲜的太阳已经从地平线上冉冉升起，一些年长的会员甚至觉得，这轮太阳蹿升的速度快得有点儿过了头。

“我的意见是——”坐在主席近旁的哈拉维说道。哈拉维是个胡须斑白、一脸贪相的老家伙，眼下担任着分会的书记。“麦克默多兄弟应该耐心一点儿，等到分会乐于起用他的时候再说。”

“当然，我完全听从分会的差遣，刚才的话也是这个意思，”麦克默多说道。

“会有你施展的机会的，兄弟，”主席说道。“我们已经记住了，你是一名踊跃效劳的兄弟，我们相信你在这里大有可为。今晚就有一件小事情，只要你乐意，里面就有你的一席之地。”

“我可以等待更值得一干的活计。”

“不管怎么样，今晚你还是去吧，去了你就会知道，本会有一些什么样的主张。这件事情我等一会儿再来宣布。与此同时，”他瞥了一眼手上的议程表，“我还有一两件事情要在会上说一说。首先，我要请司库讲一讲咱们的存款状况。咱们得给吉姆·卡纳威的寡妇准备一笔救济金。卡纳威因公殉难，咱们有责任把他的妻

子照顾好。”

“上个月，吉姆跟别人一起去杀马雷溪谷的切斯特·威尔科克斯，没想到反遭毒手，”邻座告诉麦克默多。

“眼下，咱们的资金非常充足，”司库说道，银行账簿就摆在他的面前。“最近这段时间，各家公司都比较大方。马克斯·林德公司交了五百块，只求咱们饶过他们。沃克兄弟公司交了一百，不过我已经自作主张把钱退了回去，让他们按五百来交。如果我到星期三还没有听见信儿的话，他们的升降机多半会出故障。去年他们就不听话，非得等咱们烧掉了他们的碎煤机才肯讲道理。还有，西区煤业公司也把他们的年度捐赠交了上来。咱们手头有足够的钱来应付所有的开销。”

“阿奇·斯温登怎么样呢？”一名兄弟问道。

“他已经卖掉产业，离开了这个地区。这个老混蛋还给咱们留了张字条，说他宁肯在纽约自由自在地扫大街，也不愿意当一个任由黑帮敲诈的大矿主。我的天！算他跑得快，赶在字条送到之前就溜掉了！按我看，他再也不会在这个山谷里露面啦。”

一个慈眉善目、和颜悦色、脸刮得干干净净的老人从正对主席的桌子下首站了起来。“司库先生，”老人问道，“我能不能问一问，这个人被咱们赶跑之后，他的产业叫谁给买走了呢？”

“没问题，莫里斯兄弟。买主是州县联营默顿铁路公司。”

“去年，托德曼家和李家的两座矿以同样的方式流到了市面上，当时的买主是谁呢？”

“也是这家公司，莫里斯兄弟。”

“前不久，曼森、舒曼、范·德埃和阿特伍德都把自个儿的炼铁厂给卖了，买主又是谁呢？”

“买主是西吉尔莫顿矿业总公司。”

“我可看不出来，莫里斯兄弟，”主席说道，“买主是谁跟咱们有什么关系，不管他们是谁，总不可能把矿产搬到别处去吧。”

“恕我冒昧，尊贵的会首，我觉得这跟咱们有很大的关系。到现在，这样的兼并过程已经持续了整整十年的时间。咱们正在一步一步地把所有的小矿主赶出这个行当。结果是什么呢？咱们已经看到，取而代之的都是像默顿铁路公司和矿业总公司这样的巨头，他们的董事要么是在纽约，要么就在费城，根本不在乎咱们的威胁。咱们确实可以从他们的本地经理手中得到好处，可这只会驱使他们打发新的经理来接管本地的生意。除此之外，咱们这是在自找麻烦。小矿主无财无势，压根儿就奈何不了咱们。只要咱们不把他们榨得太狠，他们就会留在咱们的势力范围之内。反过来，那些巨头要是发现咱们妨碍了他们赚钱，肯定会不遗余力、不惜工本地追踪咱们，直到把咱们告上法庭为止。”

听了这番不祥的言论，会场里一下子鸦雀无声，所有的人都沉下脸来，开始交换沮丧的眼神。他们一直都是无所不能、所向披靡，以至于已经彻底忘记，自己有可能遭到报应。然而，看到这种可能性之后，即便是他们当中最无所顾忌的人也觉得身上发冷。

“我的建议是，”莫里斯接着说道，“咱们不妨对那些小矿主宽大一些。一旦把他们悉数赶跑，本会的势力就会荡然无存。”

真相若是令人不快，那就注定不会受人青睐。莫里斯坐回原位之后，会场里响起了愤怒的吼声。麦金提站起身来，脸上堆满了乌云。

“莫里斯兄弟，”他说道，“你向来就是个乌鸦嘴。只要本会兄弟团结一心，整个美国也找不出能够奈何咱们的势力。难道说，法庭咱们还去得少吗？按我看，那些巨头跟小公司一样，也会发现交钱比打官司省事。好了，兄弟们，”说到这里，麦金提摘下了他的黑丝绒帽子和绶带，“今晚的议程到此结束，剩下的只有一件小事，可以留到咱们分别的时候再说。时间到啦，兄弟们都来开怀痛饮、畅叙友情吧。”

人性可真是一种奇怪的东西。瞧瞧这些人，他们把杀人当作家常便饭，曾经撂倒过一个又一个跟他们无冤无仇的一家之主，面对受害者哭泣的妻子和无助的儿女，他们从来都没有丝毫的歉疚或者同情，尽管如此，温柔哀婉的乐声却可以让他们感动得热泪盈眶。麦克默多天生一副男高音的好嗓子，即便他此前还没有赢得这个分会的好感，他即席献上的《玛丽，我坐在篱阶上等你》和《艾伦河畔》[1]也立时让众人深受感动，不得不对他青眼相看。

入会的头一个晚上，这个新会员不光把自己变成了最受大家欢迎的兄弟之一，还得到了头领们的赏识，随时可能跻身高位。不过，除了兄弟们的喜爱之外，一名值得尊敬的自由人会会员还需要具备其他的一些素质。究竟需要什么素质，这个晚上还没过完，麦克默多就看到了一个可以说明问题的例子。威士忌瓶子传了无数圈之后，大家都已经面红耳赤，做好了为非作歹的充分准备。这时候，会首再一次站了起来，开始对众人讲话。

“各位哥们儿，”他说道，“本镇有个家伙需要收拾，你们有责任满足他这方面的需要。我说的是《先驱报》的詹姆斯·斯坦格。他又在冲咱们乱喷唾沫星子，你们都知道是怎么回事了吧？”

会场里响起了一片赞同的嗡嗡声，还有许多人嘟嘟囔囔地骂了起来。麦金提从马甲的口袋里掏出了一张剪报，开口念道：

“法律何在！秩序何存！

“这就是他用的标题。

“恐怖主宰煤铁矿区

十二年前，首批暗杀事件证明本地确有黑帮活动。自彼

[1] 这两首都是哀歌。《玛丽，我坐在篱阶上等你》（“I’m Sitting on the Stile, Mary”）是美国爱尔兰移民当中的流行民谣，《艾伦河畔》（“On the Banks of Allan Water”）据说是英格兰作家马修·刘易斯（Matthew Lewis, 1775—1818）的作品，艾伦河是苏格兰中部的一条河流。

时迄于今日，此等暴行从未停息，目下更已登峰造极，令我等沦为文明社会之可耻污痕。泱泱吾国海纳百川，慨然容留此辈不堪欧洲暴政之外来移民，莫非竟为此等回报？此辈自我等手中获得栖身之所，翻以暴行凌虐我等，世间可有是理？此土居于自由之星条旗帜神圣庇佑之下，乃有此等恐怖肆虐、法纪沦亡之情状，致令我等触目心惊，恍如置身腐朽至极之东方王朝，世间可有是理？此辈之名非属隐秘，所在帮会亦属人所共知。我等隐忍，须至何日？我等岂能永远置身——

“行了，这篇废话我不想再往下念了！”主席大吼一声，把剪报扔到了桌子上。“他就是这么说咱们的。我要问你们的是，咱们该怎么回答他呢？”

“宰了他！”十几个兄弟发出了怒吼。

“我反对这种做法，”和颜悦色、脸刮得干干净净的莫里斯兄弟说道。“听我说，兄弟们，咱们用在这个山谷里的手段有点儿太狠了，总有一天，仅仅是为了自卫，所有的人也会联合起来消灭咱们的。詹姆斯·斯坦格已经上了年纪，整个镇子乃至整片地区的人都很尊敬他。在这个山谷里，他的报纸就是所有真相的象征。要是把他干掉的话，整个州都会骚动起来，最后的结局只能是咱们的毁灭。”

“他们能靠什么方法来毁灭咱们呢，缩头先生？”麦金提吼道。“靠警察吗？大家都知道，一半的警察拿着咱们的薪水，另一半害怕咱们。不然的话，靠法庭和法官吗？打官司的事情咱们见得少吗，哪一次不是不了了之呢？”

“他们兴许会请一个名叫‘私刑’的法官来审理这件案子，[①]”莫里斯兄弟说道。

[①]“私刑”的英文是“lynch”，按通常的说法是源自美国农场主及独立运动分子查尔斯·林奇（Charles Lynch, 1736—1796），此人于美国独立战争期间在家乡弗吉尼亚自组法庭，以非常规手段惩治罪犯。林奇所用手段并非十分过激，但他的姓氏却从此成为不由程序私自“执法”的代名词。莫里斯这么说，实际的意思是镇上的人可能会联合起来以暴制暴。

这句话引来了满堂的怒吼。

“只需要动动指头，”麦金提叫道，“我就可以调来两百号人，把这个镇子杀个鸡犬不留。”接下来，他突然提高嗓门儿，乌黑的浓眉拧成了一个可怕的结：“听着，莫里斯兄弟，我已经盯上了你，而且不是一天两天了！你自个儿没种也就算了，还想让别的人跟你一样没种。莫里斯兄弟，等你自个儿的名字上了咱们的议程之后，那你就知道日子不好过了，眼下我觉得，确实应该把你的名字列进去。”

莫里斯已经脸色煞白，这会儿便双膝一软，瘫倒在了自个儿的椅子上。他抖抖索索地举起酒杯喝了一口，这才有了开口作答的力气。“如果我说了不该说的话，我这就向您道歉，尊贵的会首，也向会里的所有兄弟道歉。我是个忠心耿耿的会员，大家都知道这一点，我说了这么些忧心忡忡的话，仅仅是因为我担心本会遇上祸事。不过，尊贵的会首，我相信您比我高瞻远瞩，我跟您保证，再也不会犯这样的错误。”

听了这番低声下气的话语，会首的怒色渐渐缓和。“很好，莫里斯兄弟。要是非得给你一个教训的话，真正痛心的还得说是我本人。不过，只要我还坐在这把椅子上，咱们就必须团结一致，不管是说话还是做事。好了，各位哥们儿，”他接着说道，目光扫视着会场里所有的人，“我的意见是这样，如果斯坦格把他该吃的果子全部吃完的话，兴许会惹来一些不必要的麻烦，因为这些编报纸的全都是一伙，本州的所有报纸都会为这件事情嚷嚷起来，要求警察和军队出面干预。话又说回来，我看你们完全可以给他一个相当严厉的警告。你能办好这件事情吗，鲍德温兄弟？”

“没问题！”小伙子热切地应道。

“你要带多少个兄弟？”

“六个，其中两个负责把门。你跟我去，高尔，还有你，曼塞尔，还有你，斯坎伦，再加上威勒比两兄弟。”

“刚才我已经答应了，新来的这位兄弟也得去，”主席说道。

特德·鲍德温看了看麦克默多，眼神里说得明明白白，他并没有忘记以前的事情，谅解更是无从谈起。“呃，他想去就去吧，”他没好气地说道。“这样就够了。咱们干活去吧，越早越好。”

伴随着大呼小叫，还有醉意醺醺的断续歌声，众人一哄而散。酒吧里仍然挤满了纵酒狂欢的客人，不少兄弟便在那里停住了脚步。奉命执行任务的这个小组上了大街，沿着人行道往前走，三三两两地分成了几个小队，免得引起别人的注意。这天晚上冷得要命，半圆的月亮在繁星点点的霜冻夜空之中大放光华。这群人在一个院坝里停了下来，重新聚到了一起，院坝对面是一座高大的建筑，灯火辉煌的窗子上打着“维尔米萨先驱报社”几个金字，窗子里面传来了印刷机运转的咣啷声。

“听着，你，”鲍德温对麦克默多说道，“你就在楼下把门，保证我们退路畅通。阿瑟·威勒比跟你一起。其他人都跟我一起去。用不着害怕，各位哥们儿，咱们有十几个证人，个个都可以证明，咱们这会儿是在团结会馆的酒吧里。”

时间已经将近午夜，大街上冷冷清清，有的只是一两个正在回家的酒鬼。这帮人跑到街道对面，推开报社的大门，鲍德温带着几个人冲了进去，顺着正对他们的那段楼梯往上爬，麦克默多和另一个人留在了楼下。楼上的房间里传来一声怒吼，一声求救的呼喊，跟着就是一阵脚步杂沓、椅子翻倒的声音。片刻之后，一个头发花白的男人冲到了楼梯顶端的平台上。

那个人还想继续跑，歹徒们已经抓住了他，他的眼镜丁零当啷地滚到了麦克默多脚下。只听得一记闷响、一声呻吟，他已经栽倒在地，五根棍棒同时落到他的身上，碰得咔嗒乱响。他扭来扭去，又瘦又长的四肢在重击之下不停颤抖。到最后，其他人都已经住了手，鲍德温却还在拼命地抽打那个人的脑袋，冷酷的脸上凝着一个魔鬼一般的笑容。那个人抬起双臂想护住自己的脑袋，

只可惜无济于事。受害人的白发已经血迹斑斑，鲍德温仍然俯身冲着受害人，看见露在双手外面的部位就又快又狠地来上一下，直到麦克默多冲上楼梯把他拖开为止。

“你这样会打死人的，”他说道。“停手吧！”

鲍德温万分惊讶地盯着他。“你去死吧！”他吼道。“你算什么东西，也敢来干涉——就凭你这么一个刚刚加入分会的家伙吗？给我闪开！”他挥起手里的棍子，麦克默多却抢先一步，“唰”的一声掏出了屁股兜里的手枪。

“你才要给我闪开！”麦克默多叫道。“你要敢动我一个指头，我就一枪崩掉你的脑袋。你还有脸提什么分会，会首不是吩咐过不能杀他吗——你这么干，不是想杀他又是想干吗呢？”

“他说得对，”另一个人说道。

“我的天！你们最好快一点儿！”守在楼下的人叫道。“所有的窗子都开始亮灯了，用不了五分钟，整个镇子的人都会跑到这儿来的。”

千真万确，大街上已经传来了喊叫的声音，楼下的大厅里也聚起了一小群排字工和印制工，正准备鼓起勇气采取行动。见此情景，这帮歹徒把一动不动的报社主编撇在了楼梯口，急匆匆地冲下楼梯，顺着大街飞快地跑了起来。其中的几个跑回团结会馆，混到麦金提酒廊的人群之中，悄声地向吧台里面的头领通报了任务圆满完成的消息。包括麦克默多在内的其他几个人则转进小街，七拐八弯地绕回了各自的家里。

第四章 * 恐怖谷

第二天早上醒来的时候，麦克默多完全有理由记起昨夜的入会仪式。酒精让他的脑袋隐隐作痛，烙了标记的右臂也已经肿了起来，疼得火烧火燎。既然拥有一个独特的收入来源，他的班自然是可上可不上。这么着，他吃了一顿迟来的早饭，一上午都待在家里，给一个朋友写了一封长信。接下来，他开始阅读《每日先驱报》，报上有一篇最后一刻才加进版面的特别报道，标题是这样的：

先驱报社惨遭涂炭——报社主编
身负重伤

这篇报道非常简短，撰稿人对相关事实的了解程度也绝对比不上麦克默多自己。报道的末尾是以下一段文字：

> 此事虽已移交警方，若望警方成效胜于往日，究属渺茫之事。部分凶徒身份已得确认，此案或可定谳。不问可知，暴行主使正是长期奴役此地民众之某等社团，该社团恶名昭彰，本报与之势不两立。斯坦格先生虽遭令人发指之野蛮殴打，头部伤势严重，所幸并非生命垂危，此讯当可令斯坦格先生之众多友好备感欣慰。

报道中接着说，警方已经为报社配备了一队持有温彻斯特步枪[1]的警卫。

麦克默多放下报纸，抬起被昨夜的种种严峻考验弄得抖颤不已的手臂，刚开始点烟斗，便听见外面有

[1] 温彻斯特步枪（Winchester rifle）是由美国温彻斯特连发火器公司制造的一种步枪，为世界上最早的连发步枪之一。

人敲门。接下来，房东太太把一张便条交给了他，说是一个少年刚刚送来的。便条没有署名，内容如下：

> 我想跟你谈一谈，但却不想在你的屋里谈。你可以到米勒山上的旗杆旁边来找我。麻烦你现在就来，有一些要紧事情，我应该说一说，而你也应该听一听。

麦克默多反复读了两遍，心里惊讶至极，因为他完全想不出便条的意义，也想不出便条出自谁的手笔。假设便条的笔迹娇柔纤细的话，他兴许会觉得，过往生活中屡见不鲜的风流韵事又一次露出了端倪。然而，从笔迹上看，便条的作者是个男人，还是个受过良好教育的男人。犹豫再三之后，他最终决定如约前往，看看到底是怎么回事。

米勒山是一个疏于维护的公园，坐落在镇子的正中央，夏天是很受大家青睐的游赏之地，冬日里却十分荒凉。站在山顶，你不光可以将污秽凌乱的镇子尽收眼底，还可以看到下方的蜿蜒山谷，看到那些黑黢黢的矿场和工厂散布在山谷两侧的积雪之中，看到拱卫山谷的那两列林木蓊郁、白雪皑皑的山脉。

麦克默多沿着常青树篱之中的曲折小径慢慢上行，一直走到了餐馆跟前，那座餐馆是夏日欢宴的中心场所，眼下则空无一人。餐馆旁边立着一根光秃秃的旗杆，旗杆底下站着一个男人，帽檐压得低低的，大衣的领子也竖了起来。那人转过脸来，麦克默多发现他不是别人，正是昨夜惹得会首大发雷霆的莫里斯兄弟。见面之后，两人对了一下分会的暗号。

“我找你是想跟你谈一谈，麦克默多先生，”老人说话的口气犹犹豫豫，显然是有所顾忌。“谢谢你赏脸过来。”

“你的便条为什么不署名呢？”

“不小心不行啊，先生。眼下这种时候，你根本没法判断事情的后果，也没法判断哪些人值得相信、哪些人不值得。”

“会里的兄弟总是值得相信的吧。”

“不，不，那可不一定，”莫里斯万分激动地叫了起来。“咱们说过的所有事情，甚至是咱们脑子里想的事情，似乎都会传到麦金提那个家伙的耳朵里去。”

“听着！”麦克默多厉声说道。“你自己也非常清楚，就在昨天晚上，我刚刚宣誓要效忠会首。难不成，你要我现在就自食其言吗？”

“你要是这么来看问题的话，”莫里斯悲哀地说道，“那我只能说，对不起，我不该麻烦你跑来见我。两个自由的公民都不能彼此交流思想，这样的世道可真是糟糕透了。”

麦克默多一直在仔仔细细地打量对方，这会儿便换上了比较缓和的态度。“当然喽，我刚才的话只针对我自己，”他说道。“你也知道，我初来乍到，什么事情都不了解。有资格说话的人并不是我，莫里斯先生，你要是想跟我说点儿什么的话，我倒是愿意洗耳恭听。”

“听了就去告诉麦金提头领！”莫里斯痛心疾首地说道。

“说实在的，你这么说可就冤枉了我，”麦克默多叫道。“我自个儿忠于分会，刚才也坦白跟你说了，可我要是把你私下告诉我的事情传给别人的话，那我就真是禽兽不如啦。我不会往外传的，不过我必须警告你，你可别指望从我这儿得到帮助和同情。”

“别人的帮助和同情，我早就已经不指望了，”莫里斯说道。“我要说的话多半会把我自个儿的性命交到你的手里，不过，你虽然不是什么好人——从你昨天晚上的表现来看，我觉得你正在朝最坏的方向发展——可你终归是新来的，心肠还不会像他们那么狠毒。所以我才觉得，我可以跟你谈一谈。”

“那么，你到底要谈什么呢？”

“你要是出卖我的话，老天会诅咒你的！”

“放心吧，我说了我不会的。”

“那么，我想问你一句，你在芝加哥加入自由人会、宣誓践行

旗杆底下站着一个男人，帽檐压得低低的，大衣的领子也竖了起来。

博爱与忠诚的时候，心里面有没有想过，这个团体会让你走上犯罪的道路呢？”

“如果你称之为犯罪的话，”麦克默多回答道。

“称之为犯罪！”莫里斯大叫一声，激动得嗓音发颤。“虽然你见得还少，可你倒是说说，不是犯罪又是什么。昨天晚上，你们动手殴打一个老得可以做你父亲的老人，直到他的鲜血染红了白发，这是不是犯罪呢？是不是犯罪——不是的话，你还能称之为什么呢？”

“有些人可能会称之为战争，”麦克默多说道，“两个阶级之间的战争，双方都得赌上一切，所以双方都会竭尽全力。”

“可是，在芝加哥加入自由人会的时候，你想到过这种事情吗？”

“没有，说老实话，当时我没想到。”

“我在费城入会的时候也没想到。那里的自由人会只是一个互助组织，一个朋友聚会的场所。后来我听说了这个地方——愿老天诅咒这个地名传进我耳朵的那个时辰！——还跑到这个地方来寻找更好的生活！天哪，寻找更好的生活！我的妻子和三个孩子都跟着我来了这里，我在集市广场开了一家布店，生意做得非常不错。我是自由人会会员的事情传开之后，我不得不加入了本地的分会，跟你昨天晚上的情况一样。我的胳膊烙上了丑恶的标记，心里的烙印则更加可耻，因为我发现自己听命于一个卑劣的恶棍，受困于一张罪行的罗网。我能怎么办呢？我的每一句规劝都被他们看成了背叛，就像你昨晚看到的那样。我不能离开这里，因为我仅有的家当就是我的店铺，而且我非常清楚，退出帮会对我来说意味着遭人谋杀，对我的妻儿来说意味着什么，那就只有老天爷才知道了。噢，伙计，这真是太糟糕了——糟糕极了！”他双手掩面，禁不住啜泣起来，身子一阵一阵地抽搐。

麦克默多耸了耸肩。“你这个人心肠太软，干不了会里的活计，”他说道。“你这类人本来就不适合这类工作。”

“我有良心，也有信仰，他们却把我变成了跟他们一样的罪犯。有一次，他们派给我一件活计，而我心里明白，拒绝的后果会是什么。没准儿，我天生就是个胆小鬼，也没准儿，我心里牵挂着我那个可怜的小妇人、牵挂着我的孩子，所以就变成了胆小鬼，总而言之，我听从了他们的吩咐。依我看，那件事情会缠我一辈子的。

“那是一座孤零零的房子，就在那座山的背面，离这儿有二十英里。他们叫我把门，也跟你昨天晚上的情况一样。他们信不过我，觉得我干不好那样的活计。其他的人都进了屋，出来的时候，他们一个个都是双手血红，一直红到了腕子上。我们离开的时候，一个小孩子从屋里跑了出来，追着我们哭号不止。那是个五岁的小男孩，亲眼目睹了自己的父亲被人杀害的过程。我惊骇得差一点儿就晕了过去，但却不得不装出一副满不在乎的笑脸，因为我非常清楚，如果我不这么做的话，下一次他们就会带着血淋淋的双手从我的屋子里出来，为自己的父亲哭号的就该是我的小弗雷德了。

“可是，我从此就变成了一名罪犯，变成了杀人的帮凶，今生和来世都没了指望。我是个虔诚的天主教徒，神父却再也不肯和我交谈，还把我逐出教会，就因为他听说我是个扫魂帮。这就是我的遭遇。眼下我看到你走上了同一条道路，所以就想问一问你，尽头会是什么模样。你是打算变成跟他们一样的冷血凶手，还是打算跟我一起，想点儿办法来阻止这些事情呢？”

“你打算怎么做？”麦克默多突然问道。“该不会是想去告密吧？”

“这话可不能说！”莫里斯叫道。“毫无疑问，光是这样的念头就足以让我性命不保。”

“那就好，”麦克默多说道。“我是这么觉得的，你这个人太过软弱，对这些事情有点儿小题大做。”

“小题大做！待久一点儿你就知道了。瞧瞧下面的山谷！瞧瞧无数烟囱喷吐在山谷上空的那层阴云吧！我可以告诉你，笼罩在人们头上的杀气比那层阴云还要浓重、还要迫近。这是一座恐怖之谷、死亡之谷。从黎明到黄昏，人们的心里时时刻刻装满了恐惧。等着瞧吧，年轻人，你自己也能看明白的。”

“好吧，等我看得更明白之后，我会告诉你的，”麦克默多满不在乎地说道。“非常明白的事情是，你并不适合这个地方，你最好卖掉铺子离开这里，越早越好，别管你是不是只能卖到十分之一的价钱。你说的话不会从我这里传出去，不过，老天在上！如果我发现你是个叛徒的话——”

“不，不是！”莫里斯可怜巴巴地喊道。

“好吧，我相信你不是。我会记着你说的话，没准儿哪天会再想想。按我看，你跟我说这些也是一片好心。好了，我准备回家去了。”

“等一等，还有一句话，”莫里斯说道。“咱俩见面的事情可能会被人看见，他们兴许会问，咱俩谈的是什么事情。”

“哈！幸亏你想到了这一点。”

“他们问的话，我就说我想请你当店员。”

“而我没有答应，咱俩谈的就是这件事情。好了，再见，莫里斯兄弟，祝你以后的日子越来越顺当。”

同一天下午，麦克默多坐在起居室的炉子旁边，一边抽烟一边沉思。房门突然开了，麦金提头领的硕大身形把门框塞了个满满当当。对完暗号之后，他在小伙子对面坐了下来，一瞬不瞬地看了小伙子一阵，小伙子也一瞬不瞬地回应着他的注视。

“我并不怎么上门拜访别人，麦克默多兄弟，”头领终于开了口。“要我说，光是上门拜访我的人就已经够我应付的了。不过，这次我倒是觉得，我不妨破个例，来你自个儿家里看看你。”

“您的光临让我非常自豪，议员，”麦克默多一边恳切地回答，

一边从碗橱里拿出了一瓶威士忌。“真没想到，我能有这样的荣幸。”

“胳膊怎么样啦？”头领问道。

麦克默多做了个鬼脸。“呃，一时半会儿还忘不了疼，”他说道，“不过，这也是值得的。”

“没错，对于那些忠诚不改、襄助本会的兄弟来说，”对方回答道，“这的确是值得的。今天上午在米勒山上，你跟莫里斯兄弟聊了些什么呢？”

这个问题来得猝不及防，幸亏他已经有了现成的答案。于是乎，他爆发出了一阵爽朗的笑声。“莫里斯不知道，我用不着出门就可以维持生活，不知道也好，因为他良心过剩，肯定受不了我这样的人。话说回来，这个老伙计的心眼儿倒是挺好的。他以为我找不到活计，所以想给我一点儿照顾，请我到一家布店去当店员。”

“哦，就是这件事情吗？”

“是的，就是这件事情。”

“你没答应他吗？”

“那是当然。我待在自个儿的卧室里，只需要花四个钟头的时间就可以挣来十倍的钱，不是吗？”

“的确如此。不过，换了是我的话，我是不会老跟莫里斯搅在一起的。”

“为什么呢？”

“呃，不为什么，就因为我叫你别这么做。对于咱们这边的大多数人来说，有这个理由也就够了。”

“大多数人兴许会觉得够了，可我觉得还不够，议员，”麦克默多大着胆子说道。“您要是懂得看人的话，那就肯定能看出这一点。”

黑大汉恶狠狠地瞪着麦克默多，毛茸茸的爪子攥紧了玻璃酒杯，似乎是打算把杯子扔到麦克默多的脑袋上。片刻之后，他拿出那种惯有的作派，装模作样、咋咋唬唬地大笑起来。

“你可真是个古怪家伙，如假包换，”他说道。“好吧，你非要知道理由的话，那我就说给你听听好了。你们俩见面的时候，莫里斯没说什么反对本会的话吗？”

“没有。”

“也没说反对我的话吗？”

“没有。”

“呃，那是因为他对你不放心。不过，他从骨子里就不是一个忠诚的兄弟。我们非常清楚这一点，所以才监视他的行动，准备找个合适的日子给他一点儿教训。依我看，这个日子很快就要来了。咱们的队伍可容不下害群之马。如果你老是跟一个有贰心的家伙搅在一起的话，我们兴许会觉得，你自个儿也有贰心，明白了吗？”

“我可不会老是跟他搅在一起，因为我不喜欢他这个人，”麦克默多回答道。“至于说我有贰心嘛，这话也就是您说，要是从别的任何人嘴里说出来，那他绝对没机会在我面前说第二遍。”

“好啦，这样就行了，”麦金提说道，喝干了杯里的酒。“我来是为了给你提个醒儿，到这儿就算是说完了。”

“我倒想知道，”麦克默多说道，“我跟莫里斯谈话的事情，您究竟是怎么知道的呢？”

麦金提笑了起来。“知道这个镇子里出了些什么事情，正好是我的本分，”他说道。“我看你最好记清楚，所有的事情都逃不过我的耳目。好了，时间差不多了，我这就——”

就在这时，一件十分出人意料的事情打断了头领的道别言语。突然之间，房门“咣”的一声被人撞开，三个眉头紧锁的大檐帽怒冲冲地盯住了房间里的两个人。麦克默多一跃而起，左轮手枪掏到一半，胳膊却僵在了半空之中，因为他发现，两支温彻斯特步枪已经直直地对准了自己的脑袋。一个身穿制服的人走进房间，手里端着一把左轮手枪，不是别人，正是曾经隶属芝加哥警局、眼下供职于矿警部队的马文队长。他冲着麦克默多摇起头来，脸

上带着一种不阴不阳的怪笑。

“我就知道你准保会惹上麻烦，芝加哥的麦克默多不老实先生，”他说道。“不惹麻烦你活不下去，对吧？戴上你的帽子，跟我们走吧。”

“依我看，你会为这件事情付出代价的，马文队长，”麦金提说道。“你竟敢以这种方式闯进民宅、骚扰正直守法的市民，我倒想知道，你到底算是哪门子人物？”

“您这完全是多管闲事，麦金提议员，”警察队长说道。“我们来抓这个名叫麦克默多的家伙，不是来抓您的。您应该协助我们执行公务，而不是从中作梗。”

“他是我的朋友，他的行为我可以负责，”头领说道。

“种种迹象表明，麦金提先生，过不了多久，您就得为您自个儿的行为负责，”队长回答道。“这个麦克默多来这里之前就是个歹徒，眼下也仍然是个歹徒。拿枪瞄着他，警员，我来缴他的械。”

“我的枪就在这儿，”麦克默多镇定自若地说道。“要我说，马文队长，如果你我两个单独碰面的话，兴许你是没这么容易抓住我的。”

“你的逮捕令在哪儿呢？”麦金提问道。“我的天！维尔米萨有了你这样的警察头目，大家还不如到俄国去生活呢。这是一起资本家主使的暴行，要我说，这件事情到这儿还不算完。”

“您只管尽力履行您自个儿心目当中的本职，议员，我们也要切实履行自己的职守。”

“我的罪名是什么呢？”麦克默多问道。

“罪名是殴打先驱报社的老主编斯坦格。你侥幸逃过了谋杀的罪名，可这并不是因为你没有杀人的歹意。”

“是吗，如果你们抓他就为这件事情的话，”麦金提笑了笑，大声说道，“那你们倒不如就此打住，免得给自己找一大堆麻烦。这个人昨晚在我的酒廊里跟我打牌，一直打到半夜，我可以找十

几个人来证明这件事情。”

“随您的便，依我看，明天您可以上法庭去解决这件事情。好了，跟我们走，麦克默多，你最好给我们放老实点儿，免得我们拿枪托朝你的脑袋上招呼。麻烦您让开，麦金提先生，我可要警告您，我决不会允许任何人妨碍我执行公务！”

队长的神情无比坚决，麦克默多和他的头领不得不俯首听命。分开之前，头领瞅准机会跟犯人嘀咕了几句。

“有没有问题——”他猛然竖起大拇指，表明他指的是铸造假币的工具。

“没问题，”麦克默多悄声说道。他已经在地板下面辟出了一块隐秘的地方，把工具藏了起来。

“我这就跟你道别，”头领握着麦克默多的手说道。“我会去找赖利律师，还会亲自上庭替你辩护。你只管放心，他们定不了你的罪的。”

“我看不一定。你们两个把犯人看好，他要敢耍花样，你们就朝他开枪。离开之前，我得搜一搜这座房子。”

他把房子搜了一遍，但却显然是没有发现那座地下工厂的痕迹。于是他走下楼来，跟两名警员一起把麦克默多押回警局。夜幕已经降临，外面狂风暴雪，大街上几乎空无一人。即便如此，还是有几个闲人跟在这群人的后面，借着夜幕的掩护大声诅咒麦克默多。

“直接弄死这个天杀的扫魂帮！”他们高声叫喊。“直接弄死他算了！”警察把麦克默多推进警局的时候，他们哈哈大笑、冷嘲热讽。值班的督察按规矩对麦克默多进行了一番简短的讯问，然后就把他关进了公共牢房。鲍德温和另外三名参与昨晚暴行的歹徒也在里面，他们都是下午被捕的，审讯的时间则是明天上午。

然而，自由人会的手伸得很长，甚至可以伸进执法机构内部的这座森严壁垒。夜深之后，一名狱卒拿来了一捆稻草，说是供

他们铺床之用，里面却藏着两瓶威士忌、几只酒杯和一副扑克牌。他们兴高采烈地过了一夜，完全没有为第二天上午的严峻考验感到担忧。

从审讯的结果来看，他们确实没有理由感到担忧。仅凭现有的证据，地方法官根本不能把他们送交更高一级的法庭。一方面，那些排字工和印制工不得不承认现场光线昏暗，他们自己也相当慌乱，尽管他们相信几名被告都曾经参与行凶，但却不能完全确定凶手的身份。面对麦金提雇来的那名狡猾律师的交叉质询，他们的证词便显得更加地不足为凭。

按照伤者本人预先提交的证词，凶手的袭击来得猝不及防，以至于他什么也说不上来，只知道带头打他的是个蓄着小胡子的人。伤者补充说，他知道凶手都是扫魂帮的人，因为镇上其他的人都不会对他怀有任何敌意，与此同时，他那些直言不讳的社论早就已经惹来了扫魂帮的恫吓。

另一方面，包括本镇高官麦金提议员在内的六位市民众口一词、斩钉截铁、清清楚楚地指出，当天晚上，几名被告都在团结会馆打牌，牌局散场的时间远远晚于暴行发生的时间。

不用说，几名被告都是当庭获释，法官还为他们所受的骚扰发表了一些非常接近于道歉的话语，并且对马文队长和警方多管闲事的躁进行为提出了含蓄的批评。

听完法官的判决，旁听席上传来了高声的喝彩。旁听席上有许多麦克默多熟识的面孔，会里的兄弟一个个笑容满面、频频挥手。不过，也有一些人紧绷着嘴唇坐在那里，目光阴郁地看着这帮人鱼贯走出被告席。那些人当中有一个蓄着黑须、面容坚毅的小个子，在这些刚刚获释的囚犯从他面前走过的时候，他把自己和同事们的心声说了出来。

“你们这些该死的凶手！”他说道。“我们迟早会要你们的好看！”

第五章 * 最黑暗的时辰

如果说杰克·麦克默多在会里的声望还需要一点儿助力的话，他先是被捕继而获释的事情便可谓适逢其会。一名兄弟在入会当夜就做下了一件上庭受审的事情，在分会的历史上还是一项前无古人的纪录。他本来就已经名头响亮，大家都知道他友善热诚、快活豪爽，而且脾气火爆，连势焰熏天的头领本人也不能给他气受。眼下呢，他又让兄弟们产生了这样一种印象，那就是他比他们当中的任何人都更善于制订血腥残忍的计划，也比他们当中的任何人都更有能力实施计划。“他肯定能成为一个擅长‘干净活计’的哥们儿，”会里的各位长者交口称赞，准备在时机成熟的时候让他一试身手。

麦金提虽然爪牙众多，但却在这个小伙子身上看到了高人一等的本领，觉得自己帐下多了一头凶猛的猎犬。小活计可以让那些小狗去完成，不过，有朝一日，他终究会悄悄松开这头猛兽，让它扑向合适的猎物。包括特德·鲍德温在内的几名会员觉得这个新来的兄弟蹿得太快，为此还恨上了他，可他们都不敢去招惹他，因为他的拳头来得跟他的笑脸一样快。

不过，他虽然赢得了兄弟们的拥戴，但却失去了另一个圈子的欢心，对他来说，那个圈子的重要性已经超过了他的帮会。伊蒂·沙夫特的父亲不想再跟他有任何往来，也不允许他踏进自家的门槛。伊蒂本人虽然深陷爱河，没办法跟他一刀两断，理智却警告她三思而行，让她不得不仔细掂量，嫁给一个众人眼里的罪犯会有什么样的后果。

一天早上，彻夜未眠的伊蒂拿定了主意，就算是最后一次，自己也得去看看他，竭尽全力地拉他一把，让他摆脱那些正在将他拖向深渊的邪恶势力。他经常都央求伊蒂到他家里去，这一天，伊蒂便来到他的寓所，径直走进了他用作起居室的那个房间。他背对着门坐在桌子跟前，面前摆着一封信。见此情景，年方十九的伊蒂陡然产生了女孩子的那种淘气念头。伏案而坐的他没有听见她推开房门的声音，于是她蹑手蹑脚地走上前去，轻轻地拍了拍他的肩膀。

要说她打算吓唬吓唬他的话，那她可真算是如愿以偿，只不过，转眼之间，受到惊吓的人就变成了她自己。他像头猛虎一样扑向了她，右手伸向她的咽喉，左手则将面前的信纸揉成了一团。他横眉怒目地站在那里，一眨眼的工夫，惊讶和喜悦浮上了他的脸庞，取代了先前那种让他面容扭曲的狞恶表情。伊蒂一直过着温良纯善的日子，从来没有见过那样的狞恶表情，这会儿已经吓得退了回去。

“是你啊！”麦克默多一边说，一边擦拭额上的汗水。“想想吧，我的心肝宝贝，你特意上门来看我，我怎么欢迎不好，竟然想把你给扼死！过来吧，亲爱的，”他伸出了自己的双臂，“让我来给你一点儿补偿。”

可是，伊蒂依然心有余悸，因为在刚才的那个瞬间，她从这个男人的脸上看到了心虚和恐惧。女人的全部直觉都在提醒她，那绝不仅仅是受到惊吓之后的自然反应。错不了，那是心虚，心虚和恐惧！

“你这是怎么啦，杰克？”她大声说道。“你为什么会被我吓成那个样子呢？噢，杰克，要是心里没有鬼的话，你肯定不会像刚才那样看我的！”

“没什么，刚才我正在想别的事情，可你的脚步像仙女一样轻盈，走过来的时候没有任何动静——”

“不，不对，事情没有那么简单，杰克。”接下来，她心里突然产生了一种怀疑。“你刚才在写什么信，拿给我看一看。”

“噢，伊蒂，这我可不能给你看。”

她的怀疑得到了确证。“信是写给其他女人的，”她嚷嚷起来。“肯定是这样！要不然，你干吗不让我看信呢？你是在给你的妻子写信吗？我怎么知道你有没有结婚呢——你是个外乡人，谁都不知道你的底细，我又怎么能知道呢？”

“我没有结婚，伊蒂。听我说，我可以发誓！你是我在这世上唯一的一个女人，我可以凭着耶稣基督的十字架起誓！”

他激动得脸色惨白，语气也十分恳切，伊蒂没法不相信他的话。

“好吧，那么，”她叫道，“你干吗不肯让我看信呢？”

“我这就告诉你原因，小心肝儿，”他说道。“我曾经发誓不透露这封信的内容，因此我必须遵守对别人的承诺，就跟我不会违背对你的誓言一样。信上讲的都是会里的事情，即便对你也必须保密。刚才我感觉到有人拍我，一下子吓得够呛，可是，拍我的人很有可能是一名侦探啊，这你难道不明白吗？”

她觉得他没说假话，于是他把她揽入怀中，用亲吻驱散了她心里的恐惧和疑问。

“挨着我坐下吧，这样的座席配不上像你这么尊贵的女王，只可惜，你这个时运不济的爱人提供不了更好的东西。要我说，有朝一日，他肯定会给你更好的生活的。好啦，现在你心里踏实了，对吗？”

“杰克，我明知道你是个罪犯，跟一帮罪犯混在一起，说不定哪天就会听到你因为杀人受到审判的消息，你叫我怎么心里踏实呢？就在昨天，我们那里的一个住客还把你叫做‘扫魂帮麦克默多’呢，那个称呼像刀子一样扎到了我的心窝里。”

“没什么的，再难听的话也不能让人伤筋动骨。”

“可他们说的都是真话啊。”

“呃，亲爱的，扫魂帮也没有你想的那么坏。我们不过是一帮穷人，不过是在按自己的方式争取权利而已。”

伊蒂伸出双臂搂住了爱人的颈项。“退出吧，杰克！看在我的分上，也看在上帝分上，退出吧！我今天来找你，就是为了劝你退出的。噢，杰克，这样吧——我给你跪下啦！我跪在你面前求你，求你赶紧退出吧！”

麦克默多把她扶了起来，让她把脑袋靠在自己的胸膛上，竭力地安慰她。

“说真的，亲爱的，你并不知道你求的是什么。退出就等于违反誓言、背弃同事，你叫我怎么退出呢？你要能看清我的处境，肯定就不会这么劝我啦。再说了，就算我自个儿愿意，那又该怎么退出呢？你该不会以为，扫魂帮会任由一名会员带着会里所有的秘密一走了之吧？”

“这我已经想过了，杰克。我全都盘算好了。父亲攒下了一些钱，而且对这个地方深恶痛绝，因为那些人把我们的生活弄得充满恐惧、暗无天日。他已经做好了离开的准备，咱们可以一起逃到费城去，去纽约也行，那样就不怕他们的暗算了。”

麦克默多笑了起来。“扫魂帮的手长着呢。你难道以为，咱们跑到了费城或者纽约，他们就够不着了吗？”

“那么，咱们可以逃到西部去，还可以去英国，去德国也可以，父亲就是从那儿来的——只要能逃离这座恐怖之谷，去哪儿都可以！”

听到这句话，麦克默多不由得想起了年迈的莫里斯兄弟。“说真的，这已经是我第二次听人用这个字眼儿来形容这座山谷了，”他说道。“看样子，对你们当中的一些人来说，头上的阴云确实是非常浓重啊。”

“阴云时时刻刻地笼罩着我们，让我们的生活暗淡无光。你以为特德·鲍德温会放过咱们吗？要不是因为他怕你的话，你觉得

咱们能有什么活路呢？他看我的那种贪婪邪恶的眼神，你要能亲眼看见就好了！”

“老天作证！要是我逮到他这么干的话，那我一定得教教他什么叫做礼貌！好了，听我说，小姑娘。我不能离开这儿，不为别的，就是不能——你只管相信我，以后也别再问了。不过，如果你由着我自己安排的话，我就会努力为咱们铺下一条离开这儿的体面出路。”

“这样的事情哪有什么体面可言。”

“好啦，好啦，这只是你的看法而已。不过，只要你能给我六个月的时间，我就可以把出路安排好，走的时候也可以理直气壮地迎接其他人的目光。”

姑娘开心地笑了起来。“六个月！”她叫道。“这话算数吗？”

“呃，也可能需要七八个月。总而言之，最多只要一年，咱们就可以离开这座山谷。”

他能给伊蒂的承诺不过如此，可它好歹是个承诺。这一抹希望之光虽然遥远，终归也可以照亮眼前的黑暗。回家的时候，伊蒂的心情格外地轻松，杰克·麦克默多闯进她的生活之后，她还从来没有这么轻松过呢。

大家兴许会觉得，麦克默多既然入了会，自然可以知晓会里的所有事情。可他很快就发现，这个组织十分庞大、十分复杂，绝不只是一个普普通通的分会。有很多事情就连麦金提头领都不知道，因为山谷里还有一个号称“县特派员”的头领，此人住在铁路线低处的霍布森帕奇，按一种任性无常、专横跋扈的方式统辖着几个分会。麦克默多只见过他一次，那是个獐头鼠目、头发斑白的小个子，走起路来鬼鬼祟祟，乜斜的眼睛闪着凶光。此人名为埃文斯·波特，面对他的时候，即便是那位不可一世的维尔米萨头领也会产生厌恶和恐惧的感觉，就像大块头的丹东见到了

矮小却凶险的罗伯斯庇尔一样[1]。

有一天，跟麦克默多同住一屋的斯坎伦收到了麦金提的一张便条，里面附有埃文斯·波特写来的信。波特在信里通知麦金提，他差了两名好手到这一带来执行任务，一个名叫劳勒，另一个名叫安德鲁斯。为求稳妥，他不能透露他俩承担着什么样的任务，不过，会首能不能帮他俩安排合适的住处、照应他俩的生活，直到行动开始呢？麦金提在便条里补充说，鉴于团结会馆人多眼杂，谁来了都难免走漏风声，他希望麦克默多和斯坎伦帮个忙，让那两个外乡人在他们的寄宿公寓里暂住几天。

那两个人当天晚上就来了，一人拎着一个小皮箱。劳勒已经上了年纪，长相精明、沉默寡言、深沉内敛，穿的是一件破旧的黑色礼服大衣，再加上软顶的呢帽和蓬乱的花白胡须，整个儿的模样就像是一名巡回讲道的教士。跟他同来的安德鲁斯则是个刚刚成年的孩子，面容坦率开朗，神态轻松愉快，让人觉得他来这里是为了度假，而且打定主意要玩个痛快，一分钟也不放过。他俩都是滴酒不沾，从各方面看都算得上这个社会的模范成员，不够模范的只有一个小小的方面，也就是说，他俩都是杀手，曾经多次用事实证明，他俩都是这个杀人组织最能干的爪牙。劳勒已经执行过十四次类似的任务，安德鲁斯也有三次的经验。

麦克默多发现，他俩都非常乐意谈论自己过去的所作所为。说起那些事情的时候，他俩又是自豪又是忸怩，神情就跟那些曾经为社会做出无私贡献的人一样。不过，关于此行的任务，他俩却不肯透露半点风声。

“他们之所以派我俩来，就是因为我和这个孩子都不喝酒，”

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[1] 丹东（Georges Danton, 1759—1794）为法国大革命（1789—1799）领袖之一，因反对罗伯斯庇尔的“恐怖专政”而遭斩首；罗伯斯庇尔（Maximilien Robespierre, 1758—1794）亦为法国大革命领袖之一，同时也是“恐怖专政”的始作俑者，最终自食其果，亦遭斩首；丹东和罗伯斯庇尔的身材如文中所述。

劳勒解释道。“因为他们知道，我俩不会把不该说的事情说出来。你们可别有什么误会，我们不肯说，只是在执行县特派员的命令而已。”

“说来说去，咱们不都是一伙的嘛，”四个人坐在一起吃夜宵的时候，麦克默多的室友斯坎伦说道。

“这话当然没错，所以我们可以聊杀死查理·威廉斯的活计，也可以聊杀死西蒙·伯德的活计，以前的所有活计都可以聊，聊到你们尽兴为止。不过，还没干完的活计我们可不能说。”

“这一带有五六个我看不顺眼的人，”麦克默多说道，恶狠狠地骂了一句。“依我看，你们该不会是打算收拾铁山的杰克·诺克斯吧。要是能看见他遭到报应的话，让我跑断腿我也愿意。”

“不是，还没轮到他呢。”

“要不，是赫尔曼·施特劳斯吗？”

“不，也不是他。”

“呃，你们不愿意说，我们也不能勉强。只不过，我真的挺好奇的。”

劳勒微笑着摇了摇头，逗他开口是没有用的。

尽管两位客人守口如瓶，斯坎伦和麦克默多却打定了主意，一定要到现场去看看他们这帮人所说的“乐子”。这一来，一天凌晨，听到两位客人偷偷下楼之后，麦克默多赶紧把斯坎伦叫了起来，两个人开始急急忙忙地穿衣服。穿戴整齐之后，他俩发现两位客人已经悄悄地走出了屋子，连门都没有关。天色尚未破晓，借着街灯的光线，他俩看到两位客人已经顺着大街走出了一段距离。这么着，他俩小心翼翼地跟了上去，踩着深深的积雪悄悄前行。

寄宿公寓贴近镇子的边缘，没过多久，两位客人就走到了镇子外面的十字路口。三个男人在路口等候，劳勒和安德鲁斯跟他们火急火燎地商量了几句，五个人便一起展开了行动。显而易见，这是一件需要众多人手的重要活计。路口有几条通往不同矿区的

小路，那帮外乡人走的是通往乌鸦山的那一条。乌鸦山是一座巨大的煤矿，经理乔赛亚·H. 邓恩是一个干劲十足、无所畏惧的新英格兰人[1]。在恐怖肆虐的漫长岁月之中，多亏了他的铁腕管理，乌鸦山煤矿的秩序和纪律才在一定程度上得到了维持。

天色渐渐放亮，一溜矿工正在沾满煤灰的黑色小路上缓缓前进，有的人踽踽独行，也有的三五成群。

麦克默多和斯坎伦混在人群之中，溜达着往前走，始终没让跟踪的对象走出视线。浓浓的雾气罩到了他们的身上，雾气的中央突然传来了汽笛的尖叫。汽笛声是预备上工的信号，再过十分钟，罐笼就会降入矿井，一天的劳作也会随之开始。

他俩走进了矿井周围的开阔地，已经有上百名矿工等在了那里。天气冷得要命，矿工们一边跺脚，一边往手上呵气。那帮外乡人单独站在升降机房的阴影下面，斯坎伦和麦克默多则爬到了一堆煤渣顶上，从那里可以完整地看到现场的情景。在他俩的注视之下，一个蓄着大胡子的苏格兰大块头从机房里面走了出来。那人名叫孟席斯，是矿上的工程师。他吹响哨子，指挥工人把罐笼往下放。

与此同时，一个身材高大、瘦骨伶仃的小伙子急匆匆地走向矿井。小伙子神情严肃，脸刮得干干净净，正是这座煤矿的经理。走着走着，他瞥见了机房屋檐下那帮一声不吭、一动不动的人。那帮人把帽檐压得很低，还把衣领竖了起来，为的是掩藏自己的面目。见此情景，死亡的恶兆像一只冰冷的手攥住了煤矿经理的心。尽管如此，他转眼就甩掉了心里的恐惧，只知道自己有责任诘问这些不请自来的外人。

“你们是干吗的？”他一边问，一边走向他们。“为什么要在这儿游荡？”

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[1] 新英格兰（New England）是美国东北角的一片地区，包括缅因、新罕布什尔、马萨诸塞、康涅狄格等六个州。

谁也没有回答他的问题，只有那个名叫安德鲁斯的小伙子抢前一步，一枪打在了他的肚子上。上百名等着下井的矿工眼睁睁地站在那里一动不动，一个个都跟吓瘫了似的。经理用双手捂住伤处，身子弯了下去，踉踉跄跄地想要逃开。另一名杀手开了枪，他侧身倒进了一堆煤渣，双脚乱蹬、双手乱舞。见此情景，苏格兰人孟席斯怒吼一声，抄起一把钢铁扳手，朝着那些凶手冲了过去。然而，两颗子弹打在了他的脸上，他当场死去，就倒在那些凶手的脚边。

一些矿工开始涌向那帮凶手，同情与愤怒的喊声响成一片。可是，几个外乡人冲着人群的头顶开了火，打空了手里的六发左轮手枪，矿工们立刻四散奔逃，有一些还疯狂地逃回了维尔米萨镇上的住处。等到最勇敢的几名矿工重整旗鼓回到矿上的时候，那帮凶手已经消失在了晨雾之中。他们当着上百人的面制造了一起双重谋杀，能够确切指认他们的证人却连一个都没有。

斯坎伦和麦克默多开始往回走，斯坎伦的情绪多少有点儿委靡不振，因为这是他第一次亲眼目睹杀人的活计，场面似乎并不像别人让他相信的那么有趣。他俩急匆匆地走向镇子，经理遗孀的凄惨哭号一直萦绕在他俩的耳边。麦克默多闷声不响地沉思着什么，但却对同伴的软弱表现一点儿也不同情。

“说真的，这就像一场战争，”他反复强调。“这不是别的，就是我们跟他们之间的一场战争，我们必须反击，不放过任何机会。”

当天晚上，团结会馆的分会会场一片欢腾，不光是因为那帮外乡人杀死了乌鸦山煤矿的经理和工程师，那座煤矿势必效法其他的一些本地公司，在恐惧之中乖乖纳贡，还因为本分会亲自出马，在遥远的地方取得了一场胜利。

情形似乎是，县特派员派了五名好手到维尔米萨来实施惩戒，同时也要求维尔米萨分会作出回报，暗中挑选三名兄弟去刺杀皇股煤矿的威廉·黑尔斯。威廉·黑尔斯是吉尔莫顿地区名气最大、

最受拥戴的矿主之一，据说在普天之下都没有任何仇敌，因为他从各方面来看都当得起模范雇主的称号。然而，他毫不手软地要求工作的效率，因此就遣散了一些酗酒成性的懒惰员工，那些人又刚好属于这个势焰熏天的帮会。挂在他家门外的死亡警告没能动摇他的决心，结果呢，在一个自由的文明国度当中，他竟然因为解雇员工的举动摊上了死刑的判决。

分会庆祝胜利的时候，威廉·黑尔斯的死刑判决已经执行完毕。行刑队的头目是特德·鲍德温，眼下正四仰八叉地坐在会首身旁的荣耀席位之上。他的脸涨得通红，充血的眼睛目光呆滞，说明他曾经熬更受夜，酒也没少喝。头天夜里，他和两名同志是在山里度过的。他们仪容邋遢、风霜满面，然而，随便哪位绝境生还的英雄也不能像他们这样，受到同志们如此热烈的欢迎。

伴随着众人的欢呼与狂笑，他们把自己的英雄事迹讲了一遍又一遍。他们埋伏在一道陡峻山坡的顶上，等待目标在黄昏时分赶车回家，原因是爬坡的时候，目标的马车肯定走得很慢。为了抵挡寒气，目标给自个儿裹上了厚厚的皮衣，结果是连手枪都掏不出来。他们把他拖出马车，冲他开了一枪又一枪。事发当时，目标尖叫着向他们求饶，这会儿呢，他们便把他求饶的叫喊学给兄弟们听，给兄弟们找点儿乐子。

“再让我们听听他是怎么叫的吧，”兄弟们喊道。

兄弟们都跟死者素不相识，可他们就是觉得，杀人是一件妙趣无穷的事情，更何况，这件事情还可以向吉尔莫顿的扫魂帮证明，维尔米萨的同志是靠得住的。

刺杀黑尔斯的过程当中，他们遇上了一点儿意外，因为一对夫妇赶着马车爬上了山坡，那时候，他们还在冲着无声无息的尸体开枪。有人提议把那对夫妇一块儿干掉，不过呢，那对夫妇跟煤矿毫不相干，不会造成什么妨害，所以他们只是疾言厉色地警告他俩，叫他俩继续赶路、以后也不许声张，要不然就会大祸临头。

接下来，三位高贵的复仇使者撇下那具血肉模糊的尸体，以此警告那些跟死者一样铁石心肠的雇主，然后就急匆匆地进了山，荒无人烟的群山连绵不断，一直延伸到了一座座高炉和一堆堆矿渣的边缘。眼下呢，他们平平安安地回到了这里，心里装满了不辱使命的自豪，耳边则萦绕着同志们的高声喝彩。

对于扫魂帮来说，这是个值得纪念的大日子。这一天，笼罩这座山谷的阴云比以往任何时候都要浓重。不过，聪明的将领都懂得乘胜追击，不给敌人留下卷土重来的喘息之机，所以呢，麦金提头领那双老谋深算的歹毒眼睛已经投向了未来的战场，心里也盘算好了又一次打击敌人的行动。当天晚上，半醉的人群纷纷散去的时候，他捅了捅麦克默多的胳膊，领着麦克默多走进了他俩初次晤谈的那间里屋。

“听着，小伙计，”头领说道，“我终于找到了一件值得你出手的活计。你必须亲手完成这件任务。”

“听您这么说，我觉得十分自豪，”麦克默多回答道。

“你可以带上两个兄弟，曼德斯和赖利，他俩都已经收到了准备行动的通知。不把切斯特·威尔科克斯处理掉，咱们就别想在这个地区过上称心如意的日子。你要能把他撂倒的话，煤区里所有的分会都会感激你的。”

“不管行与不行，我肯定会尽力的。他是干吗的，我该到哪里去找他呢？”

麦金提的嘴角永远都叼着一支雪茄，一半是为了咬，一半是为了抽。到这会儿，他把雪茄拿了下来，从自己的记事本上撕了一页纸，开始在纸上画一张简略的地图。

“他是铁坝公司的总领班，非常不好对付，内战期间是一名护旗军士[①]，满身伤疤、须发斑白。我们已经对他下过两次手，两次

[①] 护旗军士（colour sergeant）职责为护卫军旗，为军士之中的荣耀头衔。

都没有得手，吉姆·卡纳威还因此送掉了性命。眼下呢，这个任务就由你来接手。喏，这就是他的房子。就像你在地图上看到的这样，他的房子孤零零地戳在铁坝十字路口，枪声所及的范围之内没有任何邻居。白天下手是不行的，他身上带着武器，枪法又快又准，而且是一上来就开枪，不问任何问题。不过，到了晚上嘛——是这样，他的房子里住着他和他的妻子，他的三个孩子，还有他请的一个女佣。你没法挑着来，要么不干，要干就只能全部干掉。你可以在他家的前门摆上一包炸药，再配上一根慢燃的引信——”

“这个人干了些什么呢？”

“他枪杀了吉姆·卡纳威，刚才我不是跟你说过吗？”

“他为什么要枪杀卡纳威呢？”

“我的天，这跟你究竟有什么关系？卡纳威在夜里跑到了他的房子附近，他就冲卡纳威开了枪。对于你我二人来说，知道这一点也就够了。你必须替卡纳威讨还公道。”

“房子里还有两个女人和三个孩子，他们也得一块儿报销吗？”

“他们只能一块儿报销，要不然，咱们怎么干掉他呢？”

“这对他们有点儿太狠了吧，他们什么也没干啊。”

“你说的这是什么蠢话？你是要打退堂鼓吗？”

“别急，议员，别急！您竟然觉得我胆敢违抗自己分会会首的命令，可我究竟说了什么话、做了什么事呢？这事情对也好，错也好，总归都得由您说了算。”

“那么，你会去干吗？”

“我当然会去干。”

“什么时候动手？”

“呃，您最好给我一两个晚上的时间，我好去看看那座房子，把事情计划好，然后——”

“很好，”麦金提说道，跟他握了握手。“这件事情就交给你来

处理。你哪一天送来喜报，哪一天就会成为咱们的一个大日子。有了这最后一击，他们全都会向咱们俯首称臣。”

突如其来地接到这件任务之后，麦克默多进行了长时间的周密考虑。切斯特·威尔科克斯那座孤零零的住宅坐落在附近的一座山谷里面，离镇子大约有五英里。当夜他就独自展开了行动之前的侦查工作，天亮之后才回到家里。接下来的一天，他跟曼德斯和赖利谈了谈。这两个助手都是无法无天的青年，两个都表现得兴高采烈，就跟这一次是要去猎鹿一样。

两天之后的夜里，他们在镇子外头碰了面，三个人都带了武器，有一个还带了一包采石场用来开山的炸药。凌晨两点，他们来到了这座孤零零的住宅旁边。当天夜里刮着大风，丝丝缕缕的云朵飞快地掠过满了七分的月亮。他们事先得到了警告，必须提防这家人豢养的猎犬，这时就小心翼翼地摸向前方，手里端着扳好了击铁的手枪。可是，除了耳边的呼啸狂风和头顶的摇摆枝条之外，周遭再没有什么别的动静。

麦克默多站在这座荒僻住宅的门前，仔仔细细地听了一阵，里面却没有任何声息。接下来，他把炸药包靠在门上，用刀子在包上挖了个洞，把引信连了进去。点燃引信之后，他和两名同伙拔腿就跑，安然无恙地躲进了远处的一条水沟。紧接着，他们听见了震耳欲聋的爆炸声和房屋垮塌的低沉轰响，由此知道自己已经大功告成。在他们血渍斑斑的帮会历史上，还没有哪件活计做得比这件更“干净”呢。

真叫人想不到，策划得如此细心、执行得如此大胆的一件活计竟然是白费力气！看到了那些受害人的悲惨命运，又知道自己变成了暗杀的目标，切斯特·威尔科克斯已经有所警觉。刚好是在他们动手的前一天，威尔科克斯带着全家搬到了一个更加安全、更加隐秘的所在，还有一队警察为他们提供保护。炸药摧垮的只是一座空屋，那位上过战场、性格倔强的老护旗军士依然故我，

依然用严明的纪律管束着铁坝公司的矿工。

“把他交给我好了，”麦克默多说道。“他是我的人，哪怕得花上一年的工夫，我也要让他栽在我的手里。”

全体会员都向他表示感谢，相信他言出必行，这件事情就此告一段落。几个星期之后，报纸上传来消息，威尔科克斯遭到伏击、饮弹身亡。听到这个消息，所有的人都心知肚明，麦克默多并没有让自己的活计半途而废。

以上就是自由人会的做事方法，就是扫魂帮的所作所为，通过诸如此类的行径，他们的恐怖统治渐渐覆盖了这个幅员辽阔的富饶地区，致使这个地区长期笼罩在他们的可怕阴影之下。干吗还要用更多的罪行来玷污这些纸张呢？关于这些人，还有这些人的手段，我不是说得够多了吗？

他们的罪行已经写进了历史，罪行的细节也有相关的记载可供查阅。你可以读到警员亨特和埃文斯遭到枪杀的事件，这起双重谋杀出自维尔米萨分会的策划，凶手冷酷无情地对两个已经放下武器的无助者下了毒手，只因为他俩曾经斗胆逮捕两名帮会成员。你也可以读到拉尔比太太遭到枪击的事件，只因为麦金提头领指使暴徒把她的丈夫打得半死，而她居然敢照料他。此外还有詹金斯兄弟接踵被杀的事件、詹姆斯·默多克被人弄得四肢不全的事件、斯德普豪斯一家被人炸死的事件，以及斯滕达尔夫妇双双遇害的事件，这些暴行一件挨着一件，全都发生在上文之中这个可怕的冬季。

沉沉暗影笼罩着这座恐怖之谷。春天已经来临，溪水喧腾、花满枝头。长久遭受铁钳禁锢的自然万物充满了希望，生活在这个恐怖牢笼之中的男男女女却看不到哪怕是一丁点儿盼头。一八七五年初夏，阴云依然压在他们的头顶，前所未有地黑暗、前所未有地令人绝望。

第六章 * 危机

恐怖统治达到了登峰造极的程度。麦克默多已经被委任为分会的内堂执事，大有日后接替麦金提出任会首的希望，眼下更是同志们心目当中不可或缺的谋臣策士，所有的会务都有他的帮助与建议。可是，自由人会的会员对他越是欢迎，他在维尔米萨街道上吃到的冷眼就越是恶毒。市民们虽然胆战心惊，但却渐渐地鼓起了勇气，开始联合起来反抗那些压迫自己的人。分会已经听到传言，说有些市民在先驱报社举行秘密集会，还说有人在向那些守法的市民分发枪支。不过，麦金提和他的爪牙对这些传闻不以为意。他们人多势众、意志坚定、武器精良，对手却一盘散沙、不成气候。到头来，市民的反抗行动肯定会跟以前一样，不过是一堆不着边际的空话，顶多再加上几次定不了罪的逮捕，仅此而已。麦金提是这么说的，麦克默多和所有那些胆子比较大的会员也是这么说的。

星期六晚上向来是扫魂帮集会的时间，五月里一个星期六的傍晚，麦克默多正要出门参加集会，立场不稳的莫里斯兄弟却突然找上门来。他的额头布满了忧虑的皱纹，和善的脸庞也显得憔悴枯槁。

“我可以跟你敞开了说吗，麦克默多先生？”

“当然可以。”

“我曾经跟你说过一次心里话，而你替我守住了秘密，就连头领本人也没能从你嘴里问出来，这件事情我是不会忘记的。”

“既然你那么信任我，我还能怎么做呢？可这并

不意味着我赞同你上次说的那些话。”

“这一点我非常清楚。即便如此，你仍然是唯一的一个让我说话没有顾虑的兄弟。我这儿藏着一个秘密，”他把手放在了自己的胸口，“这个秘密弄得我心如汤煮。真希望知道这个秘密的是你们当中的随便哪个人，只要不是我就好。如果我说出来，这事情必然会以谋杀告终，如果我不说，它兴许会让我们全体灭亡。上帝啊，帮帮我吧，这事情真要把我逼疯了！”

麦克默多目不转睛地打量着这个人。看到他四肢都在打颤，麦克默多便斟上一杯威士忌，递到了他的手里。“这就是最适合你这种人的良药，”他说道。“好了，说来听听吧。”

莫里斯喝了一口，苍白的脸上有了一点儿血色。“我这个秘密一句话就可以说完，”他说道。“有个侦探正在调查我们。”

麦克默多万分惊讶地望着他。“咳，伙计，你可真是疯了，”他说道。“这地方哪儿不是警察和侦探，什么时候伤到过咱们的汗毛呢？”

“不，不是，他不是本地人。你说得没错，本地的侦探我们都知道，他们什么也干不了。可是，你听说过平克顿的侦探[1]吗？”

“我在报上读到过一个姓平克顿的家伙。”

“是吗，你只管相信我说的话，一旦他们盯上了你，你的戏就算是唱完了。这可不是一个成不成都无所谓的政府机构，而是一家真拿买卖当回事的商号，他们出手就要看到结果，而且不择手段，不达目的绝不罢休。如果平克顿的人盯上了这件事情，咱们就都是死路一条。”

“咱们必须宰了他。”

“唉，果不其然，这就是你的第一个念头！这么说，你肯定是

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[1] 平克顿（Pinkerton）即平克顿全国侦探事务所（Pinkerton National Detective Agency），为美国著名安保公司，由苏格兰裔美国人艾伦·平克顿（Allan Pinkerton, 1819—1884）于 1850 年创立，曾经是全世界最大的私立执法机构。

要向会里报告了吧。我刚刚才说这事情会以谋杀告终，眼下不就应验了吗？”

“得了吧，谋杀算得了什么呢？在这些地方，这样的事情不是家常便饭吗？”

“没错，确实是家常便饭。不过，我可不想帮你们指出谋杀的目标。那样的话，我一辈子都不会安心的。话说回来，面临威胁的可是咱们自个儿的脖子啊。上帝啊，我该怎么办呢？”他心里充满了矛盾，痛苦得前俯后仰。

不过，他的话已经让麦克默多深有触动。一望而知，麦克默多完全赞同他的看法，承认这是一场必须设法应对的危机。情急之下，麦克默多抓住了莫里斯的肩膀，使劲儿地摇晃起来。

“听着，伙计，”他激动得拔高了嗓门儿，几乎是在尖叫了，“你不能像个哭丧的老寡妇似的坐在这里哀号，这样是没有用的。把事实说来听听吧。这个家伙究竟是谁？眼下在什么地方？你是怎么知道他的？为什么要来找我？”

“我来找你，是因为只有你可以给我一些指点。我曾经跟你说过，来这里之前，我在东部开着一家店铺。我在那边还有一些好朋友，其中一个在电报局工作。喏，这就是他写给我的信，我昨天收到的。我要说的事情就写在这页信纸的顶上，你自己看吧。”

以下就是麦克默多读到的信件内容：

> “你那边的那个扫魂帮近况如何？我们在报纸上看到了很多关于他们的报道。咱俩私下说吧，按我的估计，你很快就会写信来报告他们的消息。五家大企业和两个铁路公司已经揽下了这件事情，决心也非常之大。他们打定主意要解决这个问题，而你只管放心，他们肯定解决得了！他们已经实实在在地干了起来。平克顿接受了他们的委托，他最得力的手下博迪·爱德华兹正在采取行动。这件事情马上就会得到遏止。”

“再看看附言吧。”

“当然，我告诉你的事情都是我从工作当中知道的，你可不能往外传。要是你天天经手大段大段的密码电文，但却完全猜不出其中的含意，那种密码才真叫怪哩。”

麦克默多一言不发地坐了一会儿，双手有气无力地捧着那封信。迷雾虽然得到了片刻的澄清，呈现在他眼前的却是一道万丈深渊。

“还有人知道这件事情吗？”他问道。

“我没跟别人说过。”

“可是，这个家伙，我是说你这个朋友，他会不会写信告诉别的什么人呢？”

“呃，依我看，他应该认识一两个别的人。”

“会里的吗？”

“很有可能。”

“我这么问，是因为他有可能跟别人形容过这个博迪·爱德华兹的长相。那样的话，咱们就可以把这个家伙查出来。”

“呃，是有这个可能。不过，我倒觉得他并不认识这个家伙。他无非是跟我说说他从工作当中得来的消息而已。他怎么会认识这个平克顿侦探呢？”

麦克默多猛一激灵。

“老天作证！”他叫道，“我知道这个家伙是谁了。我可真是个傻子，以前竟然没有察觉这件事情。我的天！不过，咱们的运气真是不错！咱们很快就可以把他处理掉，不会让他有时间制造麻烦。听着，莫里斯，你愿意把这件事情交托给我吗？”

“当然愿意，我巴不得推掉这个包袱呢。”

“那就交给我好了。你可以彻底撇清自己，一切都由我来处理。我甚至可以不提你的名字，把整件事情算到我自己头上，就跟这封信是我收到的一样。这样的话，你觉得满意吗？”

“正合我意。”

“好吧，你不要再管这件事情，提都不要再提。我这就到会里去，我们很快就可以煞一煞平克顿这个老东西的威风。”

“你们不会杀死这个人吧？”

“你知道得越少，莫里斯老兄，心里的包袱就越小，睡得也就越好。别问什么问题，这些事情不妨听其自然。到现在，这件事情已经归我了。”

告辞的时候，莫里斯悲哀地摇起头来。“我觉得，我的手上已经沾满了他的鲜血，”他唉声叹气地说道。

“不管你怎么算，自卫也不能算是谋杀，”麦克默多狞笑着说道。“他不死，咱们就得死。按我看，如果任由这家伙在山谷里长期活动的话，他准保会把咱们赶尽杀绝。咳，莫里斯兄弟，我们真该选你当会首才是，你可是实实在在地挽救了整个帮会啊。”

话虽然说得轻描淡写，麦克默多的举动却清清楚楚地表明，他把这个新情况看得相当严重。可能是因为做贼心虚，也可能是因为平克顿侦探事务所的威名，还可能是因为他听说那些财雄势大的公司已经将铲除扫魂帮的事情引为己任，不管是什么原因吧，他的举动说明他已经做好了最坏的打算。出门之前，他销毁了所有那些可能构成罪证的文件。这之后，他觉得自己可保无虞，不由得心满意足地长吁了一口气。可是，他肯定是没能完全抹去祸事临头的感觉，因为在前往分会的路上，他特意到老沙夫特的家里去了一趟。这座房子已经变成了他无权踏足的禁地，不过他敲了敲窗子，伊蒂便从屋里来到了他的身边。她爱人的眼睛里不再有爱尔兰人那种眉飞色舞的顽皮劲头，面对他正经八百的凝视，她意识到他遇上了危险。

“一定是出了什么事情！”她叫道。“噢，杰克，你遇上危险了！”

“你放心，事情并不是特别地糟糕，亲爱的。不过呢，咱们最好赶在局面恶化之前挪挪地方。”

“挪挪地方？”

“我曾经答应过你，有朝一日会离开这里。眼下我觉得，离开的时间已经到了。今晚我听到了一点儿消息，不妙的消息，照我看，麻烦很快就要上门。”

“警察吗？”

“呃，是一个平克顿的侦探。当然喽，小心肝儿，你肯定不知道那是什么东西，也不知道它对我这样的人来说意味着什么。我在这件事情当中陷得太深了，兴许得赶紧抽身才行。你以前说过，如果我走的话，你会跟我一起走的。”

“噢，杰克，你要是肯走，那就等于是得救了啊！”

“在有些事情上，我也算是个诚实的人，伊蒂。不管这世道拿什么东西来引诱我，我都不会让你那颗漂亮的脑袋上少一根头发，还有啊，在我的心目当中，你的位置永远都是云端的那个黄金宝座，我决不会把你往下拽，哪怕是一英寸也不会。你相信我吗？”

她没有说话，只是把自己的手放进了他的手心。

“好吧，那你就要听我说，还要照我说的去做，说实在的，咱们只有这么一条出路。这座山谷里马上就要出大事了，我从骨子里就有这种预感。说不定，我们当中有很多人都得多加小心才是。不说别人，我不小心是不行的。我要走的时候，不管是白天还是晚上，你都必须跟我一起走！”

“你走的话，我马上就会跟过去，杰克。”

“不，不行，你必须跟我一起走。这座山谷会把我拒之门外，让我永远也不能回来，更何况，我兴许还得躲避警察，压根儿就没法捎信给你，这样的话，我怎么能把你扔在这里呢？你必须跟我一起走。我来的那个地方有一个好心的妇人，我会把你安顿在她那里，直到我俩可以成亲的时候为止。你会去吗？”

“会的，杰克，我会去。”

“你这么信任我，愿上帝保佑你！要是辜负了你的信任，那我可真算是地狱里钻出来的恶魔了。好了，你千万要记好，伊蒂，

到时我只会给你捎一句话，听到这句话之后，你就得放下所有的事情，立刻到车站的候车室里去等我，不见不散。”

“只要听到你捎来的话，白天晚上我都去，杰克。”

自个儿的逃亡计划既已铺开，麦克默多好歹是松了口气。接下来，他来到了分会的会场。会议已经开始，经过一番繁复的暗语对答之后，他终于通过了外场警卫和内场警卫的森严关卡。他步入会场的时候，欢呼的声音和问候的话语嗡嗡嗡地响成了一片。长长的房间坐得满满当当，缭绕烟雾之中，他看到了会首头上那一蓬纠结的黑色鬃毛，看到了鲍德温那副不怀好意的冷酷面容，看到了分会书记哈拉维那张贪婪的面孔，还看到了其他的十几个分会头目。他觉得非常高兴，因为这些人都在会场，可以一起商讨他带来的消息。

“说真的，我们都很高兴见到你，兄弟！”主席高声说道。“这儿刚好有一件事情，需要一个所罗门[1]式的人物来作个公断。”

“是兰德和伊根的事情，”麦克默多就座之后，邻座解释道。“他俩都说自己在斯泰尔斯镇杀死了那个名叫克拉布的老家伙，都说自己应该拿到分会开出的赏金，谁知道那颗要命的子弹是他俩之中的哪一个打出去的呢？”

麦克默多站起身来，举起了一只手。他脸上的表情立刻攫住了所有人的注意，全场鸦雀无声，等着他开口说话。

“尊贵的会首，”他的语气十分沉重，“我有急事禀告！”

“既然麦克默多兄弟有急事，”麦金提说道，“按照本会的规矩，咱们就应该优先讨论他的事情。说吧，兄弟，我们都听着呢。”

麦克默多从口袋里掏出了那封信。

“尊贵的会首，各位兄弟，”他说道，“今天我带来的并不是什么好消息，可咱们还是应该知道这件事情、商讨这件事情，这样

[1] 所罗门（Solomon）是传说之中的古代以色列国王，以多谋善断著称。《福尔摩斯回忆录》的《驼背男子》当中曾经提及的“大卫”是所罗门的父亲。

总比咱们所有人毫无防备地遇上灭顶之灾要好。根据我收到的消息，本州最有钱有势的一些公司已经勾结在了一起，目的是消灭咱们，就在我说话的这个时刻，一个名叫博迪·爱德华兹的平克顿侦探正在这座山谷里搜集证据，他搜集的证据兴许会让咱们当中的不少人套上绞索，还会把这间屋子里所有的人送进重犯牢房。我刚才说有急事，就是想请大家来讨论这样的形势。”

会场里顿时一片死寂。接下来，主席打破了沉默。

“你说的这些有什么依据呢，麦克默多兄弟？”他问道。

“依据就在我收到的这封信里面，”麦克默多说道，跟着就把信里的那段文字大声地念了一遍。“这事情关系到我的个人信用，所以我不能透露与这封信相关的更多细节，也不能把信交给你们。不过我可以保证，信里面的其他内容都跟本会的利益没有任何关系。我已经把我收到的消息原原本本地告诉了你们。”

“容我插一句，主席先生，”一名年长的兄弟说道，“我听说过博迪·爱德华兹这个人，还听说他是平克顿侦探事务所里最厉害的一名侦探。”

“有人知道他长什么样吗？”麦金提问道。

“有的，”麦克默多说道，“我知道。”

会场里响起了一片惊愕的低语声。

“依我看，他已经栽进了咱们的手心，”麦克默多接着说道，脸上带着兴高采烈的笑容。“如果咱们迅速地采取适当的行动，这件事情就会烟消云散。只要你们给我信任和支持，咱们就什么也不用害怕。”

“说到底，咱们有什么可害怕的呢？他能对咱们的事情有什么了解呢？”

“议员，如果所有的人都跟您一样坚定的话，您当然可以这么说。可是，这家伙的背后还有那些资本家的万贯钱财呢。您难道认为，咱们这些个分会里面连一个可以收买的软骨头都没有吗？

他肯定能搞到咱们的秘密，说不定已经搞到了。可靠的补救方法只有一种。”

“也就是说，不能让他走出这座山谷，”鲍德温说道。

麦克默多点了点头。

“说得好，鲍德温兄弟，”他说道。“你我之间虽然有不少分歧，今晚你倒是说到了点子上。”

“那么，他究竟在哪儿呢？咱们该到哪里去会会他呢？”

“尊贵的会首，”麦克默多恳切地说道，“我想跟您说的是，这件事情对咱们太过生死攸关，并不适合在大会上公开讨论。要说我怀疑在座的任何一位兄弟的话，老天爷也容不得我，可是，一旦这个家伙听到了一丁点儿风声，咱们就再也别想逮着他了。我要求分会挑几个可靠的兄弟来组建一个委员会，主席先生——容我斗胆建议，您自己算一个，鲍德温兄弟也算一个，另外再加上五个兄弟。这之后，我就可以毫无顾虑地向委员会禀告我知道的所有事情，再加上我拟订的全盘计划。”

他的提议立刻得到采纳，委员会也迅速组建起来。除了主席和鲍德温之外，委员会的成员还包括一脸贪相的哈拉维书记、残忍的年轻杀手“老虎”科马克、司库卡特，以及悍不畏死、百无禁忌的威勒比兄弟。

这天晚上，会场里惯有的那种狂欢场面为时短暂，气氛也不像平常那么热烈，原因是这帮人的心里笼上了一层阴影，不少人破天荒第一次看到了这样的一幅景象：嫉恶如仇的法律之云冉冉上升，渐渐飘进了那片长年庇护他们的晴朗天空。他们已经把自己施于他人的恐怖看成了天经地义的生活常态，以至于觉得报应是一件虚无缥缈的事情，眼下呢，报应突然变得如此迫近，自然就格外地令人胆寒。这么着，他们早早地散了席，只有各位头领还在那里商议对策。

“说吧，麦克默多！”其他人走了之后，麦金提说道。在场

的只剩了委员会的七名成员，全部都一动不动地坐在自个儿的座位上。

“刚才我说了，我认得博迪·爱德华兹，”麦克默多解释道。“用不着我说，你们也知道他在这儿用的不是这个名字。他这个人胆子很大，但还没大到失去理智的程度。眼下他化名斯蒂夫·威尔逊，寄住在霍布森帕奇。”

“这你是怎么知道的呢？”

“因为我跟他搭过话。当时我没把这件事情放在心上，要不是收到了这封信的话，肯定也不会再去回想。可是，现在我可以肯定，他真的就是那个侦探。这个星期三，我坐火车到下边去，结果就在火车上碰见了这个人。要说这世上有难缠的人的话，这家伙就得算上一个。他说他是一名记者，当时我也相信了他的话。他千方百计地打听扫魂帮的事情，还打听他所谓的‘各种暴行’，说是要替纽约的一家报纸写报道。他拿各种各样的问题来问我，指望着弄到一点儿情报。你们只管放心，我没有透露任何秘密。‘我会给你钱的，而且不会少给，’他这么跟我说，‘只要你能给我一点儿适合我主编口味的东西。’我估摸着说了一些他可能会爱听的话，他就给了我一张二十元的钞票，说是资料费。‘如果你能把我需要的资料都搞来的话，’他说，‘还有十倍的赏钱等着你呢。’”

“那么，你究竟跟他说了些什么呢？”

“都是我临时瞎编的东西。”

“你怎么知道他不是记者呢？”

“我这就告诉你们。他在霍布森帕奇下了车，我也是在那儿下的。我碰巧去了一趟电报局，正好看到他从里面出来。

“‘瞧瞧这个，’他出去之后，报务员说了一句，‘要我说，这种东西我们应该收双倍的价钱。’——‘我看也是，’我应了一句，因为照我们看，他填在电报表格里的东西恐怕得是中文。报务员又说，‘这种玩意儿，他每天都要发一张。’‘是啊，’我说，‘这肯

定是专供他那张报纸的独家新闻，他生怕让别人给抢了去。’这就是我和那个报务员当时的想法，眼下我可不这么想了。”

“我的天！我看你说得没错，”麦金提说道。“不过，按你看，咱们该怎么处理这件事情呢？”

“干吗不立刻过去收拾他呢？”有人提出了建议。

“是啊，越早越好。”

“要是知道该上哪儿去找他的话，我一分钟也不会耽搁，”麦克默多说道。“他确实住在霍布森帕奇，可我并不知道具体是哪座房子。不过，如果你们愿意听的话，我倒有一个计划。”

“是吗，什么计划呢？”

“我明早就去霍布森帕奇，通过那个报务员跟他联系。按我看，那个报务员应该有办法找到他。然后我就告诉他，我自个儿就是自由人会的会员，只要他肯出钱，我可以把会里所有的秘密告诉他。你们放心好了，他肯定会感兴趣。我会跟他说，文件都在我的家里，可他不能在周围有人的时候到我家里来，要不然我就性命难保。这道理谁都明白，他也不会不同意。我会叫他夜里十点到我家来，答应给他看所有的东西。这样的话，他肯定会来的。”

“然后呢？”

“剩下的事情你们可以自己安排。寡妇麦克纳马拉的房子没有四邻，她这个人跟钢铁一样可靠，耳朵又聋得像根电线杆子。房子里没有别的租客，只有我和斯坎伦。如果他答应来的话，我就会通知你们，还有啊，我建议你们七位九点钟的时候到我家里集合。到时候，咱们先把他放进屋来，如果他还能活着出去的话，呃，下半辈子就可以大吹特吹博迪·爱德华兹的运气啦！”

“我没搞错的话，平克顿的事务所很快就会空出一个位子来。就这么办吧，麦克默多。明晚九点，我们准时过去找你。等他进屋之后，你只需要把门一关，剩下的就是我们的事情了。”

第七章 * 博迪·爱德华兹的陷阱

正如麦克默多所说，他住的是一座孤零零的房子，特别适合用来实施他们谋划的那种罪行。房子坐落在镇子的最边缘，又跟大路隔着相当长的一段距离。换作是其他情形的话，这帮不轨之徒完全可以照搬那种屡试不爽的老办法，直接喊出目标的名字，然后就把手枪里的子弹全部倾泻到目标身上。然而，这一次的情形有所不同，他们很有必要弄清楚，这个人究竟知道多少，怎么知道的，已经汇报给东家的又有多少。

说不定，对方的事情已经办完，他们的行动终归是迟了一步。果真如此的话，他们至少可以对办事的人进行报复。不过，他们乐观地认为，这个侦探还没有弄到什么至关重要的情报。按他们的看法，如果情况与此相反的话，这个侦探就不会大费周章地把麦克默多提供的情报记下来，然后再发回去，因为据麦克默多所说，他告诉这个侦探的都是些琐碎无聊的东西。当然喽，情况究竟如何，他们都可以从这个侦探自个儿的嘴里知道。一旦逮住了他，他们总会有办法撬开他的嘴巴。跟不情不愿的证人打交道，对他们来说可不是第一次了。

按照事先商定的计划，麦克默多启程前往霍布森帕奇。这天早上，警察似乎对他特别地感兴趣。他在车站等车的时候，自称是他芝加哥老熟人的那个马文队长竟然实实在在地跟他打起了招呼，而他别过身去，没有搭理这个警察。当天下午，他结束任务返回镇上，

跟着就到团结会馆去拜见麦金提。

“他会来的，”他说道。

“好极了！”麦金提说道。这个大汉没穿外套，宽大的马甲上斜坠着熠熠生辉的链饰和图章，一颗钻石透过猬毛一般的须髯边缘闪着光芒。酒廊生意和政治权术已经把这个头领变成了一位财雄势大的人物，这样一来，昨天夜里，那幅监狱加绞架的影像从他眼前一闪而过的时候，他自然是觉得格外胆寒。

“你觉得他知道得多吗？”他迫不及待地问道。

麦克默多神色凝重地摇了摇头。“他来这边的时间已经不短啦——至少也得有六个星期。要我说，他可不是到这儿来找矿的。他已经在咱们当中活动了这么久，兜里又装着铁路公司的大把钞票，我看他肯定是弄到了一些情报，而且已经发回去了。”

“咱们会里可没有软骨头，”麦金提叫道。“他们都跟钢铁一样可靠，哪一个也不例外。话说回来，我的天！还有莫里斯那个混蛋呢。他怎么样呢？要说有人出卖咱们的话，那就只可能是他。我倒想不等天黑就派两个哥们儿去狠揍他一顿，看看能不能从他嘴里问出点儿什么来。”

“呃，这么做倒也无妨，”麦克默多回答道。“我不否认我对莫里斯有点儿好感，不忍心看到他遭受伤害。他跟我谈过一两次会里的事情，虽然说看法跟您和我不太一样，倒也不像是那种会去告密的人。当然喽，这是您和他之间的事情，我没有权利干涉。”

“我一定要收拾这个老混蛋！”麦金提说道，恨恨地骂了一句。“过去这一年，我一直都盯着他呢。”

“呃，这些事情您肯定最清楚，”麦克默多回答道。“不过，不管有什么打算，您都得等到明天。平克顿这件事情解决之前，咱们必须放低身段。咱们可不能去捅警察的马蜂窝，今天去捅就更要不得。”

“你说得对，”麦金提说道。“再者说，咱们反正可以从博迪·爱

德华兹本人那里知道他的消息来源，不行就把他的心挖出来瞧一瞧。按你的感觉，他看出这是个陷阱了吗？”

麦克默多笑了起来。“按我看，我可算是戳到了他的软肋！”他说道。“只要你给他指一条追踪扫魂帮的明路，让他追到地狱里去他都肯干。我还收了他的钱呢，”麦克默多咧嘴大笑，掏出了一大卷钞票，“等我给他看了所有的文件之后，他还会再给我这么多。”

“什么文件？”

“呃，什么文件也没有。只不过，我跟他胡诌了一大堆章程、守则、会员表格之类的东西。他打算把所有的事情弄个一清二楚，然后再离开这里。”

“说真的，他这么想就对了，”麦金提恶狠狠地说道。“他没有问你为什么不把文件带去给他吗？”

“我本来就受到了警方的怀疑，今天在车站的时候，马文队长还想跟我聊聊呢，这样的情形之下，我要把这种东西带在身上才怪呢！”

“是啊，马文找你的事情我也听说了，”麦金提说道。“要我说，这件活计带来的麻烦恐怕会落到你的头上。干掉他之后，咱们可以把他扔进一个废弃的矿井。可是，不管咱们怎么干，终归绕不过这样一个事实：这个人住在霍布森帕奇，而你今天刚好去过那里。”

麦克默多耸了耸肩。“只要咱们做得稳妥，他们就证明不了人是咱们杀的，”他说道。“他来的时候天已经黑了，不会有人看见他走进我的房子，而我可以打赌，更不会有人看见他出去。听我说，议员，我这就跟您讲讲我的计划，请您安排其他的人照此办理。首先，你们大家都得准时到达。很好。十点钟的时候，他来了。他会敲三下门，我会去给他开门，然后就绕到他身后去把房门关上。这时候，他已经落到了咱们的手里。”

“这些都非常容易、非常简单。”

“没错。可是，下一步就需要多加考虑了。这个家伙很难对付，而且武装到了牙齿。我虽然骗得他团团转，可他多半还是会有所防备。想想吧，我直接把他领进来，他本以为房间里只有我一个人，结果却看到另外还有七个，这样就肯定会发生枪战，肯定会有人受伤。”

“确实是这样。”

“还有啊，枪声肯定会让镇子里所有那些该死的警察拼死拼活地赶过来。”

“我看你说得没错。”

“我是这么打算的。你们都待在一间大屋里，就是您上次找我聊天的时候看见的那一间。我去给他开门，把他领进门边上的那间会客室，然后就把他撇在那儿，跟他说我要去取文件，趁机向你们通风报信。接下来，我拿上一些假文件回去找他。他开始看文件的时候，我就扑到他的身上，钳住他用枪的那只胳膊，大声地招呼你们。听到我招呼之后，你们得赶紧冲过来，越快越好，因为他跟我一样强壮，我不一定对付得了他。话又说回来，我应该可以拖住他，直到你们赶来为止。”

“你的计划非常不错，”麦金提说道。“分会决不会忘记你这次的功劳。依我看，等到我卸任的时候，接班人的名字我心里还是有数的。”

“说真的，议员，我不过是一名新兵而已，”麦克默多嘴上是这么说，脸上却写得明明白白，他并不是对这位显赫人物的夸奖无动于衷。

回家之后，他自己也做了一些准备，以便应付即将来临的严峻夜晚。他首先清洗了一下自己的史密斯－威森左轮手枪[1]，给枪上了油、装上子弹，然后就把用来伏击侦探的那个房间审视了一遍。

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[1] 史密斯－威森（Smith & Wesson）为美国著名手枪制造商。

这是个宽敞的房间，房间中央摆着一张长长的松木桌子，其中一面墙的旁边放着一个巨大的火炉，其余三面墙上都有窗子，窗子上没有窗板，只挂了一些浅色的窗帘。麦克默多仔细地检查了这些窗子，毫无疑问，他已经注意到这个房间很不隐蔽，并不适合如此秘密的一次集会。不过，房间离大路相当远，多少弥补了这个缺陷。检查完房间之后，他跟同屋的斯坎伦商量了一下晚上的事情。斯坎伦虽说加入了扫魂帮，但却是个安分守己的小角色。他软弱得不敢公开反对同志们的意见，暗地里却对自己时不时被迫参与的血腥行径深恶痛绝。麦克默多跟他简短地说了说晚上的计划。

“我要是你的话，迈克·斯坎伦，今天晚上就会上别处去，离这件事情远远的。天亮之前，这里肯定会发生血淋淋的事情。”

“好的，这样最好，麦克[1]，”斯坎伦回答道。“我倒不是不愿意参加，怕就怕自己没那个胆量。上一次，在那边的煤矿里看到邓恩经理倒下的时候，我真的觉得承受不了。我生来就不适合这种事情，跟你和麦金提不一样。如果会里没意见的话，我就照你说的办，今晚就不在这里碍你们的事了。”

参加行动的人准时来到了麦克默多家里。从外表上看，他们都是些值得尊敬的市民，衣着光鲜、仪容整洁，不过，善于相面的人可以通过他们紧抿的嘴唇和冷酷的眼睛看出来，博迪·爱德华兹不会有任何活命的希望。房间里随便哪个人的手上都有十几条人命，他们杀人杀成了习惯，就跟宰羊一样若无其事。

当然，不管是看外表，还是看过去的罪孽，元凶首恶都得算是那个狰狞可怖的头领。担任书记的哈拉维是个心黑手狠的瘦子，长长的脖子皮包骨头，紧张的四肢不停抽搐。在关系到分会财务的问题上，他表现出了无法动摇的忠诚，除此之外，他跟任何人

[1] 这个“麦克”（Mac）是“麦克默多”（McMurdo）的亲昵省称，前文之中，福尔摩斯也称“麦克唐纳”（MacDonald）为“麦克”。

都不讲公道与诚信。司库卡特是个表情淡漠以至阴郁的中年人，肤色如同发黄的羊皮纸。他善于出谋划策，所有暴行的具体细节几乎都是出自他那颗诡计多端的脑袋。威勒比兄弟担当着打手的角色，两个人都是身材颀长、动作敏捷、面容坚毅的小伙子，他俩的同行“老虎”科马克则是个膀大腰圆、肤色黝黑的青年，就连会里的同志都对他凶暴的性情谈虎色变。这天晚上，聚到麦克默多家里来杀那名平克顿侦探的就是这么一帮子人。

主人在桌子上备了威士忌，他们已经急不可耐地灌了一气，也算是为接下来的活计做点儿准备。鲍德温和科马克已经喝得半醉，全身的凶性都被酒精勾了出来。这个时节，夜里依然很冷，房间里的炉子是生着火的。科马克把双手伸到炉子跟前烤了一会儿。

“有这个就行了，”他说着恶狠狠地骂了一句。

“对，”鲍德温心领神会地说道。“咱们可以把他绑到炉子上，不怕他不说实话。”

“不用担心，咱们肯定能听到他的实话，”麦克默多说道。这个人真是拥有钢铁一般的意志，整件事情的重担全部压在了他的肩头，可他仍然冷静从容、若无其事。其他人也注意到了这一点，不由得交口称赞。

“你就是他的克星，”头领赞许地说道。“在你扼住他的咽喉之前，他根本察觉不到你的意图。美中不足的是，你这些窗子没装窗板。”

麦克默多挨个儿走到每一扇窗子跟前，把窗帘拉严实了一些。“现在好了，肯定没人能偷看咱们了。时间也快要到了呢。”

“搞不好他不会来。搞不好，他已经嗅到了危险的气味，”书记说道。

“不用担心，他会来的，”麦克默多回答道。“他火急火燎地想

要来，就跟你们火急火燎地想要见他一样。听，有动静！”

他们直挺挺地坐在那里，活像是一尊尊蜡像，有的人刚刚举起杯子，杯子也停在了半空。门上传来了三声响亮的叩击。

“嘘！”麦克默多抬手示意大家不要出声。房间里的人纷纷开始交换欣喜若狂的眼神，全都把手放在了藏在衣服里的武器上。

“别弄出任何动静，这可是要命的事情！”麦克默多悄声说道，跟着就走出房间，小心翼翼地带上了房门。

凶手们支起耳朵静静等待，连这位同志穿过走廊的脚步都可以一声一声地数出来。接下来，他们听见他打开了外面的门，又听见几句寒暄，然后就听见屋里响起了一阵陌生的脚步和一个陌生的嗓音。片刻之后，外间传来了重重关门的声音和钥匙转动门锁的声音。他们的猎物已经完完全全地掉进了陷阱。“老虎”科马克狞笑起来，麦金提头领忙不迭地伸出大手，捂住了他的嘴。

“别出声，你这个蠢货！”头领悄声说道。“你可别坏了咱们的事！”

隔壁的房间里传来了叽里咕噜的交谈，在他们听来简直是没完没了。接下来，房门开了，麦克默多再次现身，把手指竖在嘴上做了个噤声的手势。

他走到桌子尽头，扫视着房间里的人。他的神态已经发生了一点儿微妙的变化，一副重任在肩的模样。他的脸变得像花岗岩一样坚定，眼睛从眼镜后面射出激情澎湃的炽烈光芒，领袖的风范呼之欲出。他们急不可待地盯着他，可他一句话也不说，只顾着用那种直勾勾的古怪眼神挨个儿地扫视所有的人。

“行了！”麦金提头领忍不住叫了起来。“他来了吗？博迪·爱德华兹来了吗？”

“来了，”麦克默多慢吞吞地回答道。“博迪·爱德华兹就在这儿，我就是博迪·爱德华兹！”

这句简短宣言之后，足足有十秒钟的时间，房间里一片死寂，

简直就跟空无一人似的。此时此刻，炉子上那只水壶的咝咝声陡然变得格外尖利、格外刺耳。七个脸色煞白的人仰望着这个居高临下俯视他们的人，七张脸都僵在了彻底的恐惧之中。突然之间，玻璃纷纷碎裂，一根根闪闪发亮的来复枪管从每一扇窗子外面伸进了屋里，与此同时，所有的窗帘都被扯了下来。

见此情景，麦金提头领发出一声受伤熊罴的怒吼，猛然冲向半掩的房门，迎头却撞上了一把平端着的左轮手枪，手枪的准星后面是矿警部队马文队长那双寒光闪烁的蓝眼睛。头领倒退几步，瘫倒在了自己的椅子上。

“还是待在那儿比较安全，议员，”据他们所知名为“麦克默多”的人说道。“还有你，鲍德温，你不赶紧让你的手离开枪把的话，那你可算是逃脱绞架了。把手拿出来，要不然，老天作证——行了，这样就好。这座房子周围有四十个全副武装的伙计，你们可以自个儿算算，逃脱的希望究竟有几成。下掉他们的手枪，马文！”

这么些来复枪在周围虎视眈眈，反抗显然是不可能的事情。被人缴械之后，这帮人仍然坐在桌子周围，面色阴沉、服服帖帖、惊骇莫名。

“分别之前，我还想跟你们说两句，”设陷阱捉住他们的人说道。“依我看，在我出庭作证之前，咱们一时半会儿是见不上面啦。我这就给你们讲点儿事情，在咱们分别的这段时间里，你们可以好好地回味回味。我究竟是谁，眼下你们已经知道了。到这会儿，我终于得到了亮出底牌的机会。我是平克顿侦探事务所的博迪·爱德华兹，奉命来铲除你们的帮会。我玩的是一场又艰难又危险的游戏。我玩的游戏没有人知道，没有一个人知道，我最亲最近的人也不知道。知道这件事情的人只有这位马文队长，再加上我的东家。谢天谢地，游戏已经在今晚宣告结束，赢家是我！”

七张惨白僵硬的脸仰望着他，眼睛里都写着不共戴天的仇恨。他心里明白，他们已经发出了绝无宽贷的威胁。

“你们兴许觉得，游戏到这儿还不算完。呃，那我也只能赌赌运气。不管怎么样，你们当中的一些人已经没有接着玩的机会了。除了你们之外，今晚还会有六十个家伙锒铛入狱。这么说吧，接到这件工作的时候，我压根儿就不相信，世上竟然会有你们这种帮会。我以为这只是报纸的胡诌，还打算证明给他们看。他们告诉我，这事情跟自由人会有关，于是我去了芝加哥，在那里入了会。入会之后，我更加确信这只是报纸的胡诌，因为我发现这个会做了不少好事，并没有为非作歹。

“话虽如此，我还得接着干我的工作，于是就走进了这些产煤的山谷。来了这里之后，我意识到自己想错了，意识到这终归不是十分钱小说[1]里面的情节。于是乎，我留下来料理这件事情。我没有在芝加哥杀过人，这辈子也没有伪造过哪怕是一块钱。我给你们的那些钱一点儿都不假，当然也不是白给，那些钱花得再合算不过了。为了投你们所好，我才装成了负案潜逃的模样。这个办法的效果完全符合我的预计。

“这么着，我加入了你们那个罪恶的帮会，替你们出谋划策。有人兴许会说，我跟你们一样坏。只要能够抓到你们，我可不在乎别人会有什么话说。不过，事实究竟如何呢？我入会的当天晚上，你们殴打了斯坦格老先生。因为没有时间，我没能提前向他发出警告，可我制止了你，鲍德温，没让你把他往死里打。要说我给你们提供过什么建议的话，那也是为了取得你们的信任，与此同时，我建议的都是一些我有把握阻止的事情。因为情报太过有限，我没能挽救邓恩和孟席斯，不过，我一定会把杀害他俩的凶手送上绞架。我提前警告了切斯特·威尔科克斯，所以呢，我炸掉他家房子的时候，他和他的家人早已经躲了起来。的确，我没能阻止

[1] 十分钱小说（dime novel）指十九世纪下半叶至二十世纪初流行于美国的一种价格低廉、情节离奇夸张的通俗冒险小说，因此类小说的一些早期品种售价十美分而得名。

的罪行为数众多，可你们不妨回想一下，有多少次，你们的目标选择了不同的回家路线，或者是赶在你们上门之前进了城，或者是在你们算定的外出时间待在了屋里，想明白这些事情，你们就可以知道，我到底干了些什么。”

“你这个该死的叛徒！”麦金提咬牙切齿地骂了一句。

“咳，约翰·麦金提，如果叫我叛徒能让你痛快一点儿的话，那你就这么叫好了。你和你那帮人是上帝的敌人，也是这一带所有居民的敌人，总得有人挺身而出，让那些可怜的男男女女摆脱你们的魔爪。这事情只有一种方法可以办到，所以我就用上了这种方法。你可以把我叫做叛徒，可我觉得，成千上万的人会把我叫做地狱里的救星。我已经在地狱里待了三个月，即便他们让我到华盛顿的国库里去随便拿钱，我也不愿意再待三个月。之前我不得不留在这里，是因为我必须掌握所有的情况，弄清楚所有的人、所有的秘密。本来我还会稍微多等一阵的，只可惜我突然发现，我的秘密面临着暴露的危险。有一封信来到了这个镇子里，很可能会让你们恍然大悟。所以我只好采取行动，而且刻不容缓。

“我要跟你们说的就是这些，最后还有一句，等到我大限临头的时候，想到我在这座山谷里完成的工作，我肯定会死得更加安然。好了，马文，我不耽搁你们了。带他们走，把这件事情了结了吧。”

讲到这里，故事已经接近尾声。斯坎伦奉命将一封密信送往伊蒂·沙夫特小姐的住处，接到这个任务的时候，他眨巴了一下眼睛，心领神会地笑了笑。第二天凌晨，一个美丽的女子和一个浑身包裹得严严实实的男人登上了铁路公司安排的一趟专列，飞快地离开了这片危险的土地，中途没有任何停顿。从那以后，伊蒂和她的爱人再也不曾踏入这座恐怖之谷。十天之后，他俩在芝加哥结了婚，老雅各布·沙夫特也见证了他俩的婚礼。

扫魂帮的审判地点远离恐怖之谷，他们的徒众无法再对执法人员进行恐吓。他们苦苦挣扎，只可惜无济于事。为了逃脱覆灭

的命运，扫魂帮大把大把地花费他们从整个乡区勒索来的金钱，依然是无济于事。一个对他们的生活、他们的组织、他们的罪行无所不知的证人提供了一份严整清晰、客观冷静的证词，他们的辩护人使尽心机也无法撼动。到最后，横行多年的扫魂帮终于土崩瓦解，笼罩山谷的阴云从此一扫而空。

麦金提在绞架上结束了自己的生命，临刑的表现则是抖如筛糠、哀号不已。八名主要党羽落得了跟他一样的命运，还有五十来个会员得到了长短不一的刑期。到这个时候，博迪·爱德华兹可谓大功告成。[①]

然而，如他所料，游戏到这儿还不算完。接下来不是只有一局，而是一局接着一局，没完没了。逃过绞架的扫魂帮不在少数，特德·鲍德温就是其中之一，威勒比兄弟和其他几名最为凶恶的帮会成员也是如此。十年的时间里面，他们从社会上销声匿迹，终于有一天，他们重新获得了自由。爱德华兹非常了解自己的对手，心里也十分清楚，从这一天开始，自己就不会再有太平的日子。他们已经发下了最为郑重的誓言，一定要用爱德华兹的鲜血洗清同志们的冤仇。为了践行自己的誓言，他们可真是竭尽全力！

爱德华兹还在芝加哥的时候，他们有过两次非常接近成功的尝试，以致他不得不相信，自己逃不过第三次。于是他改名换姓，搬到了加利福尼亚。到了那里之后，伊蒂·爱德华兹不幸去世，他的生活一时间变得暗淡无光。接下来，他再一次险遭杀害，

[①] 很多西方学者认为，“恐怖谷”的故事是以爱尔兰裔美国人组建的秘密组织“莫利·马圭尔帮”（Molly Maguires）为蓝本，该帮会成员包括许多矿工，自南北战争时期开始活跃于宾夕法尼亚一带，后被控犯有绑架、谋杀等罪行，于 1876 至 1878 年间遭到审判，多名成员被处绞刑。在消灭“莫利·马圭尔帮”的行动当中，平克顿侦探事务所的爱尔兰裔侦探詹姆斯·麦克帕兰（James McParland, 1843—1919）化名詹姆斯·麦克纳（James McKenna），成功渗入帮会内部，他的证词对指控该帮会发挥了至关重要的作用。也有学者认为，消灭“莫利·马圭尔帮”的行动实际上是资本家对工人运动的一次镇压。柯南·道尔认识艾伦·平克顿的儿子威廉·平克顿（William Pinkerton），并且知道“莫利·马圭尔帮”的事情，这个故事里有很多地方都可以看到“莫利·马圭尔帮”的影子。

不得不再一次改名换姓，顶着道格拉斯的姓氏到一个荒凉的峡谷里去工作。在那里，他跟一个名叫巴克的英国人合伙开矿，赚到了一大笔钱。到最后，警报又一次传来，那群恶狗又一次嗅到了他的踪迹。千钧一发之际，他成功地逃到了英格兰。这一来，我们已经看到，约翰·道格拉斯再一次娶到了一个般配的伴侣，在萨塞克斯郡当了五年的乡绅，最后又不得不终结自己的乡绅生活，起因则是我们已经听说的那些古怪事情。

尾声

地方法庭的审讯已经结束，结论是将约翰·道格拉斯移送更高一级的法庭。季度会审[1]也已结束，结论是道格拉斯自卫杀人、无罪开释。

“不管会有什么样的代价，你也要让他离开英格兰，”福尔摩斯在给道格拉斯太太的信中写道。“这里的一些势力比他曾经摆脱的那些势力还要危险。待在英格兰的话，你的丈夫是没有安全可言的。”

两个月的时间已经过去，我们也多少有点儿淡忘了这件案子。接下来的一天早晨，一封谜一般的简短信函来到了我们的信箱里。“我的天，福尔摩斯先生，我的天！”这封没留姓名地址的奇特信件如是写道。这条古怪的讯息逗得我笑了起来，福尔摩斯的神情却严肃得异乎寻常。

“事情不妙啊，华生！”他这么说了一句，沉着脸坐了很长时间。

昨天深夜，房东哈德森太太上楼通报，说有位绅士想见福尔摩斯，有重大的事情要谈。紧随她上楼的正是我们在那座城壕拱卫的宅子里认识的朋友，塞西尔·巴克。只见他一脸憔悴，形容枯槁。

“我听到了不好的消息，应该说是可怕的消息，福尔摩斯先生，”他说道。

“我就担心会是这样，”福尔摩斯说道。

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[1] 季度会审（Quarter Sessions）是当时英格兰各地的地方法庭每季一次的会审，通常在郡城举行，有权裁决地方法庭无权裁决的一些大案。1972 年，英格兰和威尔士废除了这一制度。

“您没有收到过什么电报吗？”

“我收到了一封收到过电报的人写来的信。”

“我要说的是可怜的道格拉斯。他们跟我说他的真名是爱德华兹，不过，对我来说，他永远都是贝尼托峡谷的那个杰克·道格拉斯。以前我告诉过您，三个星期前，他们两口子一起动身去了南非，搭的是‘帕尔迈拉号’轮船。”

“没错。”

“昨天夜里，那艘船到了开普敦。今天早上，我收到了道格拉斯太太发来的电报：

> 船至圣赫勒拿岛[1]附近，杰克遇风落海。事故详情无人知晓。
>
> 艾薇·道格拉斯”

“哈！原来是这么回事，不是吗？”福尔摩斯若有所思地说道。“呃，我有十成的把握，这是一次精心安排的行动。”

“您认为这不是一次事故，对吗？”

“绝对不是。”

“他是被人谋杀的吗？”

“那还用说！”

“我也这么觉得。这些十恶不赦的扫魂帮，这帮不依不饶的该死罪犯——”

“不，不是他们，善良的先生啊，”福尔摩斯说道。“这可是大师的手笔，绝不是锯短枪管的霰弹枪和笨拙不便的左轮手枪所能比拟的。你们可以通过笔触认出古典大师[2]的真迹，我也可以一眼看出莫里亚蒂的杰作。这桩罪行的源头在伦敦，并不在美国。”

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[1] 圣赫勒拿岛（St. Helena）是南大西洋当中的一个火山岛，因曾是拿破仑的流放地而闻名于世。

[2] 古典大师（old master）通常用来统称十九世纪之前的欧洲大画家，尤指文艺复兴时期的大画家。这个英文短语也可以指这些画家的作品。

“可是，动机是什么呢？”

“主谋之所以策划这桩罪行，是因为他不能承受失败，因为他独一无二的声望正是来自他从不失手的事实。一颗了不起的头脑跟一个庞大的组织合起来对付一个孤立无援的人，完全是小题大做，简直就跟用汽锤去砸核桃一样荒唐——当然喽，不管这事情有多么荒唐，核桃一样会化为齑粉。”

“这个家伙跟这件事情究竟有什么关系呢？”

“我只知道这么一个事实，关于这桩罪行，我们最早是从他的一名爪牙那里听到风声的。这些美国人还是挺有心计的，要在英国办事的时候，他们就选择了最适合外来罪犯的一种做法，跟这个了不起的犯罪顾问勾结在了一起。从那个时刻开始，他们的目标就已经在劫难逃。刚开始的时候，莫里亚蒂兴许不会太当回事，只是让自己的爪牙帮他们找出目标的下落，然后再指示他们该怎么办。到最后，他收到了鲍德温失手的报告，于是就决定亲自出马，使出一记大师级的高招。还在伯尔斯通宅邸的时候，我就警告过道格拉斯，将来的危险比过去的还要大，这话你也听见了。我没说错吧？”

巴克又是愤怒又是无奈，握紧拳头捶了捶自己的脑袋。“您该不是说，这事情咱们只能逆来顺受吧？您难道是说，谁也对付不了这个魔王吗？”

“不，我不是这个意思，”福尔摩斯说道。他的眼神深邃悠远，似乎已经投向了迢遥的未来。“我并没有说他不可战胜。不过，你必须给我时间，必须给我时间！”

我们不言不语地坐了几分钟，静默之中，福尔摩斯那双先知一般的眼睛依然一瞬不瞬，似乎是想要洞烛命运。

Part.1

The Tragedy of Birlstone

THE VALLEY OF FEAR

CHAPTER 1 THE WARNING

"I am inclined to think——" said I.

"I should do so," Sherlock Holmes remarked impatiently.

I believe that I am one of the most long-suffering of mortals; but I'll admit that I was annoyed at the sardonic interruption.

"Really, Holmes," said I severely, "you are a little trying at times."

He was too much absorbed with his own thoughts to give any immediate answer to my remonstrance. He leaned upon his hand, with his untasted breakfast before him, and he stared at the slip of paper which he had just drawn from its envelope. Then he took the envelope itself, held it up to the light, and very carefully studied both the exterior and the flap.

"It is Porlock's writing," said he thoughtfully. "I can hardly doubt that it is Porlock's writing, though I have seen it only twice before. The Greek *e* with the peculiar top flourish is distinctive. But if it is Porlock, then it must be something of the very first importance."

He was speaking to himself rather than to me; but my vexation disappeared in the interest which the words awakened.

"Who then is Porlock?" I asked.

"Porlock, Watson, is a nom-de-plume, a mere identification mark; but behind it lies a shifty and evasive personality. In a former letter he frankly informed me that the name was not his own, and defied me ever to trace him among the teeming millions of this great city. Porlock is important, not

for himself, but for the great man with whom he is in touch. Picture to yourself the pilot fish with the shark, the jackal with the lion—anything that is insignificant in companionship with what is formidable: not only formidable, Watson, but sinister—in the highest degree sinister. That is where he comes within my purview. You have heard me speak of Professor Moriarty?"

"The famous scientific criminal, as famous among crooks as—"

"My blushes, Watson!" Holmes murmured in a deprecating voice.

"I was about to say, as he is unknown to the public."

"A touch! A distinct touch!" cried Holmes. "You are developing a certain unexpected vein of pawky humour, Watson, against which I must learn to guard myself. But in calling Moriarty a criminal you are uttering libel in the eyes of the law—and there lie the glory and the wonder of it! The greatest schemer of all time, the organizer of every deviltry, the controlling brain of the underworld, a brain which might have made or marred the destiny of nations—that's the man! But so aloof is he from general suspicion, so immune from criticism, so admirable in his management and self-effacement, that for those very words that you have uttered he could hale you to a court and emerge with your year's pension as a solatium for his wounded character. Is he not the celebrated author of *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*, a book which ascends to such rarefied heights of pure mathematics that it is said that there was no man in the scientific press capable of criticizing it? Is this a man to traduce? Foul-mouthed doctor and slandered professor—such would be your respective rôles! That's genius, Watson. But if I am spared by lesser men, our day will surely come."

"May I be there to see!" I exclaimed devoutly. "But you were speaking of this man Porlock."

"Ah, yes—the so-called Porlock is a link in the chain some little way from its great attachment. Porlock is not quite a sound link—between ourselves. He is the only flaw in that chain so far as I have been able to test it."

"But no chain is stronger than its weakest link."

"Exactly, my dear Watson! Hence the extreme importance of Porlock. Led on by some rudimentary aspirations towards right, and encouraged by the judicious stimulation of an occasional ten-pound note sent to him by devious methods, he has once or twice given me advance information which has been of value—that highest value which anticipates and prevents rather than avenges crime. I cannot doubt that, if we had the cipher, we should find that this communication is of the nature that I indicate."

Again Holmes flattened out the paper upon his unused plate. I rose and, leaning over him, stared down at the curious inscription, which ran as follows:

534 C2 13 127 36 31 4 17 21 41

DOUGLAS 109 293 5 37 BIRLSTONE

26 BIRLSTONE 9 47 171

"What do you make of it, Holmes?"

"It is obviously an attempt to convey secret information."

"But what is the use of a cipher message without the cipher?"

"In this instance, none at all."

"Why do you say 'in this instance'?"

"Because there are many ciphers which I would read as easily as I do the apocrypha of the agony column: such crude devices amuse the intelligence without fatiguing it. But this is different. It is clearly a reference to the words in a page of some book. Until I am told which page and which book I am powerless."

"But why 'Douglas' and 'Birlstone'?"

"Clearly because those are words which were not contained in the page in question."

"Then why has he not indicated the book?"

"Your native shrewdness, my dear Watson, that innate

cunning which is the delight of your friends, would surely prevent you from inclosing cipher and message in the same envelope. Should it miscarry, you are undone. As it is, both have to go wrong before any harm comes from it. Our second post is now overdue, and I shall be surprised if it does not bring us either a further letter of explanation, or, as is more probable, the very volume to which these figures refer."

Holmes's calculation was fulfilled within a very few minutes by the appearance of Billy, the page, with the very letter which we were expecting.

"The same writing," remarked Holmes, as he opened the envelope, "and actually signed," he added in an exultant voice as he unfolded the epistle. "Come, we are getting on, Watson." His brow clouded, however, as he glanced over the contents.

"Dear me, this is very disappointing! I fear, Watson, that all our expectations come to nothing. I trust that the man Porlock will come to no harm.

"Dear Mr. Holmes [he says]:

> I will go no further in this matter. It is too dangerous—he suspects me. I can see that he suspects me. He came to me quite unexpectedly after I had actually addressed this envelope with the intention of sending you the key to the cipher. I was able to cover it up. If he had seen it, it would have gone hard with me. But I read suspicion in his eyes. Please burn the cipher message, which can now be of no use to you.
>
> Fred Porlock."

Holmes sat for some little time twisting this letter between his fingers, and frowning, as he stared into the fire.

"After all," he said at last, "there may be nothing in it. It may be only his guilty conscience. Knowing himself to be a traitor, he may have read the accusation in the other's eyes."

"The other being, I presume, Professor Moriarty."

"No less! When any of that party talk about 'He' you know whom they mean. There is one predominant 'He' for all of them."

"But what can he do?"

"Hum! That's a large question. When you have one of the first brains of Europe up against you, and all the powers of darkness at his back, there are infinite possibilities. Anyhow, Friend Porlock is evidently scared out of his senses—kindly compare the writing in the note to that upon its envelope; which was done, he tells us, before this ill-omened visit. The one is clear and firm. The other hardly legible."

"Why did he write at all? Why did he not simply drop it?"

"Because he feared I would make some inquiry after him in that case, and possibly bring trouble on him."

"No doubt," said I. "Of course." I had picked up the original cipher message and was bending my brows over it. "It's pretty maddening to think that an important secret may lie here on this slip of paper, and that it is beyond human power to penetrate it."

Sherlock Holmes had pushed away his untasted breakfast and lit the unsavoury pipe which was the companion of his deepest meditations. "I wonder!" said he, leaning back and staring at the ceiling. "Perhaps there are points which have escaped your Machiavellian intellect. Let us consider the problem in the light of pure reason. This man's reference is to a book. That is our point of departure."

"A somewhat vague one."

"Let us see then if we can narrow it down. As I focus my mind upon it, it seems rather less impenetrable. What indications have we as to this book?"

"None."

"Well, well, it is surely not quite so bad as that. The cipher message begins with a large 534, does it not? We may take it as a working hypothesis that 534 is the particular page to which the cipher refers. So our book has already become a *large* book, which is surely something gained. What other indications have we as to the nature of this large book? The next sign is C2. What do you make of that, Watson?"

"Chapter the second, no doubt."

"Hardly that, Watson. You will, I am sure, agree with me that if the page be given, the number of the chapter is immaterial. Also that if page 534 finds us only in the second chapter, the length of the first one must have been really intolerable."

"Column!" I cried.

"Brilliant, Watson. You are scintillating this morning. If it is not column, then I am very much deceived. So now, you see, we begin to visualize a large book, printed in double columns, which are each of a considerable length, since one of the words is numbered in the document as the two hundred and ninety-third. Have we reached the limits of what reason can supply?"

"I fear that we have."

"Surely you do yourself an injustice. One more coruscation, my dear Watson—yet another brain-wave! Had the volume been an unusual one, he would have sent it to me. Instead of that, he had intended, before his plans were nipped, to send me the clue in this envelope. He says so in his note. This would seem to indicate that the book is one which he thought I would have no difficulty in finding for myself. He had it—and he imagined that I would have it, too. In short, Watson, it is a very common book."

"What you say certainly sounds plausible."

"So we have contracted our field of search to a large book, printed in double columns and in common use."

"The Bible!" I cried triumphantly.

"Good, Watson, good! But not, if I may say so, quite good enough! Even if I accepted the compliment for myself, I could hardly name any volume which would be less likely to lie at the elbow of one of Moriarty's associates. Besides, the editions of Holy Writ are so numerous that he could hardly suppose that two copies would have the same pagination. This is clearly a book which is standardized. He knows for certain that his page 534 will exactly agree with my page 534."

"But very few books would correspond with that."

"Exactly. Therein lies our salvation. Our search is narrowed down to standardized books which anyone may be supposed to possess."

"Bradshaw!"

"There are difficulties, Watson. The vocabulary of Bradshaw is nervous and terse, but limited. The selection of words would hardly lend itself to the sending of general messages. We will eliminate Bradshaw. The dictionary is, I fear, inadmissible for the same reason. What then is left?"

"An almanac!"

"Excellent, Watson! I am very much mistaken if you have not touched the spot. An almanac! Let us consider the claims of Whitaker's Almanac. It is in common use. It has the requisite number of pages. It is in double column. Though reserved in its earlier vocabulary, it becomes, if I remember right, quite garrulous towards the end." He picked the volume from his desk. "Here is page 534, column two, a substantial block of print dealing, I perceive, with the trade and resources of British India. Jot down the words, Watson! Number thirteen is 'Mahratta.' Not, I fear, a very auspicious beginning. Number one hundred and twenty-seven is 'Government'; which at least makes sense, though somewhat irrelevant to ourselves and Professor Moriarty. Now let us try again. What does the Mahratta government do? Alas! the next word is 'pig's-bristles.' We are undone, my good Watson! It is finished!"

He had spoken in jesting vein, but the twitching of his bushy eyebrows bespoke his disappointment and irritation. I sat helpless and unhappy, staring into the fire. A long silence was broken by a sudden exclamation from Holmes, who dashed at a cupboard, from which he emerged with a second yellow-covered volume in his hand.

"We pay the price, Watson, for being too up-to-date!" he cried. "We are before our time, and suffer the usual penalties. Being the seventh of January, we have very properly laid in the new almanac. It is more than likely that Porlock took his message from the old one. No doubt he would have told us

so had his letter of explanation been written. Now let us see what page 534 has in store for us. Number thirteen is 'There,' which is much more promising. Number one hundred and twenty-seven is 'is'— 'There is' "—Holmes's eyes were gleaming with excitement, and his thin, nervous fingers twitched as he counted the words—" 'danger.' Ha! Ha! Capital! Put that down, Watson. 'There is danger—may—come—very—soon—one.' Then we have the name 'Douglas'—'rich—country—now—at—Birlstone—House—Birlstone—confidence—is—pressing.' There, Watson! What do you think of pure reason and its fruit? If the green-grocer had such a thing as a laurel wreath, I should send Billy round for it."

I was staring at the strange message which I had scrawled, as he deciphered it, upon a sheet of foolscap on my knee.

"What a queer, scrambling way of expressing his meaning!" said I.

"On the contrary, he has done quite remarkably well," said Holmes. "When you search a single column for words with which to express your meaning, you can hardly expect to get everything you want. You are bound to leave something to the intelligence of your correspondent. The purport is perfectly clear. Some deviltry is intended against one Douglas, whoever he may be, residing as stated, a rich country gentleman. He is sure—'confidence' was as near as he could get to 'confident'—that it is pressing. There is our result—and a very workmanlike little bit of analysis it was!"

Holmes had the impersonal joy of the true artist in his better work, even as he mourned darkly when it fell below the high level to which he aspired. He was still chuckling over his success when Billy swung open the door and Inspector MacDonald of Scotland Yard was ushered into the room.

Those were the early days at the end of the '80's, when Alec MacDonald was far from having attained the national fame which he has now achieved. He was a young but trusted member of the detective force, who had distinguished himself in several cases which had been intrusted to him. His tall, bony figure gave promise of exceptional physical strength, while his great cranium and deep-set, lustrous eyes spoke no less clearly

of the keen intelligence which twinkled out from behind his bushy eyebrows. He was a silent, precise man with a dour nature and a hard Aberdonian accent.

Twice already in his career had Holmes helped him to attain success, his own sole reward being the intellectual joy of the problem. For this reason the affection and respect of the Scotchman for his amateur colleague were profound, and he showed them by the frankness with which he consulted Holmes in every difficulty. Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself; but talent instantly recognizes genius, and MacDonald had talent enough for his profession to enable him to perceive that there was no humiliation in seeking the assistance of one who already stood alone in Europe, both in his gifts and in his experience. Holmes was not prone to friendship, but he was tolerant of the big Scotchman, and smiled at the sight of him.

"You are an early bird, Mr. Mac," said he. "I wish you luck with your worm. I fear this means that there is some mischief afoot."

"If you said 'hope' instead of 'fear,' it would be nearer the truth, I'm thinking, Mr. Holmes," the inspector answered, with a knowing grin. "Well, maybe a wee nip would keep out the raw morning chill. No, I won't smoke, I thank you. I'll have to be pushing on my way; for the early hours of a case are the precious ones, as no man knows better than your own self. But—but—"

The inspector had stopped suddenly, and was staring with a look of absolute amazement at a paper upon the table. It was the sheet upon which I had scrawled the enigmatic message.

"Douglas!" he stammered. "Birlstone! What's this, Mr. Holmes? Man, it's witchcraft! Where in the name of all that is wonderful did you get those names?"

"It is a cipher that Dr. Watson and I have had occasion to solve. But why—what's amiss with the names?"

The inspector looked from one to the other of us in dazed astonishment. "Just this," said he, "that Mr. Douglas of Birlstone Manor House was horribly murdered last night!"

CHAPTER 2 SHERLOCK HOLMES DISCOURSES

It was one of those dramatic moments for which my friend existed. It would be an overstatement to say that he was shocked or even excited by the amazing announcement. Without having a tinge of cruelty in his singular composition, he was undoubtedly callous from long over-stimulation. Yet, if his emotions were dulled, his intellectual perceptions were exceedingly active. There was no trace then of the horror which I had myself felt at this curt declaration; but his face showed rather the quiet and interested composure of the chemist who sees the crystals falling into position from his oversaturated solution.

"Remarkable!" said he. "Remarkable!"

"You don't seem surprised."

"Interested, Mr. Mac, but hardly surprised. Why should I be surprised? I receive an anonymous communication from a quarter which I know to be important, warning me that danger threatens a certain person. Within an hour I learn that this danger has actually materialized and that the person is dead. I am interested; but, as you observe, I am not surprised."

In a few short sentences he explained to the inspector the facts about the letter and the cipher. MacDonald sat with his chin on his hands and his great sandy eyebrows bunched into a yellow tangle.

"I was going down to Birlstone this morning," said he. "I had come to ask you if you cared to come with me—you and your friend here. But from what you say we might perhaps be doing better work in London."

"I rather think not," said Holmes.

"Hang it all, Mr. Holmes!" cried the inspector. "The papers will be full of the Birlstone mystery in a day or two; but where's the mystery if there is a man in London who prophesied the crime before ever it occurred? We have only to lay our hands on that man, and the rest will follow."

"No doubt, Mr. Mac. But how do you propose to lay your hands on the so-called Porlock?"

MacDonald turned over the letter which Holmes had handed him. "Posted in Camberwell—that doesn't help us much. Name, you say, is assumed. Not much to go on, certainly. Didn't you say that you have sent him money?"

"Twice."

"And how?"

"In notes to Camberwell post-office."

"Did you ever trouble to see who called for them?"

"No."

The inspector looked surprised and a little shocked. "Why not?"

"Because I always keep faith. I had promised when he first wrote that I would not try to trace him."

"You think there is someone behind him?"

"I *know* there is."

"This professor that I've heard you mention?"

"Exactly!"

Inspector MacDonald smiled, and his eyelid quivered as he glanced towards me. "I won't conceal from you, Mr. Holmes, that we think in the C.I.D. that you have a wee bit of a bee in your bonnet over this professor. I made some inquiries myself about the matter. He seems to be a very respectable, learned, and talented sort of man."

"I'm glad you've got so far as to recognize the talent."

"Man, you can't but recognize it! After I heard your view I made it my business to see him. I had a chat with him on

eclipses. How the talk got that way I canna think; but he had out a reflector lantern and a globe, and made it all clear in a minute. He lent me a book; but I don't mind saying that it was a bit above my head, though I had a good Aberdeen upbringing. He'd have made a grand meenister with his thin face and gray hair and solemn-like way of talking. When he put his hand on my shoulder as we were parting, it was like a father's blessing before you go out into the cold, cruel world."

Holmes chuckled and rubbed his hands. "Great!" he said. "Great! Tell me, Friend MacDonald, this pleasing and touching interview was, I suppose, in the professor's study?"

"That's so."

"A fine room, is it not?"

"Very fine—very handsome indeed, Mr. Holmes."

"You sat in front of his writing desk?"

"Just so."

"Sun in your eyes and his face in the shadow?"

"Well, it was evening; but I mind that the lamp was turned on my face."

"It would be. Did you happen to observe a picture over the professor's head?"

"I don't miss much, Mr. Holmes. Maybe I learned that from you. Yes, I saw the picture—a young woman with her head on her hands, peeping at you sideways."

"That painting was by Jean Baptiste Greuze."

The inspector endeavoured to look interested.

"Jean Baptiste Greuze," Holmes continued, joining his finger tips and leaning well back in his chair, "was a French artist who flourished between the years 1750 and 1800. I allude, of course, to his working career. Modern criticism has more than indorsed the high opinion formed of him by his contemporaries."

The inspector's eyes grew abstracted. "Hadn't we better—"

he said.

"We are doing so," Holmes interrupted. "All that I am saying has a very direct and vital bearing upon what you have called the Birlstone Mystery. In fact, it may in a sense be called the very centre of it."

MacDonald smiled feebly, and looked appealingly to me. "Your thoughts move a bit too quick for me, Mr. Holmes. You leave out a link or two, and I can't get over the gap. What in the whole wide world can be the connection between this dead painting man and the affair at Birlstone?"

"All knowledge comes useful to the detective," remarked Holmes. "Even the trivial fact that in the year 1865 a picture by Greuze entitled 'La Jeune Fille á l'Agneau' fetched one million two hundred thousand francs—more than forty thousand pounds—at the Portalis sale may start a train of reflection in your mind."

It was clear that it did. The inspector looked honestly interested.

"I may remind you," Holmes continued, "that the professor's salary can be ascertained in several trust-worthy books of reference. It is seven hundred a year."

"Then how could he buy—"

"Quite so! How could he?"

"Ay, that's remarkable," said the inspector thoughtfully. "Talk away, Mr. Holmes. I'm just loving it. It's fine!"

Holmes smiled. He was always warmed by genuine admiration—the characteristic of the real artist. "What about Birlstone?" he asked.

"We've time yet," said the inspector, glancing at his watch. "I've a cab at the door, and it won't take us twenty minutes to Victoria. But about this picture: I thought you told me once, Mr. Holmes, that you had never met Professor Moriarty."

"No, I never have."

"Then how do you know about his rooms?"

"Ah, that's another matter. I have been three times in his rooms, twice waiting for him under different pretexts and leaving before he came. Once—well, I can hardly tell about the once to an official detective. It was on the last occasion that I took the liberty of running over his papers—with the most unexpected results."

"You found something compromising?"

"Absolutely nothing. That was what amazed me. However, you have now seen the point of the picture. It shows him to be a very wealthy man. How did he acquire wealth? He is unmarried. His younger brother is a station master in the west of England. His chair is worth seven hundred a year. And he owns a Greuze."

"Well?"

"Surely the inference is plain."

"You mean that he has a great income and that he must earn it in an illegal fashion?"

"Exactly. Of course I have other reasons for thinking so—dozens of exiguous threads which lead vaguely up towards the centre of the web where the poisonous, motionless creature is lurking. I only mention the Greuze because it brings the matter within the range of your own observation."

"Well, Mr. Holmes, I admit that what you say is interesting: it's more than interesting—it's just wonderful. But let us have it a little clearer if you can. Is it forgery, coining, burglary—where does the money come from?"

"Have you ever read of Jonathan Wild?"

"Well, the name has a familiar sound. Someone in a novel, was he not? I don't take much stock of detectives in novels—chaps that do things and never let you see how they do them. That's just inspiration: not business."

"Jonathan Wild wasn't a detective, and he wasn't in a novel. He was a master criminal, and he lived last century—1750 or thereabouts."

"Then he's no use to me. I'm a practical man."

"Mr. Mac, the most practical thing that you ever did in your life would be to shut yourself up for three months and read twelve hours a day at the annals of crime. Everything comes in circles—even Professor Moriarty. Jonathan Wild was the hidden force of the London criminals, to whom he sold his brains and his organization on a fifteen per cent commission. The old wheel turns, and the same spoke comes up. It's all been done before, and will be again. I'll tell you one or two things about Moriarty which may interest you."

"You'll interest me, right enough."

"I happen to know who is the first link in his chain—a chain with this Napoleon gone-wrong at one end, and a hundred broken fighting men, pickpockets, blackmailers, and card sharpers at the other, with every sort of crime in between. His chief of staff is Colonel Sebastian Moran, as aloof and guarded and inaccessible to the law as himself. What do you think he pays him?"

"I'd like to hear."

"Six thousand a year. That's paying for brains, you see—the American business principle. I learned that detail quite by chance. It's more than the Prime Minister gets. That gives you an idea of Moriarty's gains and of the scale on which he works. Another point: I made it my business to hunt down some of Moriarty's checks lately—just common innocent checks that he pays his household bills with. They were drawn on six different banks. Does that make any impression on your mind?"

"Queer, certainly! But what do you gather from it?"

"That he wanted no gossip about his wealth. No single man should know what he had. I have no doubt that he has twenty banking accounts; the bulk of his fortune abroad in the Deutsche Bank or the Crédit Lyonnais as likely as not. Sometime when you have a year or two to spare I commend to you the study of Professor Moriarty."

Inspector MacDonald had grown steadily more impressed as the conversation proceeded. He had lost himself in his interest. Now his practical Scotch intelligence brought him back with a snap to the matter in hand.

"He can keep, anyhow," said he. "You've got us side-tracked with your interesting anecdotes, Mr. Holmes. What really counts is your remark that there is some connection between the professor and the crime. That you get from the warning received through the man Porlock. Can we for our present practical needs get any further than that?"

"We may form some conception as to the motives of the crime. It is, as I gather from your original remarks, an inexplicable, or at least an unexplained, murder. Now, presuming that the source of the crime is as we suspect it to be, there might be two different motives. In the first place, I may tell you that Moriarty rules with a rod of iron over his people. His discipline is tremendous. There is only one punishment in his code. It is death. Now we might suppose that this murdered man—this Douglas whose approaching fate was known by one of the arch-criminal's subordinates—had in some way betrayed the chief. His punishment followed, and would be known to all—if only to put the fear of death into them."

"Well, that is one suggestion, Mr. Holmes."

"The other is that it has been engineered by Moriarty in the ordinary course of business. Was there any robbery?"

"I have not heard."

"If so, it would, of course, be against the first hypothesis and in favour of the second. Moriarty may have been engaged to engineer it on a promise of part spoils, or he may have been paid so much down to manage it. Either is possible. But whichever it may be, or if it is some third combination, it is down at Birlstone that we must seek the solution. I know our man too well to suppose that he has left anything up here which may lead us to him."

"Then to Birlstone we must go!" cried MacDonald, jumping from his chair. "My word! it's later than I thought. I can give you, gentlemen, five minutes for preparation, and that is all."

"And ample for us both," said Holmes, as he sprang up and hastened to change from his dressing gown to his coat. "While we are on our way, Mr. Mac, I will ask you to be good enough to tell me all about it."

"All about it" proved to be disappointingly little, and yet there was enough to assure us that the case before us might well be worthy of the expert's closest attention. He brightened and rubbed his thin hands together as he listened to the meagre but remarkable details. A long series of sterile weeks lay behind us, and here at last there was a fitting object for those remarkable powers which, like all special gifts, become irksome to their owner when they are not in use. That razor brain blunted and rusted with inaction.

Sherlock Holmes's eyes glistened, his pale cheeks took a warmer hue, and his whole eager face shone with an inward light when the call for work reached him. Leaning forward in the cab, he listened intently to MacDonald's short sketch of the problem which awaited us in Sussex. The inspector was himself dependent, as he explained to us, upon a scribbled account forwarded to him by the milk train in the early hours of the morning. White Mason, the local officer, was a personal friend, and hence MacDonald had been notified much more promptly than is usual at Scotland Yard when provincials need their assistance. It is a very cold scent upon which the Metropolitan expert is generally asked to run.

> Dear Inspector MacDonald [said the letter which he read to us]:
>
> Official requisition for your services is in separate envelope. This is for your private eye. Wire me what train in the morning you can get for Birlstone, and I will meet it—or have it met if I am too occupied. This case is a snorter. Don't waste a moment in getting started. If you can bring Mr. Holmes, please do so; for he will find something after his own heart. We would think the whole thing had been fixed up for theatrical effect if there wasn't a dead man in the middle of it. My word! it *is* a snorter.

"Your friend seems to be no fool," remarked Holmes.

"No, sir, White Mason is a very live man, if I am any judge."

"Well, have you anything more?"

"Only that he will give us every detail when we meet."

"Then how did you get at Mr. Douglas and the fact that he had been horribly murdered?"

"That was in the inclosed official report. It didn't say 'horrible': that's not a recognized official term. It gave the name John Douglas. It mentioned that his injuries had been in the head, from the discharge of a shotgun. It also mentioned the hour of the alarm, which was close on to midnight last night. It added that the case was undoubtedly one of murder, but that no arrest had been made, and that the case was one which presented some very perplexing and extraordinary features. That's absolutely all we have at present, Mr. Holmes."

"Then, with your permission, we will leave it at that, Mr. Mac. The temptation to form premature theories upon insufficient data is the bane of our profession. I can see only two things for certain at present—a great brain in London, and a dead man in Sussex. It's the chain between that we are going to trace."

CHAPTER 3 THE TRAGEDY OF BIRLSTONE

Now for a moment I will ask leave to remove my own insignificant personality and to describe events which occurred before we arrived upon the scene by the light of knowledge which came to us afterwards. Only in this way can I make the reader appreciate the people concerned and the strange setting in which their fate was cast.

The village of Birlstone is a small and very ancient cluster of half-timbered cottages on the northern border of the county of Sussex. For centuries it had remained unchanged; but within the last few years its picturesque appearance and situation have attracted a number of well-to-do residents, whose villas peep out from the woods around. These woods are locally supposed to be the extreme fringe of the great Weald forest, which thins away until it reaches the northern chalk downs. A number of small shops have come into being to meet the wants of the increased population; so there seems some prospect that Birlstone may soon grow from an ancient village into a modern town. It is the centre for a considerable area of country, since Tunbridge Wells, the nearest place of importance, is ten or twelve miles to the eastward, over the borders of Kent.

About half a mile from the town, standing in an old park famous for its huge beech trees, is the ancient Manor House of Birlstone. Part of this venerable building dates back to the time of the first crusade, when Hugo de Capus built a fortalice in the centre of the estate, which had been granted to him by the Red King. This was destroyed by fire in 1543, and some of its smoke-blackened corner

stones were used when, in Jacobean times, a brick country house rose upon the ruins of the feudal castle.

The Manor House, with its many gables and its small diamond-paned windows, was still much as the builder had left it in the early seventeenth century. Of the double moats which had guarded its more warlike predecessor, the outer had been allowed to dry up, and served the humble function of a kitchen garden. The inner one was still there, and lay forty feet in breadth, though now only a few feet in depth, round the whole house. A small stream fed it and continued beyond it, so that the sheet of water, though turbid, was never ditchlike or unhealthy. The ground floor windows were within a foot of the surface of the water.

The only approach to the house was over a drawbridge, the chains and windlass of which had long been rusted and broken. The latest tenants of the Manor House had, however, with characteristic energy, set this right, and the drawbridge was not only capable of being raised, but actually was raised every evening and lowered every morning. By thus renewing the custom of the old feudal days the Manor House was converted into an island during the night—a fact which had a very direct bearing upon the mystery which was soon to engage the attention of all England.

The house had been untenanted for some years and was threatening to moulder into a picturesque decay when the Douglases took possession of it. This family consisted of only two individuals—John Douglas and his wife. Douglas was a remarkable man, both in character and in person. In age he may have been about fifty, with a strong-jawed, rugged face, a grizzling moustache, peculiarly keen gray eyes, and a wiry, vigorous figure which had lost nothing of the strength and activity of youth. He was cheery and genial to all, but somewhat offhand in his manners, giving the impression that he had seen life in social strata on some far lower horizon than the county society of Sussex.

Yet, though looked at with some curiosity and reserve by his more cultivated neighbours, he soon acquired a great popularity among the villagers, subscribing handsomely to all

local objects, and attending their smoking concerts and other functions, where, having a remarkably rich tenor voice, he was always ready to oblige with an excellent song. He appeared to have plenty of money, which was said to have been gained in the California gold fields, and it was clear from his own talk and that of his wife that he had spent a part of his life in America.

The good impression which had been produced by his generosity and by his democratic manners was increased by a reputation gained for utter indifference to danger. Though a wretched rider, he turned out at every meet and took the most amazing falls in his determination to hold his own with the best. When the vicarage caught fire he distinguished himself also by the fearlessness with which he reëntered the building to save property, after the local fire brigade had given it up as impossible. Thus it came about that John Douglas of the Manor House had within five years won himself quite a reputation in Birlstone.

His wife, too, was popular with those who had made her acquaintance; though, after the English fashion, the callers upon a stranger who settled in the county without introductions were few and far between. This mattered the less to her, as she was retiring by disposition, and very much absorbed, to all appearance, in her husband and her domestic duties. It was known that she was an English lady who had met Mr. Douglas in London, he being at that time a widower. She was a beautiful woman, tall, dark, and slender, some twenty years younger than her husband; a disparity which seemed in no wise to mar the contentment of their family life.

It was remarked sometimes, however, by those who knew them best, that the confidence between the two did not appear to be complete, since the wife was either very reticent about her husband's past life, or else, as seemed more likely, was imperfectly informed about it. It had also been noted and commented upon by a few observant people that there were signs sometimes of some nerve-strain upon the part of Mrs. Douglas, and that she would display acute uneasiness if her absent husband should ever be particularly late in his return.

On a quiet countryside, where all gossip is welcome, this weakness of the lady of the Manor House did not pass without remark, and it bulked larger upon people's memory when the events arose which gave it a very special significance.

There was yet another individual whose residence under that roof was, it is true, only an intermittent one, but whose presence at the time of the strange happenings which will now be narrated brought his name prominently before the public. This was Cecil James Barker, of Hales Lodge, Hampstead.

Cecil Barker's tall, loose-jointed figure was a familiar one in the main street of Birlstone village; for he was a frequent and welcome visitor at the Manor House. He was the more noticed as being the only friend of the past unknown life of Mr. Douglas who was ever seen in his new English surroundings. Barker was himself an undoubted Englishman; but by his remarks it was clear that he had first known Douglas in America and had there lived on intimate terms with him. He appeared to be a man of considerable wealth, and was reputed to be a bachelor.

In age he was rather younger than Douglas—forty-five at the most—a tall, straight, broad-chested fellow with a clean-shaved, prize-fighter face, thick, strong, black eyebrows, and a pair of masterful black eyes which might, even without the aid of his very capable hands, clear a way for him through a hostile crowd. He neither rode nor shot, but spent his days in wandering round the old village with his pipe in his mouth, or in driving with his host, or in his absence with his hostess, over the beautiful countryside. "An easy-going, free-handed gentleman," said Ames, the butler. "But, my word! I had rather not be the man that crossed him!" He was cordial and intimate with Douglas, and he was no less friendly with his wife—a friendship which more than once seemed to cause some irritation to the husband, so that even the servants were able to perceive his annoyance. Such was the third person who was one of the family when the catastrophe occurred.

As to the other denizens of the old building, it will suffice out of a large household to mention the prim, respectable, and capable Ames, and Mrs. Allen, a buxom and cheerful person, who relieved the lady of some of her household cares. The

other six servants in the house bear no relation to the events of the night of January 6th.

It was at eleven forty-five that the first alarm reached the small local police station, in charge of Sergeant Wilson of the Sussex Constabulary. Cecil Barker, much excited, had rushed up to the door and pealed furiously upon the bell. A terrible tragedy had occurred at the Manor House, and John Douglas had been murdered. That was the breathless burden of his message. He had hurried back to the house, followed within a few minutes by the police sergeant, who arrived at the scene of the crime a little after twelve o'clock, after taking prompt steps to warn the county authorities that something serious was afoot.

On reaching the Manor House, the sergeant had found the drawbridge down, the windows lighted up, and the whole household in a state of wild confusion and alarm. The white-faced servants were huddling together in the hall, with the frightened butler wringing his hands in the doorway. Only Cecil Barker seemed to be master of himself and his emotions; he had opened the door which was nearest to the entrance and he had beckoned to the sergeant to follow him. At that moment there arrived Dr. Wood, a brisk and capable general practitioner from the village. The three men entered the fatal room together, while the horror-stricken butler followed at their heels, closing the door behind him to shut out the terrible scene from the maid servants.

The dead man lay on his back, sprawling with outstretched limbs in the centre of the room. He was clad only in a pink dressing gown, which covered his night clothes. There were carpet slippers on his bare feet. The doctor knelt beside him and held down the hand lamp which had stood on the table. One glance at the victim was enough to show the healer that his presence could be dispensed with. The man had been horribly injured. Lying across his chest was a curious weapon, a shotgun with the barrel sawed off a foot in front of the triggers. It was clear that this had been fired at close range and that he had received the whole charge in the face, blowing his head almost to pieces. The triggers had been wired together, so as to

make the simultaneous discharge more destructive.

The country policeman was unnerved and troubled by the tremendous responsibility which had come so suddenly upon him. "We will touch nothing until my superiors arrive," he said in a hushed voice, staring in horror at the dreadful head.

"Nothing has been touched up to now," said Cecil Barker. "I'll answer for that. You see it all exactly as I found it."

"When was that?" The sergeant had drawn out his notebook.

"It was just half-past eleven. I had not begun to undress, and I was sitting by the fire in my bedroom when I heard the report. It was not very loud—it seemed to be muffled. I rushed down—I don't suppose it was thirty seconds before I was in the room."

"Was the door open?"

"Yes, it was open. Poor Douglas was lying as you see him. His bedroom candle was burning on the table. It was I who lit the lamp some minutes afterward."

"Did you see no one?"

"No. I heard Mrs. Douglas coming down the stair behind me, and I rushed out to prevent her from seeing this dreadful sight. Mrs. Allen, the housekeeper, came and took her away. Ames had arrived, and we ran back into the room once more."

"But surely I have heard that the drawbridge is kept up all night."

"Yes, it was up until I lowered it."

"Then how could any murderer have got away? It is out of the question! Mr. Douglas must have shot himself."

"That was our first idea. But see!" Barker drew aside the curtain, and showed that the long, diamond-paned window was open to its full extent. "And look at this!" He held the lamp down and illuminated a smudge of blood like the mark of a boot-sole upon the wooden sill. "Someone has stood there in getting out."

"You mean that someone waded across the moat?"

"Exactly!"

"Then if you were in the room within half a minute of the crime, he must have been in the water at that very moment."

"I have not a doubt of it. I wish to heaven that I had rushed to the window! But the curtain screened it, as you can see, and so it never occurred to me. Then I heard the step of Mrs. Douglas, and I could not let her enter the room. It would have been too horrible."

"Horrible enough!" said the doctor, looking at the shattered head and the terrible marks which surrounded it. "I've never seen such injuries since the Birlstone railway smash."

"But, I say," remarked the police sergeant, whose slow, bucolic common sense was still pondering the open window. "It's all very well your saying that a man escaped by wading this moat, but what I ask you is, how did he ever get into the house at all if the bridge was up?"

"Ah, that's the question," said Barker.

"At what o'clock was it raised?"

"It was nearly six o'clock," said Ames, the butler.

"I've heard," said the sergeant, "that it was usually raised at sunset. That would be nearer half-past four than six at this time of year."

"Mrs. Douglas had visitors to tea," said Ames. "I couldn't raise it until they went. Then I wound it up myself."

"Then it comes to this," said the sergeant: "If anyone came from outside—*if* they did—they must have got in across the bridge before six and been in hiding ever since, until Mr. Douglas came into the room after eleven."

"That is so! Mr. Douglas went round the house every night the last thing before he turned in to see that the lights were right. That brought him in here. The man was waiting and shot him. Then he got away through the window and left his gun behind him. That's how I read it; for nothing else will fit the

facts."

The sergeant picked up a card which lay beside the dead man on the floor. The initials V. V. and under them the number 341 were rudely scrawled in ink upon it.

"What's this?" he asked, holding it up.

Barker looked at it with curiosity. "I never noticed it before," he said. "The murderer must have left it behind him."

"V. V.—341. I can make no sense of that." The sergeant kept turning it over in his big fingers. "What's V. V.? Somebody's initials, maybe. What have you got there, Dr. Wood?"

It was a good-sized hammer which had been lying on the rug in front of the fireplace—a substantial, workmanlike hammer. Cecil Barker pointed to a box of brass-headed nails upon the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Douglas was altering the pictures yesterday," he said. "I saw him myself, standing upon that chair and fixing the big picture above it. That accounts for the hammer."

"We'd best put it back on the rug where we found it," said the sergeant, scratching his puzzled head in his perplexity. "It will want the best brains in the force to get to the bottom of this thing. It will be a London job before it is finished." He raised the hand lamp and walked slowly round the room. "Hullo!" he cried, excitedly, drawing the window curtain to one side. "What o'clock were those curtains drawn?"

"When the lamps were lit," said the butler. "It would be shortly after four."

"Someone had been hiding here, sure enough." He held down the light, and the marks of muddy boots were very visible in the corner. "I'm bound to say this bears out your theory, Mr. Barker. It looks as if the man got into the house after four when the curtains were drawn, and before six when the bridge was raised. He slipped into this room, because it was the first that he saw. There was no other place where he could hide, so he popped in behind this curtain. That all seems clear enough. It is likely that his main idea was to burgle the house; but Mr. Douglas chanced to come upon him, so he murdered him and

escaped."

"That's how I read it," said Barker. "But I say, aren't we wasting precious time? Couldn't we start out and scour the country before the fellow gets away?"

The sergeant considered for a moment.

"There are no trains before six in the morning; so he can't get away by rail. If he goes by road with his legs all dripping, it's odds that someone will notice him. Anyhow, I can't leave here myself until I am relieved. But I think none of you should go until we see more clearly how we all stand."

The doctor had taken the lamp and was narrowly scrutinizing the body. "What's this mark?" he asked. "Could this have any connection with the crime?"

The dead man's right arm was thrust out from his dressing gown, and exposed as high as the elbow. About halfway up the forearm was a curious brown design, a triangle inside a circle, standing out in vivid relief upon the lard-coloured skin.

"It's not tattooed," said the doctor, peering through his glasses. "I never saw anything like it. The man has been branded at some time as they brand cattle. What is the meaning of this?"

"I don't profess to know the meaning of it," said Cecil Barker, "but I have seen the mark on Douglas many times this last ten years."

"And so have I," said the butler. "Many a time when the master has rolled up his sleeves I have noticed that very mark. I've often wondered what it could be."

"Then it has nothing to do with the crime, anyhow," said the sergeant. "But it's a rum thing all the same. Everything about this case is rum. Well, what is it now?"

The butler had given an exclamation of astonishment and was pointing at the dead man's outstretched hand.

"They've taken his wedding ring!" he gasped.

"What!"

"Yes, indeed. Master always wore his plain gold wedding ring on the little finger of his left hand. That ring with the rough nugget on it was above it, and the twisted snake ring on the third finger. There's the nugget and there's the snake, but the wedding ring is gone."

"He's right," said Barker.

"Do you tell me," said the sergeant, "that the wedding ring was *below* the other?"

"Always!"

"Then the murderer, or whoever it was, first took off this ring you call the nugget then the wedding ring, and afterwards put the nugget ring back again."

"That is so!"

The worthy country policeman shook his head. "Seems to me the sooner we get London on to this case the better," said he. "White Mason is a smart man. No local job has ever been too much for White Mason. It won't be long now before he is here to help us. But I expect we'll have to look to London before we are through. Anyhow, I'm not ashamed to say that it is a deal too thick for the likes of me."

CHAPTER 4 DARKNESS

At three in the morning the chief Sussex detective, obeying the urgent call from Sergeant Wilson of Birlstone, arrived from headquarters in a light dog-cart behind a breathless trotter. By the five-forty train in the morning he had sent his message to Scotland Yard, and he was at the Birlstone station at twelve o'clock to welcome us. White Mason was a quiet, comfortable-looking person in a loose tweed suit, with a clean-shaved, ruddy face, a stoutish body, and powerful bandy legs adorned with gaiters, looking like a small farmer, a retired gamekeeper, or anything upon earth except a very favourable specimen of the provincial criminal officer.

"A real downright snorter, Mr. MacDonald!" he kept repeating. "We'll have the pressmen down like flies when they understand it. I'm hoping we will get our work done before they get poking their noses into it and messing up all the trails. There has been nothing like this that I can remember. There are some bits that will come home to you, Mr. Holmes, or I am mistaken. And you also, Dr. Watson; for the medicos will have a word to say before we finish. Your room is at the Westville Arms. There's no other place; but I hear that it is clean and good. The man will carry your bags. This way, gentlemen, if you please."

He was a very bustling and genial person, this Sussex detective. In ten minutes we had all found our quarters. In ten more we were seated in the parlour of the inn and being treated to a rapid sketch of those events which have been outlined in the previous chapter. MacDonald made an occasional note, while Holmes sat absorbed, with the expression of surprised and reverent

admiration with which the botanist surveys the rare and precious bloom.

"Remarkable!" he said, when the story was unfolded, "most remarkable! I can hardly recall any case where the features have been more peculiar."

"I thought you would say so, Mr. Holmes," said White Mason in great delight. "We're well up with the times in Sussex. I've told you now how matters were, up to the time when I took over from Sergeant Wilson between three and four this morning. My word! I made the old mare go! But I need not have been in such a hurry, as it turned out; for there was nothing immediate that I could do. Sergeant Wilson had all the facts. I checked them and considered them and maybe added a few of my own."

"What were they?" asked Holmes eagerly.

"Well, I first had the hammer examined. There was Dr. Wood there to help me. We found no signs of violence upon it. I was hoping that if Mr. Douglas defended himself with the hammer, he might have left his mark upon the murderer before he dropped it on the mat. But there was no stain."

"That, of course, proves nothing at all," remarked Inspector MacDonald. "There has been many a hammer murder and no trace on the hammer."

"Quite so. It doesn't prove it wasn't used. But there might have been stains, and that would have helped us. As a matter of fact there were none. Then I examined the gun. They were buckshot cartridges, and, as Sergeant Wilson pointed out, the triggers were wired together so that if you pulled on the hinder one, both barrels were discharged. Whoever fixed that up had made up his mind that he was going to take no chances of missing his man. The sawed gun was not more than two foot long—one could carry it easily under one's coat. There was no complete maker's name; but the printed letters P-E-N were on the fluting between the barrels, and the rest of the name had been cut off by the saw."

"A big P with a flourish above it, E and N smaller?" asked Holmes.

"Exactly."

"Pennsylvania Small Arms Company—well known American firm," said Holmes.

White Mason gazed at my friend as the little village practitioner looks at the Harley Street specialist who by a word can solve the difficulties that perplex him.

"That is very helpful, Mr. Holmes. No doubt you are right. Wonderful! Wonderful! Do you carry the names of all the gun makers in the world in your memory?"

Holmes dismissed the subject with a wave.

"No doubt it is an American shotgun," White Mason continued. "I seem to have read that a sawed-off shotgun is a weapon used in some parts of America. Apart from the name upon the barrel, the idea had occurred to me. There is some evidence, then, that this man who entered the house and killed its master was an American."

MacDonald shook his head. "Man, you are surely travelling overfast," said he. "I have heard no evidence yet that any stranger was ever in the house at all."

"The open window, the blood on the sill, the queer card, the marks of boots in the corner, the gun!"

"Nothing there that could not have been arranged. Mr. Douglas was an American, or had lived long in America. So had Mr. Barker. You don't need to import an American from outside in order to account for American doings."

"Ames, the butler—"

"What about him? Is he reliable?"

"Ten years with Sir Charles Chandos—as solid as a rock. He has been with Douglas ever since he took the Manor House five years ago. He has never seen a gun of this sort in the house."

"The gun was made to conceal. That's why the barrels were sawed. It would fit into any box. How could he swear there was no such gun in the house?"

"Well, anyhow, he had never seen one."

MacDonald shook his obstinate Scotch head. "I'm not convinced yet that there was ever anyone in the house," said he. "I'm asking you to conseedar" (his accent became more Aberdonian as he lost himself in his argument) "I'm asking you to conseedar what it involves if you suppose that this gun was ever brought into the house, and that all these strange things were done by a person from outside. Oh, man, it's just inconceivable! It's clean against common sense! I put it to you, Mr. Holmes, judging it by what we have heard."

"Well, state your case, Mr. Mac," said Holmes in his most judicial style.

"The man is not a burglar, supposing that he ever existed. The ring business and the card point to premeditated murder for some private reason. Very good. Here is a man who slips into a house with the deliberate intention of committing murder. He knows, if he knows anything, that he will have a deeficulty in making his escape, as the house is surrounded with water. What weapon would he choose? You would say the most silent in the world. Then he could hope when the deed was done to slip quickly from the window, to wade the moat, and to get away at his leisure. That's understandable. But is it understandable that he should go out of his way to bring with him the most noisy weapon he could select, knowing well that it will fetch every human being in the house to the spot as quick as they can run, and that it is all odds that he will be seen before he can get across the moat? Is that credible, Mr. Holmes?'

"Well, you put the case strongly," my friend replied thoughtfully. "It certainly needs a good deal of justification. May I ask, Mr. White Mason, whether you examined the farther side of the moat at once to see if there were any signs of the man having climbed out from the water?"

"There were no signs, Mr. Holmes. But it is a stone ledge, and one could hardly expect them."

"No tracks or marks?"

"None."

"Ha! Would there be any objection, Mr. White Mason, to

our going down to the house at once? There may possibly be some small point which might be suggestive."

"I was going to propose it, Mr. Holmes; but I thought it well to put you in touch with all the facts before we go. I suppose if anything should strike you—" White Mason looked doubtfully at the amateur.

"I have worked with Mr. Holmes before," said Inspector MacDonald. "He plays the game."

"My own idea of the game, at any rate," said Holmes, with a smile. "I go into a case to help the ends of justice and the work of the police. If I have ever separated myself from the official force, it is because they have first separated themselves from me. I have no wish ever to score at their expense. At the same time, Mr. White Mason, I claim the right to work in my own way and give my results at my own time—complete rather than in stages."

"I am sure we are honoured by your presence and to show you all we know," said White Mason cordially. "Come along, Dr. Watson, and when the time comes we'll all hope for a place in your book."

We walked down the quaint village street with a row of pollarded elms on each side of it. Just beyond were two ancient stone pillars, weather-stained and lichen-blotched, bearing upon their summits a shapeless something which had once been the rampant lion of Capus of Birlstone. A short walk along the winding drive with such sward and oaks around it as one only sees in rural England, then a sudden turn, and the long, low Jacobean house of dingy, liver-coloured brick lay before us, with an old-fashioned garden of cut yews on each side of it. As we approached it, there was the wooden drawbridge and the beautiful broad moat as still and luminous as quicksilver in the cold, winter sunshine.

Three centuries had flowed past the old Manor House, centuries of births and of homecomings, of country dances and of the meetings of fox hunters. Strange that now in its old age this dark business should have cast its shadow upon the venerable walls! And yet those strange, peaked roofs and

quaint, overhung gables were a fitting covering to grim and terrible intrigue. As I looked at the deep-set windows and the long sweep of the dull-coloured, water-lapped front, I felt that no more fitting scene could be set for such a tragedy.

"That's the window," said White Mason, "that one on the immediate right of the drawbridge. It's open just as it was found last night."

"It looks rather narrow for a man to pass."

"Well, it wasn't a fat man, anyhow. We don't need your deductions, Mr. Holmes, to tell us that. But you or I could squeeze through all right."

Holmes walked to the edge of the moat and looked across. Then he examined the stone ledge and the grass border beyond it.

"I've had a good look, Mr. Holmes," said White Mason. "There is nothing there, no sign that anyone has landed—but why should he leave any sign?"

"Exactly. Why should he? Is the water always turbid?"

"Generally about this colour. The stream brings down the clay."

"How deep is it?"

"About two feet at each side and three in the middle."

"So we can put aside all idea of the man having been drowned in crossing."

"No, a child could not be drowned in it."

We walked across the drawbridge, and were admitted by a quaint, gnarled, dried-up person, who was the butler, Ames. The poor old fellow was white and quivering from the shock. The village sergeant, a tall, formal, melancholy man, still held his vigil in the room of Fate. The doctor had departed.

"Anything fresh, Sergeant Wilson?" asked White Mason.

"No, sir."

"Then you can go home. You've had enough. We can send

for you if we want you. The butler had better wait outside. Tell him to warn Mr. Cecil Barker, Mrs. Douglas, and the housekeeper that we may want a word with them presently. Now, gentlemen, perhaps you will allow me to give you the views I have formed first, and then you will be able to arrive at your own."

He impressed me, this country specialist. He had a solid grip of fact and a cool, clear, common-sense brain, which should take him some way in his profession. Holmes listened to him intently, with no sign of that impatience which the official exponent too often produced.

"Is it suicide, or is it murder—that's our first question, gentlemen, is it not? If it were suicide, then we have to believe that this man began by taking off his wedding ring and concealing it; that he then came down here in his dressing gown, trampled mud into a corner behind the curtain in order to give the idea someone had waited for him, opened the window, put blood on the—"

"We can surely dismiss that," said MacDonald.

"So I think. Suicide is out of the question. Then a murder has been done. What we have to determine is, whether it was done by someone outside or inside the house."

"Well, let's hear the argument."

"There are considerable difficulties both ways, and yet one or the other it must be. We will suppose first that some person or persons inside the house did the crime. They got this man down here at a time when everything was still and yet no one was asleep. They then did the deed with the queerest and noisiest weapon in the world so as to tell everyone what had happened—a weapon that was never seen in the house before. That does not seem a very likely start, does it?"

"No, it does not."

"Well, then, everyone is agreed that after the alarm was given only a minute at the most had passed before the whole household—not Mr. Cecil Barker alone, though he claims to have been the first, but Ames and all of them were on the spot.

Do you tell me that in that time the guilty person managed to make footmarks in the corner, open the window, mark the sill with blood, take the wedding ring off the dead man's finger, and all the rest of it? It's impossible!"

"You put it very clearly," said Holmes. "I am inclined to agree with you."

"Well, then, we are driven back to the theory that it was done by someone from outside. We are still faced with some big difficulties; but anyhow they have ceased to be impossibilities. The man got into the house between four-thirty and six; that is to say, between dusk and the time when the bridge was raised. There had been some visitors, and the door was open; so there was nothing to prevent him. He may have been a common burglar, or he may have had some private grudge against Mr. Douglas. Since Mr. Douglas has spent most of his life in America, and this shotgun seems to be an American weapon, it would seem that the private grudge is the more likely theory. He slipped into this room because it was the first he came to, and he hid behind the curtain. There he remained until past eleven at night. At that time Mr. Douglas entered the room. It was a short interview, if there were any interview at all; for Mrs. Douglas declares that her husband had not left her more than a few minutes when she heard the shot."

"The candle shows that," said Holmes.

"Exactly. The candle, which was a new one, is not burned more than half an inch. He must have placed it on the table before he was attacked; otherwise, of course, it would have fallen when he fell. This shows that he was not attacked the instant that he entered the room. When Mr. Barker arrived the candle was lit and the lamp was out."

"That's all clear enough."

"Well, now, we can reconstruct things on those lines. Mr. Douglas enters the room. He puts down the candle. A man appears from behind the curtain. He is armed with this gun. He demands the wedding ring—Heaven only knows why, but so it must have been. Mr. Douglas gave it up. Then either in cold blood or in the course of a struggle—Douglas may have gripped

the hammer that was found upon the mat—he shot Douglas in this horrible way. He dropped his gun and also it would seem this queer card—V. V. 341, whatever that may mean—and he made his escape through the window and across the moat at the very moment when Cecil Barker was discovering the crime. How's that, Mr. Holmes?"

"Very interesting, but just a little unconvincing."

"Man, it would be absolute nonsense if it wasn't that anything else is even worse!" cried MacDonald. "Somebody killed the man, and whoever it was I could clearly prove to you that he should have done it some other way. What does he mean by allowing his retreat to be cut off like that? What does he mean by using a shotgun when silence was his one chance of escape? Come, Mr. Holmes, it's up to you to give us a lead, since you say Mr. White Mason's theory is unconvincing."

Holmes had sat intently observant during this long discussion, missing no word that was said, with his keen eyes darting to right and to left, and his forehead wrinkled with speculation.

"I should like a few more facts before I get so far as a theory, Mr. Mac," said he, kneeling down beside the body. "Dear me! these injuries are really appalling. Can we have the butler in for a moment?... Ames, I understand that you have often seen this very unusual mark—a branded triangle inside a circle—upon Mr. Douglas's forearm?"

"Frequently, sir."

"You never heard any speculation as to what it meant?"

"No, sir."

"It must have caused great pain when it was inflicted. It is undoubtedly a burn. Now, I observe, Ames, that there is a small piece of plaster at the angle of Mr. Douglas's jaw. Did you observe that in life?"

"Yes, sir, he cut himself in shaving yesterday morning."

"Did you ever know him to cut himself in shaving before?"

"Not for a very long time, sir."

"Suggestive!" said Holmes. "It may, of course, be a mere coincidence, or it may point to some nervousness which would indicate that he had reason to apprehend danger. Had you noticed anything unusual in his conduct, yesterday, Ames?"

"It struck me that he was a little restless and excited, sir."

"Ha! The attack may not have been entirely unexpected. We do seem to make a little progress, do we not? Perhaps you would rather do the questioning, Mr. Mac?"

"No, Mr. Holmes, it's in better hands than mine."

"Well, then, we will pass to this card—V. V. 341. It is rough cardboard. Have you any of the sort in the house?"

"I don't think so."

Holmes walked across to the desk and dabbed a little ink from each bottle on to the blotting paper. "It was not printed in this room," he said; "this is black ink and the other purplish. It was done by a thick pen, and these are fine. No, it was done elsewhere, I should say. Can you make anything of the inscription, Ames?"

"No, sir, nothing."

"What do you think, Mr. Mac?"

"It gives me the impression of a secret society of some sort; the same with his badge upon the forearm."

"That's my idea, too," said White Mason.

"Well, we can adopt it as a working hypothesis and then see how far our difficulties disappear. An agent from such a society makes his way into the house, waits for Mr. Douglas, blows his head nearly off with this weapon, and escapes by wading the moat, after leaving a card beside the dead man, which will, when mentioned in the papers, tell other members of the society that vengeance has been done. That all hangs together. But why this gun, of all weapons?"

"Exactly."

"And why the missing ring?"

"Quite so."

"And why no arrest? It's past two now. I take it for granted that since dawn every constable within forty miles has been looking out for a wet stranger?"

"That is so, Mr. Holmes."

"Well, unless he has a burrow close by or a change of clothes ready, they can hardly miss him. And yet they *have* missed him up to now!" Holmes had gone to the window and was examining with his lens the blood mark on the sill. "It is clearly the tread of a shoe. It is remarkably broad; a splay-foot, one would say. Curious, because, so far as one can trace any footmark in this mud-stained corner, one would say it was a more shapely sole. However, they are certainly very indistinct. What's this under the side table?"

"Mr. Douglas's dumb-bells," said Ames.

"Dumb-bell—there's only one. Where's the other?"

"I don't know, Mr. Holmes. There may have been only one. I have not noticed them for months."

"One dumb-bell—" Holmes said seriously; but his remarks were interrupted by a sharp knock at the door.

A tall, sunburned, capable-looking, clean-shaved man looked in at us. I had no difficulty in guessing that it was the Cecil Barker of whom I had heard. His masterful eyes travelled quickly with a questioning glance from face to face.

"Sorry to interrupt your consultation," said he, "but you should hear the latest news."

"An arrest?"

"No such luck. But they've found his bicycle. The fellow left his bicycle behind him. Come and have a look. It is within a hundred yards of the hall door."

We found three or four grooms and idlers standing in the drive inspecting a bicycle which had been drawn out from a clump of evergreens in which it had been concealed. It was a well used Rudge-Whitworth, splashed as from a considerable

journey. There was a saddlebag with spanner and oilcan, but no clue as to the owner.

"It would be a grand help to the police," said the inspector, "if these things were numbered and registered. But we must be thankful for what we've got. If we can't find where he went to, at least we are likely to get where he came from. But what in the name of all that is wonderful made the fellow leave it behind? And how in the world has he got away without it? We don't seem to get a gleam of light in the case, Mr. Holmes."

"Don't we?" my friend answered thoughtfully. "I wonder!"

CHAPTER 5 THE PEOPLE OF THE DRAMA

"Have you seen all you want of the study?" asked White Mason as we reëntered the house.

"For the time," said the inspector, and Holmes nodded.

"Then perhaps you would now like to hear the evidence of some of the people in the house. We could use the dining room, Ames. Please come yourself first and tell us what you know."

The butler's account was a simple and a clear one, and he gave a convincing impression of sincerity. He had been engaged five years before, when Douglas first came to Birlstone. He understood that Mr. Douglas was a rich gentleman who had made his money in America. He had been a kind and considerate employer—not quite what Ames was used to, perhaps; but one can't have everything. He never saw any signs of apprehension in Mr. Douglas: on the contrary, he was the most fearless man he had ever known. He ordered the drawbridge to be pulled up every night because it was the ancient custom of the old house, and he liked to keep the old ways up.

Mr. Douglas seldom went to London or left the village; but on the day before the crime he had been shopping at Tunbridge Wells. He (Ames) had observed some restlessness and excitement on the part of Mr. Douglas that day, for he had seemed impatient and irritable, which was unusual with him. He had not gone to bed that night; but was in the pantry at the back of the house, putting away the silver, when he heard the bell ring violently. He heard no shot; but it was hardly possible he

would, as the pantry and kitchens were at the very back of the house and there were several closed doors and a long passage between. The housekeeper had come out of her room, attracted by the violent ringing of the bell. They had gone to the front of the house together.

As they reached the bottom of the stair he had seen Mrs. Douglas coming down it. No, she was not hurrying; it did not seem to him that she was particularly agitated. Just as she reached the bottom of the stair Mr. Barker had rushed out of the study. He had stopped Mrs. Douglas and begged her to go back.

"For God's sake, go back to your room!" he cried. "Poor Jack is dead! You can do nothing. For God's sake, go back!"

After some persuasion upon the stairs Mrs. Douglas had gone back. She did not scream. She made no outcry whatever. Mrs. Allen, the housekeeper, had taken her upstairs and stayed with her in the bedroom. Ames and Mr. Barker had then returned to the study, where they had found everything exactly as the police had seen it. The candle was not lit at that time; but the lamp was burning. They had looked out of the window; but the night was very dark and nothing could be seen or heard. They had then rushed out into the hall, where Ames had turned the windlass which lowered the drawbridge. Mr. Barker had then hurried off to get the police.

Such, in its essentials, was the evidence of the butler.

The account of Mrs. Allen, the housekeeper, was, so far as it went, a corroboration of that of her fellow servant. The housekeeper's room was rather nearer to the front of the house than the pantry in which Ames had been working. She was preparing to go to bed when the loud ringing of the bell had attracted her attention. She was a little hard of hearing. Perhaps that was why she had not heard the shot; but in any case the study was a long way off. She remembered hearing some sound which she imagined to be the slamming of a door. That was a good deal earlier—half an hour at least before the ringing of the bell. When Mr. Ames ran to the front she went with him. She saw Mr. Barker, very pale and excited, come out

of the study. He intercepted Mrs. Douglas, who was coming down the stairs. He entreated her to go back, and she answered him, but what she said could not be heard.

"Take her up! Stay with her!" he had said to Mrs. Allen.

She had therefore taken her to the bedroom, and endeavoured to soothe her. She was greatly excited, trembling all over, but made no other attempt to go downstairs. She just sat in her dressing gown by her bedroom fire, with her head sunk in her hands. Mrs. Allen stayed with her most of the night. As to the other servants, they had all gone to bed, and the alarm did not reach them until just before the police arrived. They slept at the extreme back of the house, and could not possibly have heard anything.

So far the housekeeper could add nothing on cross-examination save lamentations and expressions of amazement.

Cecil Barker succeeded Mrs. Allen as a witness. As to the occurrences of the night before, he had very little to add to what he had already told the police. Personally, he was convinced that the murderer had escaped by the window. The bloodstain was conclusive, in his opinion, on that point. Besides, as the bridge was up, there was no other possible way of escaping. He could not explain what had become of the assassin or why he had not taken his bicycle, if it were indeed his. He could not possibly have been drowned in the moat, which was at no place more than three feet deep.

In his own mind he had a very definite theory about the murder. Douglas was a reticent man, and there were some chapters in his life of which he never spoke. He had emigrated to America when he was a very young man. He had prospered well, and Barker had first met him in California, where they had become partners in a successful mining claim at a place called Benito Cañon. They had done very well; but Douglas had suddenly sold out and started for England. He was a widower at that time. Barker had afterwards realized his money and come to live in London. Thus they had renewed their friendship.

Douglas had given him the impression that some danger

was hanging over his head, and he had always looked upon his sudden departure from California, and also his renting a house in so quiet a place in England, as being connected with this peril. He imagined that some secret society, some implacable organization, was on Douglas's track, which would never rest until it killed him. Some remarks of his had given him this idea; though he had never told him what the society was, nor how he had come to offend it. He could only suppose that the legend upon the placard had some reference to this secret society.

"How long were you with Douglas in California?" asked Inspector MacDonald.

"Five years altogether."

"He was a bachelor, you say?"

"A widower."

"Have you ever heard where his first wife came from?"

"No, I remember his saying that she was of German extraction, and I have seen her portrait. She was a very beautiful woman. She died of typhoid the year before I met him."

"You don't associate his past with any particular part of America?"

"I have heard him talk of Chicago. He knew that city well and had worked there. I have heard him talk of the coal and iron districts. He had travelled a good deal in his time."

"Was he a politician? Had this secret society to do with politics?"

"No, he cared nothing about politics."

"You have no reason to think it was criminal?"

"On the contrary, I never met a straighter man in my life."

"Was there anything curious about his life in California?"

"He liked best to stay and to work at our claim in the mountains. He would never go where other men were if he could help it. That's why I first thought that someone was after

him. Then when he left so suddenly for Europe I made sure that it was so. I believe that he had a warning of some sort. Within a week of his leaving half a dozen men were inquiring for him."

"What sort of men?"

"Well, they were a mighty hard-looking crowd. They came up to the claim and wanted to know where he was. I told them that he was gone to Europe and that I did not know where to find him. They meant him no good—it was easy to see that."

"Were these men Americans—Californians?"

"Well, I don't know about Californians. They were Americans, all right. But they were not miners. I don't know what they were, and was very glad to see their backs."

"That was six years ago?"

"Nearer seven."

"And then you were together five years in California, so that this business dates back not less than eleven years at the least?"

"That is so."

"It must be a very serious feud that would be kept up with such earnestness for as long as that. It would be no light thing that would give rise to it."

"I think it shadowed his whole life. It was never quite out of his mind."

"But if a man had a danger hanging over him, and knew what it was, don't you think he would turn to the police for protection?"

"Maybe it was some danger that he could not be protected against. There's one thing you should know. He always went about armed. His revolver was never out of his pocket. But, by bad luck, he was in his dressing gown and had left it in the bedroom last night. Once the bridge was up, I guess he thought he was safe."

"I should like these dates a little clearer," said MacDonald. "It is quite six years since Douglas left California. You followed

him next year, did you not?"

"That is so."

"And he had been married five years. You must have returned about the time of his marriage."

"About a month before. I was his best man."

"Did you know Mrs. Douglas before her marriage?"

"No, I did not. I had been away from England for ten years."

"But you have seen a good deal of her since."

Barker looked sternly at the detective. "I have seen a good deal of *him* since," he answered. "If I have seen her, it is because you cannot visit a man without knowing his wife. If you imagine there is any connection—"

"I imagine nothing, Mr. Barker. I am bound to make every inquiry which can bear upon the case. But I mean no offense."

"Some inquiries are offensive," Barker answered angrily.

"It's only the facts that we want. It is in your interest and everyone's interest that they should be cleared up. Did Mr. Douglas entirely approve your friendship with his wife?"

Barker grew paler, and his great, strong hands were clasped convulsively together. "You have no right to ask such questions!" he cried. "What has this to do with the matter you are investigating?"

"I must repeat the question."

"Well, I refuse to answer."

"You can refuse to answer; but you must be aware that your refusal is in itself an answer, for you would not refuse if you had not something to conceal."

Barker stood for a moment with his face set grimly and his strong black eyebrows drawn low in intense thought. Then he looked up with a smile. "Well, I guess you gentlemen are only doing your clear duty after all, and I have no right to stand in the way of it. I'd only ask you not to worry Mrs. Douglas over this matter, for she has enough upon her just now. I may tell

you that poor Douglas had just one fault in the world, and that was his jealousy. He was fond of me—no man could be fonder of a friend. And he was devoted to his wife. He loved me to come here, and was forever sending for me. And yet if his wife and I talked together or there seemed any sympathy between us, a kind of wave of jealousy would pass over him, and he would be off the handle and saying the wildest things in a moment. More than once I've sworn off coming for that reason, and then he would write me such penitent, imploring letters that I just had to. But you can take it from me, gentlemen, if it was my last word, that no man ever had a more loving, faithful wife—and I can say also no friend could be more loyal than I!"

It was spoken with fervour and feeling, and yet Inspector MacDonald could not dismiss the subject.

"You are aware," said he, "that the dead man's wedding ring has been taken from his finger?"

"So it appears," said Barker.

"What do you mean by 'appears'? You know it as a fact."

The man seemed confused and undecided. "When I said 'appears' I meant that it was conceivable that he had himself taken off the ring."

"The mere fact that the ring should be absent, whoever may have removed it, would suggest to anyone's mind, would it not, that the marriage and the tragedy were connected?"

Barker shrugged his broad shoulders. "I can't profess to say what it means," he answered. "But if you mean to hint that it could reflect in any way upon this lady's honour"—his eyes blazed for an instant, and then with an evident effort he got a grip upon his own emotions—"well, you are on the wrong track, that's all."

"I don't know that I've anything else to ask you at present," said MacDonald, coldly.

"There was one small point," remarked Sherlock Holmes. "When you entered the room there was only a candle lighted on the table, was there not?"

"Yes, that was so."

"By its light you saw that some terrible incident had occurred?"

"Exactly."

"You at once rang for help?"

"Yes."

"And it arrived very speedily?"

"Within a minute or so."

"And yet when they arrived they found that the candle was out and that the lamp had been lighted. That seems very remarkable."

Again Barker showed some signs of indecision. "I don't see that it was remarkable, Mr. Holmes," he answered after a pause. "The candle threw a very bad light. My first thought was to get a better one. The lamp was on the table; so I lit it."

"And blew out the candle?"

"Exactly."

Holmes asked no further question, and Barker, with a deliberate look from one to the other of us, which had, as it seemed to me, something of defiance in it, turned and left the room.

Inspector MacDonald had sent up a note to the effect that he would wait upon Mrs. Douglas in her room; but she had replied that she would meet us in the dining room. She entered now, a tall and beautiful woman of thirty, reserved and self-possessed to a remarkable degree, very different from the tragic and distracted figure I had pictured. It is true that her face was pale and drawn, like that of one who has endured a great shock; but her manner was composed, and the finely moulded hand which she rested upon the edge of the table was as steady as my own. Her sad, appealing eyes travelled from one to the other of us with a curiously inquisitive expression. That questioning gaze transformed itself suddenly into abrupt speech.

"Have you found anything out yet?" she asked.

Was it my imagination that there was an undertone of fear rather than of hope in the question?

"We have taken every possible step, Mrs. Douglas," said the inspector. "You may rest assured that nothing will be neglected."

"Spare no money," she said in a dead, even tone. "It is my desire that every possible effort should be made."

"Perhaps you can tell us something which may throw some light upon the matter."

"I fear not; but all I know is at your service."

"We have heard from Mr. Cecil Barker that you did not actually see—that you were never in the room where the tragedy occurred?"

"No, he turned me back upon the stairs. He begged me to return to my room."

"Quite so. You had heard the shot, and you had at once come down."

"I put on my dressing gown and then came down."

"How long was it after hearing the shot that you were stopped on the stair by Mr. Barker?"

"It may have been a couple of minutes. It is so hard to reckon time at such a moment. He implored me not to go on. He assured me that I could do nothing. Then Mrs. Allen, the housekeeper, led me upstairs again. It was all like some dreadful dream."

"Can you give us any idea how long your husband had been downstairs before you heard the shot?"

"No, I cannot say. He went from his dressing room, and I did not hear him go. He did the round of the house every night, for he was nervous of fire. It is the only thing that I have ever known him nervous of."

"That is just the point which I want to come to, Mrs. Douglas. You have known your husband only in England, have

you not?"

"Yes, we have been married five years."

"Have you heard him speak of anything which occurred in America and might bring some danger upon him?"

Mrs. Douglas thought earnestly before she answered. "Yes," she said at last, "I have always felt that there was a danger hanging over him. He refused to discuss it with me. It was not from want of confidence in me—there was the most complete love and confidence between us—but it was out of his desire to keep all alarm away from me. He thought I should brood over it if I knew all, and so he was silent."

"How did you know it, then?"

Mrs. Douglas's face lit with a quick smile. "Can a husband ever carry about a secret all his life and a woman who loves him have no suspicion of it? I knew it by his refusal to talk about some episodes in his American life. I knew it by certain precautions he took. I knew it by certain words he let fall. I knew it by the way he looked at unexpected strangers. I was perfectly certain that he had some powerful enemies, that he believed they were on his track, and that he was always on his guard against them. I was so sure of it that for years I have been terrified if ever he came home later than was expected."

"Might I ask," asked Holmes, "what the words were which attracted your attention?"

"The Valley of Fear," the lady answered. "That was an expression he has used when I questioned him. 'I have been in the Valley of Fear. I am not out of it yet.'—'Are we never to get out of the Valley of Fear?' I have asked him when I have seen him more serious than usual. 'Sometimes I think that we never shall,' he has answered."

"Surely you asked him what he meant by the Valley of Fear?"

"I did; but his face would become very grave and he would shake his head. 'It is bad enough that one of us should have been in its shadow,' he said. 'Please God it shall never fall upon you!' It was some real valley in which he had lived and in which

something terrible had occurred to him, of that I am certain; but I can tell you no more."

"And he never mentioned any names?"

"Yes, he was delirious with fever once when he had his hunting accident three years ago. Then I remember that there was a name that came continually to his lips. He spoke it with anger and a sort of horror. McGinty was the name—Bodymaster McGinty. I asked him when he recovered who Bodymaster McGinty was, and whose body he was master of. 'Never of mine, thank God!' he answered with a laugh, and that was all I could get from him. But there is a connection between Bodymaster McGinty and the Valley of Fear."

"There is one other point," said Inspector MacDonald. "You met Mr. Douglas in a boarding house in London, did you not, and became engaged to him there? Was there any romance, anything secret or mysterious, about the wedding?"

"There was romance. There is always romance. There was nothing mysterious."

"He had no rival?"

"No, I was quite free."

"You have heard, no doubt, that his wedding ring has been taken. Does that suggest anything to you? Suppose that some enemy of his old life had tracked him down and committed this crime, what possible reason could he have for taking his wedding ring?"

For an instant I could have sworn that the faintest shadow of a smile flickered over the woman's lips.

"I really cannot tell," she answered. "It is certainly a most extraordinary thing."

"Well, we will not detain you any longer, and we are sorry to have put you to this trouble at such a time," said the inspector. "There are some other points, no doubt; but we can refer to you as they arise."

She rose, and I was again conscious of that quick, questioning glance with which she had just surveyed us. "What

impression has my evidence made upon you?" The question might as well have been spoken. Then, with a bow, she swept from the room.

"She's a beautiful woman—a very beautiful woman," said MacDonald thoughtfully, after the door had closed behind her. "This man Barker has certainly been down here a good deal. He is a man who might be attractive to a woman. He admits that the dead man was jealous, and maybe he knew best himself what cause he had for jealousy. Then there's that wedding ring. You can't get past that. The man who tears a wedding ring off a dead man's—What do you say to it, Mr. Holmes?"

My friend had sat with his head upon his hands, sunk in the deepest thought. Now he rose and rang the bell. "Ames," he said, when the butler entered, "where is Mr. Cecil Barker now?"

"I'll see, sir."

He came back in a moment to say that Barker was in the garden.

"Can you remember, Ames, what Mr. Barker had on his feet last night when you joined him in the study?"

"Yes, Mr. Holmes. He had a pair of bedroom slippers. I brought him his boots when he went for the police."

"Where are the slippers now?"

"They are still under the chair in the hall."

"Very good, Ames. It is, of course, important for us to know which tracks may be Mr. Barker's and which from outside."

"Yes, sir. I may say that I noticed that the slippers were stained with blood—so indeed were my own."

"That is natural enough, considering the condition of the room. Very good, Ames. We will ring if we want you."

A few minutes later we were in the study. Holmes had brought with him the carpet slippers from the hall. As Ames had observed, the soles of both were dark with blood.

"Strange!' murmured Holmes, as he stood in the light of the window and examined them minutely. "Very strange indeed!"

Stooping with one of his quick feline pounces, he placed the slipper upon the blood mark on the sill. It exactly corresponded. He smiled in silence at his colleagues.

The inspector was transfigured with excitement. His native accent rattled like a stick upon railings.

"Man," he cried, "there's not a doubt of it! Barker has just marked the window himself. It's a good deal broader than any bootmark. I mind that you said it was a splay-foot, and here's the explanation. But what's the game, Mr. Holmes—what's the game?"

"Ay, what's the game?" my friend repeated thoughtfully.

White Mason chuckled and rubbed his fat hands together in his professional satisfaction. "I said it was a snorter!" he cried. "And a real snorter it is!"

CHAPTER 6 A DAWNING LIGHT

The three detectives had many matters of detail into which to inquire; so I returned alone to our modest quarters at the village inn. But before doing so I took a stroll in the curious old-world garden which flanked the house. Rows of very ancient yew trees cut into strange designs girded it round. Inside was a beautiful stretch of lawn with an old sundial in the middle, the whole effect so soothing and restful that it was welcome to my somewhat jangled nerves.

In that deeply peaceful atmosphere one could forget, or remember only as some fantastic nightmare, that darkened study with the sprawling, bloodstained figure on the floor. And yet, as I strolled round it and tried to steep my soul in its gentle balm, a strange incident occurred, which brought me back to the tragedy and left a sinister impression in my mind.

I have said that a decoration of yew trees circled the garden. At the end farthest from the house they thickened into a continuous hedge. On the other side of this hedge, concealed from the eyes of anyone approaching from the direction of the house, there was a stone seat. As I approached the spot I was aware of voices, some remark in the deep tones of a man, answered by a little ripple of feminine laughter.

An instant later I had come round the end of the hedge and my eyes lit upon Mrs. Douglas and the man Barker before they were aware of my presence. Her appearance gave me a shock. In the dining room she had been demure and discreet. Now all pretense of grief had passed away from her. Her eyes shone with the joy of living,

and her face still quivered with amusement at some remark of her companion. He sat forward, his hands clasped and his forearms on his knees, with an answering smile upon his bold, handsome face. In an instant—but it was just one instant too late—they resumed their solemn masks as my figure came into view. A hurried word or two passed between them, and then Barker rose and came towards me.

"Excuse me, sir," said he, "but am I addressing Dr. Watson?"

I bowed with a coldness which showed, I dare say, very plainly the impression which had been produced upon my mind.

"We thought that it was probably you, as your friendship with Mr. Sherlock Holmes is so well known. Would you mind coming over and speaking to Mrs. Douglas for one instant?"

I followed him with a dour face. Very clearly I could see in my mind's eye that shattered figure on the floor. Here within a few hours of the tragedy were his wife and his nearest friend laughing together behind a bush in the garden which had been his. I greeted the lady with reserve. I had grieved with her grief in the dining room. Now I met her appealing gaze with an unresponsive eye.

"I fear that you think me callous and hard-hearted," said she.

I shrugged my shoulders. "It is no business of mine," said I.

"Perhaps some day you will do me justice. If you only realized—"

"There is no need why Dr. Watson should realize," said Barker quickly. "As he has himself said, it is no possible business of his."

"Exactly," said I, "and so I will beg leave to resume my walk."

"One moment, Dr. Watson," cried the woman in a pleading voice. "There is one question which you can answer with more authority than anyone else in the world, and it may make a very great difference to me. You know Mr. Holmes and his relations with the police better than anyone else can.

Supposing that a matter were brought confidentially to his knowledge, is it absolutely necessary that he should pass it on to the detectives?"

"Yes, that's it," said Barker eagerly. "Is he on his own or is he entirely in with them?"

"I really don't know that I should be justified in discussing such a point."

"I beg—I implore that you will, Dr. Watson! I assure you that you will be helping us—helping me greatly if you will guide us on that point."

There was such a ring of sincerity in the woman's voice that for the instant I forgot all about her levity and was moved only to do her will.

"Mr. Holmes is an independent investigator," I said. "He is his own master, and would act as his own judgment directed. At the same time, he would naturally feel loyalty towards the officials who were working on the same case, and he would not conceal from them anything which would help them in bringing a criminal to justice. Beyond this I can say nothing, and I would refer you to Mr. Holmes himself if you wanted fuller information."

So saying I raised my hat and went upon my way, leaving them still seated behind that concealing hedge. I looked back as I rounded the far end of it, and saw that they were still talking very earnestly together, and, as they were gazing after me, it was clear that it was our interview that was the subject of their debate.

"I wish none of their confidences," said Holmes, when I reported to him what had occurred. He had spent the whole afternoon at the Manor House in consultation with his two colleagues, and returned about five with a ravenous appetite for a high tea which I had ordered for him. "No confidences, Watson; for they are mighty awkward if it comes to an arrest for conspiracy and murder."

"You think it will come to that?"

He was in his most cheerful and debonair humour. "My

dear Watson, when I have exterminated that fourth egg I shall be ready to put you in touch with the whole situation. I don't say that we have fathomed it—far from it—but when we have traced the missing dumb-bell—"

"The dumb-bell!"

"Dear me, Watson, is it possible that you have not penetrated the fact that the case hangs upon the missing dumb-bell? Well, well, you need not be downcast, for between ourselves I don't think that either Inspector Mac or the excellent local practitioner has grasped the overwhelming importance of this incident. One dumb-bell, Watson! Consider an athlete with one dumb-bell! Picture to yourself the unilateral development, the imminent danger of a spinal curvature. Shocking, Watson, shocking!"

He sat with his mouth full of toast and his eyes sparkling with mischief, watching my intellectual entanglement. The mere sight of his excellent appetite was an assurance of success; for I had very clear recollections of days and nights without a thought of food, when his baffled mind had chafed before some problem while his thin, eager features became more attenuated with the asceticism of complete mental concentration. Finally he lit his pipe, and sitting in the inglenook of the old village inn he talked slowly and at random about his case, rather as one who thinks aloud than as one who makes a considered statement.

"A lie, Watson—a great, big, thumping, obtrusive, uncompromising lie—that's what meets us on the threshold! There is our starting point. The whole story told by Barker is a lie. But Barker's story is corroborated by Mrs. Douglas. Therefore she is lying also. They are both lying, and in a conspiracy. So now we have the clear problem. Why are they lying, and what is the truth which they are trying so hard to conceal? Let us try, Watson, you and I, if we can get behind the lie and reconstruct the truth.

"How do I know that they are lying? Because it is a clumsy fabrication which simply could not be true. Consider! According to the story given to us, the assassin had less than a

minute after the murder had been committed to take that ring, which was under another ring, from the dead man's finger, to replace the other ring—a thing which he would surely never have done—and to put that singular card beside his victim. I say that this was obviously impossible.

"You may argue—but I have too much respect for your judgment, Watson, to think that you will do so—that the ring may have been taken before the man was killed. The fact that the candle had been lit only a short time shows that there had been no lengthy interview. Was Douglas, from what we hear of his fearless character, a man who would be likely to give up his wedding ring at such short notice, or could we conceive of his giving it up at all? No, no, Watson, the assassin was alone with the dead man for some time with the lamp lit. Of that I have no doubt at all.

"But the gunshot was apparently the cause of death. Therefore the shot must have been fired some time earlier than we are told. But there could be no mistake about such a matter as that. We are in the presence, therefore, of a deliberate conspiracy upon the part of the two people who heard the gunshot—of the man Barker and of the woman Douglas. When on the top of this I am able to show that the blood mark on the window sill was deliberately placed there by Barker, in order to give a false clue to the police, you will admit that the case grows dark against him.

"Now we have to ask ourselves at what hour the murder actually did occur. Up to half-past ten the servants were moving about the house; so it was certainly not before that time. At a quarter to eleven they had all gone to their rooms with the exception of Ames, who was in the pantry. I have been trying some experiments after you left us this afternoon, and I find that no noise which MacDonald can make in the study can penetrate to me in the pantry when the doors are all shut.

"It is otherwise, however, from the housekeeper's room. It is not so far down the corridor, and from it I could vaguely hear a voice when it was very loudly raised. The sound from a shotgun is to some extent muffled when the discharge is at very close range, as it undoubtedly was in this instance. It would

not be very loud, and yet in the silence of the night it should have easily penetrated to Mrs. Allen's room. She is, as she has told us, somewhat deaf; but none the less she mentioned in her evidence that she did hear something like a door slamming half an hour before the alarm was given. Half an hour before the alarm was given would be a quarter to eleven. I have no doubt that what she heard was the report of the gun, and that this was the real instant of the murder.

"If this is so, we have now to determine what Barker and Mrs. Douglas, presuming that they are not the actual murderers, could have been doing from quarter to eleven, when the sound of the shot brought them down, until quarter past eleven, when they rang the bell and summoned the servants. What were they doing, and why did they not instantly give the alarm? That is the question which faces us, and when it has been answered we shall surely have gone some way to solve our problem."

"I am convinced myself," said I, "that there is an understanding between those two people. She must be a heartless creature to sit laughing at some jest within a few hours of her husband's murder."

"Exactly. She does not shine as a wife even in her own account of what occurred. I am not a whole-souled admirer of womankind, as you are aware, Watson, but my experience of life has taught me that there are few wives, having any regard for their husbands, who would let any man's spoken word stand between them and that husband's dead body. Should I ever marry, Watson, I should hope to inspire my wife with some feeling which would prevent her from being walked off by a housekeeper when my corpse was lying within a few yards of her. It was badly stage-managed; for even the rawest investigators must be struck by the absence of the usual feminine ululation. If there had been nothing else, this incident alone would have suggested a prearranged conspiracy to my mind."

"You think then, definitely, that Barker and Mrs. Douglas are guilty of the murder?"

"There is an appalling directness about your questions, Watson," said Holmes, shaking his pipe at me. "They come at me like bullets. If you put it that Mrs. Douglas and Barker know the truth about the murder, and are conspiring to conceal it, then I can give you a whole-souled answer. I am sure they do. But your more deadly proposition is not so clear. Let us for a moment consider the difficulties which stand in the way.

"We will suppose that this couple are united by the bonds of a guilty love, and that they have determined to get rid of the man who stands between them. It is a large supposition; for discreet inquiry among servants and others has failed to corroborate it in any way. On the contrary, there is a good deal of evidence that the Douglases were very attached to each other."

"That, I am sure, cannot be true," said I, thinking of the beautiful smiling face in the garden.

"Well, at least they gave that impression. However, we will suppose that they are an extraordinarily astute couple, who deceive everyone upon this point, and conspire to murder the husband. He happens to be a man over whose head some danger hangs—"

"We have only their word for that."

Holmes looked thoughtful. "I see, Watson. You are sketching out a theory by which everything they say from the beginning is false. According to your idea, there was never any hidden menace, or secret society, or Valley of Fear, or Boss MacSomebody, or anything else. Well, that is a good sweeping generalization. Let us see what that brings us to. They invent this theory to account for the crime. They then play up to the idea by leaving this bicycle in the park as proof of the existence of some outsider. The stain on the window sill conveys the same idea. So does the card on the body, which might have been prepared in the house. That all fits into your hypothesis, Watson. But now we come on the nasty, angular, uncompromising bits which won't slip into their places. Why a cut-off shotgun of all weapons—and an American one at that? How could they be so sure that the sound of it would not bring

someone on to them? It's a mere chance as it is that Mrs. Allen did not start out to inquire for the slamming door. Why did your guilty couple do all this, Watson?"

"I confess that I can't explain it."

"Then again, if a woman and her lover conspire to murder a husband, are they going to advertise their guilt by ostentatiously removing his wedding ring after his death? Does that strike you as very probable, Watson?"

"No, it does not."

"And once again, if the thought of leaving a bicycle concealed outside had occurred to you, would it really have seemed worth doing when the dullest detective would naturally say this is an obvious blind, as the bicycle is the first thing which the fugitive needed in order to make his escape."

"I can conceive of no explanation."

"And yet there should be no combination of events for which the wit of man cannot conceive an explanation. Simply as a mental exercise, without any assertion that it is true, let me indicate a possible line of thought. It is, I admit, mere imagination; but how often is imagination the mother of truth?

"We will suppose that there was a guilty secret, a really shameful secret in the life of this man Douglas. This leads to his murder by someone who is, we will suppose, an avenger, someone from outside. This avenger, for some reason which I confess I am still at a loss to explain, took the dead man's wedding ring. The vendetta might conceivably date back to the man's first marriage, and the ring be taken for some such reason.

"Before this avenger got away, Barker and the wife had reached the room. The assassin convinced them that any attempt to arrest him would lead to the publication of some hideous scandal. They were converted to this idea, and preferred to let him go. For this purpose they probably lowered the bridge, which can be done quite noiselessly, and then raised it again. He made his escape, and for some reason thought that he could do so more safely on foot than on the bicycle. He

therefore left his machine where it would not be discovered until he had got safely away. So far we are within the bounds of possibility, are we not?"

"Well, it is possible, no doubt," said I, with some reserve.

"We have to remember, Watson, that whatever occurred is certainly something very extraordinary. Well, now, to continue our supposititious case, the couple—not necessarily a guilty couple—realize after the murderer is gone that they have placed themselves in a position in which it may be difficult for them to prove that they did not themselves either do the deed or connive at it. They rapidly and rather clumsily met the situation. The mark was put by Barker's bloodstained slipper upon the window sill to suggest how the fugitive got away. They obviously were the two who must have heard the sound of the gun; so they gave the alarm exactly as they would have done, but a good half hour after the event."

"And how do you propose to prove all this?"

"Well, if there were an outsider, he may be traced and taken. That would be the most effective of all proofs. But if not—well, the resources of science are far from being exhausted. I think that an evening alone in that study would help me much."

"An evening alone!"

"I propose to go up there presently. I have arranged it with the estimable Ames, who is by no means whole-hearted about Barker. I shall sit in that room and see if its atmosphere brings me inspiration. I'm a believer in the genius loci. You smile, Friend Watson. Well, we shall see. By the way, you have that big umbrella of yours, have you not?"

"It is here."

"Well, I'll borrow that if I may."

"Certainly—but what a wretched weapon! If there is danger—"

"Nothing serious, my dear Watson, or I should certainly ask for your assistance. But I'll take the umbrella. At present I am only awaiting the return of our colleagues from Tunbridge

Wells, where they are at present engaged in trying for a likely owner to the bicycle."

It was nightfall before Inspector MacDonald and White Mason came back from their expedition, and they arrived exultant, reporting a great advance in our investigation.

"Man, I'll admeet that I had my doubts if there was ever an outsider," said MacDonald, "but that's all past now. We've had the bicycle identified, and we have a description of our man; so that's a long step on our journey."

"It sounds to me like the beginning of the end," said Holmes. "I'm sure I congratulate you both with all my heart."

"Well, I started from the fact that Mr. Douglas had seemed disturbed since the day before, when he had been at Tunbridge Wells. It was at Tunbridge Wells then that he had become conscious of some danger. It was clear, therefore, that if a man had come over with a bicycle it was from Tunbridge Wells that he might be expected to have come. We took the bicycle over with us and showed it at the hotels. It was identified at once by the manager of the Eagle Commercial as belonging to a man named Hargrave, who had taken a room there two days before. This bicycle and a small valise were his whole belongings. He had registered his name as coming from London, but had given no address. The valise was London made, and the contents were British; but the man himself was undoubtedly an American."

"Well, well," said Holmes gleefully, "you have indeed done some solid work while I have been sitting spinning theories with my friend! It's a lesson in being practical, Mr. Mac."

"Ay, it's just that, Mr. Holmes," said the inspector with satisfaction.

"But this may all fit in with your theories," I remarked.

"That may or may not be. But let us hear the end, Mr. Mac. Was there nothing to identify this man?"

"So little that it was evident that he had carefully guarded himself against identification. There were no papers or letters, and no marking upon the clothes. A cycle map of the county

lay on his bedroom table. He had left the hotel after breakfast yesterday morning on his bicycle, and no more was heard of him until our inquiries."

"That's what puzzles me, Mr. Holmes," said White Mason. "If the fellow did not want the hue and cry raised over him, one would imagine that he would have returned and remained at the hotel as an inoffensive tourist. As it is, he must know that he will be reported to the police by the hotel manager and that his disappearance will be connected with the murder."

"So one would imagine. Still, he has been justified of his wisdom up to date, at any rate, since he has not been taken. But his description—what of that?"

MacDonald referred to his notebook. "Here we have it so far as they could give it. They don't seem to have taken any very particular stock of him; but still the porter, the clerk, and the chambermaid are all agreed that this about covers the points. He was a man about five foot nine in height, fifty or so years of age, his hair slightly grizzled, a grayish moustache, a curved nose, and a face which all of them described as fierce and forbidding."

"Well, bar the expression, that might almost be a description of Douglas himself," said Holmes. "He is just over fifty, with grizzled hair and moustache, and about the same height. Did you get anything else?"

"He was dressed in a heavy gray suit with a reefer jacket, and he wore a short yellow overcoat and a soft cap."

"What about the shotgun?"

"It is less than two feet long. It could very well have fitted into his valise. He could have carried it inside his overcoat without difficulty."

"And how do you consider that all this bears upon the general case?"

"Well, Mr. Holmes," said MacDonald, "when we have got our man—and you may be sure that I had his description on the wires within five minutes of hearing it— we shall be better able to judge. But, even as it stands, we have surely gone a

long way. We know that an American calling himself Hargrave came to Tunbridge Wells two days ago with bicycle and valise. In the latter was a sawed-off shotgun; so he came with the deliberate purpose of crime. Yesterday morning he set off for this place on his bicycle, with his gun concealed in his overcoat. No one saw him arrive, so far as we can learn; but he need not pass through the village to reach the park gates, and there are many cyclists upon the road. Presumably he at once concealed his cycle among the laurels where it was found, and possibly lurked there himself, with his eye on the house, waiting for Mr. Douglas to come out. The shotgun is a strange weapon to use inside a house; but he had intended to use it outside, and there it has very obvious advantages, as it would be impossible to miss with it, and the sound of shots is so common in an English sporting neighbourhood that no particular notice would be taken."

"That is all very clear," said Holmes.

"Well, Mr. Douglas did not appear. What was he to do next? He left his bicycle and approached the house in the twilight. He found the bridge down and no one about. He took his chance, intending, no doubt, to make some excuse if he met anyone. He met no one. He slipped into the first room that he saw, and concealed himself behind the curtain. Thence he could see the drawbridge go up, and he knew that his only escape was through the moat. He waited until quarter-past eleven, when Mr. Douglas upon his usual nightly round came into the room. He shot him and escaped, as arranged. He was aware that the bicycle would be described by the hotel people and be a clue against him; so he left it there and made his way by some other means to London or to some safe hiding place which he had already arranged. How is that, Mr. Holmes?"

"Well, Mr. Mac, it is very good and very clear so far as it goes. That is your end of the story. My end is that the crime was committed half an hour earlier than reported; that Mrs. Douglas and Barker are both in a conspiracy to conceal something; that they aided the murderer's escape—or at least that they reached the room before he escaped—and that they fabricated evidence of his escape through the window, whereas

in all probability they had themselves let him go by lowering the bridge. That's my reading of the first half."

The two detectives shook their heads.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, if this is true, we only tumble out of one mystery into another," said the London inspector.

"And in some ways a worse one," added White Mason. "The lady has never been in America in all her life. What possible connection could she have with an American assassin which would cause her to shelter him?"

"I freely admit the difficulties," said Holmes. "I propose to make a little investigation of my own to-night, and it is just possible that it may contribute something to the common cause."

"Can we help you, Mr. Holmes?"

"No, no! Darkness and Dr. Watson's umbrella—my wants are simple. And Ames, the faithful Ames, no doubt he will stretch a point for me. All my lines of thought lead me back invariably to the one basic question—why should an athletic man develop his frame upon so unnatural an instrument as a single dumb-bell?"

It was late that night when Holmes returned from his solitary excursion. We slept in a double-bedded room, which was the best that the little country inn could do for us. I was already asleep when I was partly awakened by his entrance.

"Well, Holmes," I murmured, "have you found anything out?"

He stood beside me in silence, his candle in his hand. Then the tall, lean figure inclined towards me. "I say, Watson," he whispered, "would you be afraid to sleep in the same room with a lunatic, a man with softening of the brain, an idiot whose mind has lost its grip?"

"Not in the least," I answered in astonishment.

"Ah, that's lucky," he said, and not another word would he utter that night.

CHAPTER 7 THE SOLUTION

Next morning, after breakfast we found Inspector MacDonald and White Mason seated in close consultation in the small parlour of the local police sergeant. On the table in front of them were piled a number of letters and telegrams, which they were carefully sorting and docketing. Three had been placed on one side.

"Still on the track of the elusive bicyclist?" Holmes asked cheerfully. "What is the latest news of the ruffian?"

MacDonald pointed ruefully to his heap of correspondence.

"He is at present reported from Leicester, Nottingham, Southampton, Derby, East Ham, Richmond, and fourteen other places. In three of them—East Ham, Leicester, and Liverpool—there is a clear case against him, and he has actually been arrested. The country seems to be full of the fugitives with yellow coats."

"Dear me!" said Holmes sympathetically. "Now, Mr. Mac, and you, Mr. White Mason, I wish to give you a very earnest piece of advice. When I went into this case with you I bargained, as you will no doubt remember, that I should not present you with half-proved theories, but that I should retain and work out my own ideas until I had satisfied myself that they were correct. For this reason I am not at the present moment telling you all that is in my mind. On the other hand, I said that I would play the game fairly by you, and I do not think it is a fair game to allow you for one unnecessary moment to waste your energies upon a profitless task. Therefore I am here to advise you this

morning, and my advice to you is summed up in three words—abandon the case."

MacDonald and White Mason stared in amazement at their celebrated colleague.

"You consider it hopeless!" cried the inspector.

"I consider your case to be hopeless. I do not consider that it is hopeless to arrive at the truth."

"But this cyclist. He is not an invention. We have his description, his valise, his bicycle. The fellow must be somewhere. Why should we not get him?"

"Yes, yes, no doubt he is somewhere, and no doubt we shall get him; but I would not have you waste your energies in East Ham or Liverpool. I am sure that we can find some shorter cut to a result."

"You are holding something back. It's hardly fair of you, Mr. Holmes." The inspector was annoyed.

"You know my methods of work, Mr. Mac. But I will hold it back for the shortest time possible. I only wish to verify my details in one way, which can very readily be done, and then I make my bow and return to London, leaving my results entirely at your service. I owe you too much to act otherwise; for in all my experience I cannot recall any more singular and interesting study."

"This is clean beyond me, Mr. Holmes. We saw you when we returned from Tunbridge Wells last night, and you were in general agreement with our results. What has happened since then to give you a completely new idea of the case?"

"Well, since you ask me, I spent, as I told you that I would, some hours last night at the Manor House."

"What happened?"

"Ah, I can only give you a very general answer to that for the moment. By the way, I have been reading a short but clear and interesting account of the old building, purchasable at the modest sum of one penny from the local tobacconist."

Here Holmes drew a small tract, embellished with a rude engraving of the ancient Manor House, from his waistcoat pocket.

"It immensely adds to the zest of an investigation, my dear Mr. Mac, when one is in conscious sympathy with the historical atmosphere of one's surroundings. Don't look so impatient; for I assure you that even so bald an account as this raises some sort of picture of the past in one's mind. Permit me to give you a sample. 'Erected in the fifth year of the reign of James I, and standing upon the site of a much older building, the Manor House of Birlstone presents one of the finest surviving examples of the moated Jacobean residence—' "

"You are making fools of us, Mr. Holmes!"

"Tut tut, Mr. Mac!—the first sign of temper I have detected in you. Well, I won't read it verbatim, since you feel so strongly upon the subject. But when I tell you that there is some account of the taking of the place by a parliamentary colonel in 1644, of the concealment of Charles for several days in the course of the Civil War, and finally of a visit there by the second George, you will admit that there are various associations of interest connected with this ancient house."

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Holmes; but that is no business of ours."

"Is it not? Is it not? Breadth of view, my dear Mr. Mac, is one of the essentials of our profession. The interplay of ideas and the oblique uses of knowledge are often of extraordinary interest. You will excuse these remarks from one who, though a mere connoisseur of crime, is still rather older and perhaps more experienced than yourself."

"I'm the first to admit that," said the detective heartily. "You get to your point, I admit; but you have such a deuced round-the-corner way of doing it."

"Well, well, I'll drop past history and get down to present-day facts. I called last night, as I have already said, at the Manor House. I did not see either Barker or Mrs. Douglas. I saw no necessity to disturb them; but I was pleased to hear that the lady was not visibly pining and that she had partaken

of an excellent dinner. My visit was specially made to the good Mr. Ames, with whom I exchanged some amiabilities, which culminated in his allowing me, without reference to anyone else, to sit alone for a time in the study."

"What! With that?" I ejaculated.

"No, no, everything is now in order. You gave permission for that, Mr. Mac, as I am informed. The room was in its normal state, and in it I passed an instructive quarter of an hour."

"What were you doing?"

"Well, not to make a mystery of so simple a matter, I was looking for the missing dumb-bell. It has always bulked rather large in my estimate of the case. I ended by finding it."

"Where?"

"Ah, there we come to the edge of the unexplored. Let me go a little further, a very little further, and I will promise that you shall share everything that I know."

"Well, we're bound to take you on your own terms," said the inspector; "but when it comes to telling us to abandon the case—why in the name of goodness should we abandon the case?"

"For the simple reason, my dear Mr. Mac, that you have not got the first idea what it is that you are investigating."

"We are investigating the murder of Mr. John Douglas of Birlstone Manor."

"Yes, yes, so you are. But don't trouble to trace the mysterious gentleman upon the bicycle. I assure you that it won't help you."

"Then what do you suggest that we do?"

"I will tell you exactly what to do, if you will do it."

"Well, I'm bound to say I've always found you had reason behind all your queer ways. I'll do what you advise."

"And you, Mr. White Mason?"

The country detective looked helplessly from one to the

other. Holmes and his methods were new to him. "Well, if it is good enough for the inspector, it is good enough for me," he said at last.

"Capital!" said Holmes. "Well, then, I should recommend a nice, cheery country walk for both of you. They tell me that the views from Birlstone Ridge over the Weald are very remarkable. No doubt lunch could be got at some suitable hostelry, though my ignorance of the country prevents me from recommending one. In the evening, tired but happy—"

"Man, this is getting past a joke!" cried MacDonald, rising angrily from his chair.

"Well, well, spend the day as you like," said Holmes, patting him cheerfully upon the shoulder. "Do what you like and go where you will, but meet me here before dusk without fail—without fail, Mr. Mac."

"That sounds more like sanity."

"All of it was excellent advice; but I don't insist, so long as you are here when I need you. But now, before we part, I want you to write a note to Mr. Barker."

"Well?"

"I'll dictate it, if you like. Ready?

"Dear Sir:

It has struck me that it is our duty to drain the moat, in the hope that we may find some—"

"It's impossible," said the inspector. "I've made inquiry."

"Tut, tut! My dear sir, please do what I ask you."

"Well, go on."

"—in the hope that we may find something which may bear upon our investigation. I have made arrangements, and the workmen will be at work early to-morrow morning diverting the stream—"

"Impossible!"

"—diverting the stream; so I thought it best to explain matters

beforehand.

"Now sign that, and send it by hand about four o'clock. At that hour we shall meet again in this room. Until then we may each do what we like; for I can assure you that this inquiry has come to a definite pause."

Evening was drawing in when we reassembled. Holmes was very serious in his manner, myself curious, and the detectives obviously critical and annoyed.

"Well, gentlemen," said my friend gravely, "I am asking you now to put everything to the test with me, and you will judge for yourselves whether the observations I have made justify the conclusions to which I have come. It is a chill evening, and I do not know how long our expedition may last; so I beg that you will wear your warmest coats. It is of the first importance that we should be in our places before it grows dark; so with your permission we shall get started at once."

We passed along the outer bounds of the Manor House park until we came to a place where there was a gap in the rails which fenced it. Through this we slipped, and then in the gathering gloom we followed Holmes until we had reached a shrubbery which lies nearly opposite to the main door and the drawbridge. The latter had not been raised. Holmes crouched down behind the screen of laurels, and we all three followed his example.

"Well, what are we to do now?" asked MacDonald with some gruffness.

"Possess our souls in patience and make as little noise as possible," Holmes answered.

"What are we here for at all? I really think that you might treat us with more frankness."

Holmes laughed. "Watson insists that I am the dramatist in real life," said he. "Some touch of the artist wells up within me, and calls insistently for a well-staged performance. Surely our profession, Mr. Mac, would be a drab and sordid one if we did not sometimes set the scene so as to glorify our results. The blunt accusation, the brutal tap upon the shoulder—what

can one make of such a *dénouement*? But the quick inference, the subtle trap, the clever forecast of coming events, the triumphant vindication of bold theories—are these not the pride and the justification of our life's work? At the present moment you thrill with the glamour of the situation and the anticipation of the hunt. Where would be that thrill if I had been as definite as a timetable? I only ask a little patience, Mr. Mac, and all will be clear to you."

"Well, I hope the pride and justification and the rest of it will come before we all get our death of cold," said the London detective with comic resignation.

We all had good reason to join in the aspiration; for our vigil was a long and bitter one. Slowly the shadows darkened over the long, sombre face of the old house. A cold, damp reek from the moat chilled us to the bones and set our teeth chattering. There was a single lamp over the gateway and a steady globe of light in the fatal study. Everything else was dark and still.

"How long is this to last?" asked the inspector finally. "And what is it we are watching for?"

"I have no more notion than you how long it is to last," Holmes answered with some asperity. "If criminals would always schedule their movements like railway trains, it would certainly be more convenient for all of us. As to what it is we—Well, *that's* what we are watching for!"

As he spoke the bright, yellow light in the study was obscured by somebody passing to and fro before it. The laurels among which we lay were immediately opposite the window and not more than a hundred feet from it. Presently it was thrown open with a whining of hinges, and we could dimly see the dark outline of a man's head and shoulders looking out into the gloom. For some minutes he peered forth in furtive, stealthy fashion, as one who wishes to be assured that he is unobserved. Then he leaned forward, and in the intense silence we were aware of the soft lapping of agitated water. He seemed to be stirring up the moat with something which he held in his hand. Then suddenly he hauled something in as a fisherman

lands a fish—some large, round object which obscured the light as it was dragged through the open casement.

"Now!" cried Holmes. "Now!"

We were all upon our feet, staggering after him with our stiffened limbs, while he ran swiftly across the bridge and rang violently at the bell. There was the rasping of bolts from the other side, and the amazed Ames stood in the entrance. Holmes brushed him aside without a word and, followed by all of us, rushed into the room which had been occupied by the man whom we had been watching.

The oil lamp on the table represented the glow which we had seen from outside. It was now in the hand of Cecil Barker, who held it towards us as we entered. Its light shone upon his strong, resolute, clean-shaved face and his menacing eyes.

"What the devil is the meaning of all this?" he cried. "What are you after, anyhow?"

Holmes took a swift glance round, and then pounced upon a sodden bundle tied together with cord which lay where it had been thrust under the writing table.

"This is what we are after, Mr. Barker—this bundle, weighted with a dumb-bell, which you have just raised from the bottom of the moat."

Barker stared at Holmes with amazement in his face. "How in thunder came you to know anything about it?" he asked.

"Simply that I put it there."

"You put it there! You!"

"Perhaps I should have said 'replaced it there,'" said Holmes. "You will remember, Inspector MacDonald, that I was somewhat struck by the absence of a dumb-bell. I drew your attention to it; but with the pressure of other events you had hardly the time to give it the consideration which would have enabled you to draw deductions from it. When water is near and a weight is missing it is not a very far-fetched supposition that something has been sunk in the water. The idea was at least worth testing; so with the help of Ames, who admitted me

to the room, and the crook of Dr. Watson's umbrella, I was able last night to fish up and inspect this bundle.

"It was of the first importance, however, that we should be able to prove who placed it there. This we accomplished by the very obvious device of announcing that the moat would be dried to-morrow, which had, of course, the effect that whoever had hidden the bundle would most certainly withdraw it the moment that darkness enabled him to do so. We have no less than four witnesses as to who it was who took advantage of the opportunity, and so, Mr. Barker, I think the word lies now with you."

Sherlock Holmes put the sopping bundle upon the table beside the lamp and undid the cord which bound it. From within he extracted a dumb-bell, which he tossed down to its fellow in the corner. Next he drew forth a pair of boots. "American, as you perceive," he remarked, pointing to the toes. Then he laid upon the table a long, deadly, sheathed knife. Finally he unravelled a bundle of clothing, comprising a complete set of underclothes, socks, a gray tweed suit, and a short yellow overcoat.

"The clothes are commonplace," remarked Holmes, "save only the overcoat, which is full of suggestive touches." He held it tenderly towards the light. "Here, as you perceive, is the inner pocket prolonged into the lining in such fashion as to give ample space for the truncated fowling piece. The tailor's tab is on the neck—'Neal, Outfitter, Vermissa, U.S.A.' I have spent an instructive afternoon in the rector's library, and have enlarged my knowledge by adding the fact that Vermissa is a flourishing little town at the head of one of the best known coal and iron valleys in the United States. I have some recollection, Mr. Barker, that you associated the coal districts with Mr. Douglas's first wife, and it would surely not be too far-fetched an inference that the V. V. upon the card by the dead body might stand for Vermissa Valley, or that this very valley which sends forth emissaries of murder may be that Valley of Fear of which we have heard. So much is fairly clear. And now, Mr. Barker, I seem to be standing rather in the way of your explanation."

It was a sight to see Cecil Barker's expressive face during

this exposition of the great detective. Anger, amazement, consternation, and indecision swept over it in turn. Finally he took refuge in a somewhat acrid irony.

"You know such a lot, Mr. Holmes, perhaps you had better tell us some more," he sneered.

"I have no doubt that I could tell you a great deal more, Mr. Barker; but it would come with a better grace from you."

"Oh, you think so, do you? Well, all I can say is that if there's any secret here it is not my secret, and I am not the man to give it away."

"Well, if you take that line, Mr. Barker," said the inspector quietly, "we must just keep you in sight until we have the warrant and can hold you."

"You can do what you damn please about that," said Barker defiantly.

The proceedings seemed to have come to a definite end so far as he was concerned; for one had only to look at that granite face to realize that no *peine forte et dure* would ever force him to plead against his will. The deadlock was broken, however, by a woman's voice. Mrs. Douglas had been standing listening at the half opened door, and now she entered the room.

"You have done enough for now, Cecil," said she. "Whatever comes of it in the future, you have done enough."

"Enough and more than enough," remarked Sherlock Holmes gravely. "I have every sympathy with you, madam, and I should strongly urge you to have some confidence in the common sense of our jurisdiction and to take the police voluntarily into your complete confidence. It may be that I am myself at fault for not following up the hint which you conveyed to me through my friend, Dr. Watson; but, at that time I had every reason to believe that you were directly concerned in the crime. Now I am assured that this is not so. At the same time, there is much that is unexplained, and I should strongly recommend that you ask *Mr. Douglas* to tell us his own story."

Mrs. Douglas gave a cry of astonishment at Holmes's words. The detectives and I must have echoed it, when we were

aware of a man who seemed to have emerged from the wall, who advanced now from the gloom of the corner in which he had appeared. Mrs. Douglas turned, and in an instant her arms were round him. Barker had seized his outstretched hand.

"It's best this way, Jack," his wife repeated; "I am sure that it is best."

"Indeed, yes, Mr. Douglas," said Sherlock Holmes, "I am sure that you will find it best."

The man stood blinking at us with the dazed look of one who comes from the dark into the light. It was a remarkable face, bold gray eyes, a strong, short clipped, grizzled moustache, a square, projecting chin, and a humorous mouth. He took a good look at us all, and then to my amazement he advanced to me and handed me a bundle of paper.

"I've heard of you," said he in a voice which was not quite English and not quite American, but was altogether mellow and pleasing. "You are the historian of this bunch. Well, Dr. Watson, you've never had such a story as that pass through your hands before, and I'll lay my last dollar on that. Tell it your own way; but there are the facts, and you can't miss the public so long as you have those. I've been cooped up two days, and I've spent the daylight hours—as much daylight as I could get in that rat trap—in putting the thing into words. You're welcome to them—you and your public. There's the story of the Valley of Fear."

"That's the past, Mr. Douglas," said Sherlock Holmes quietly. "What we desire now is to hear your story of the present."

"You'll have it, sir," said Douglas. "May I smoke as I talk? Well, thank you, Mr. Holmes. You're a smoker yourself, if I remember right, and you'll guess what it is to be sitting for two days with tobacco in your pocket and afraid that the smell will give you away." He leaned against the mantelpiece and sucked at the cigar which Holmes had handed him. "I've heard of you, Mr. Holmes. I never guessed that I should meet you. But before you are through with that," he nodded at my papers, "you will say I've brought you something fresh."

Inspector MacDonald had been staring at the newcomer with the greatest amazement. "Well, this fairly beats me!" he cried at last. "If you are Mr. John Douglas of Birlstone Manor, then whose death have we been investigating for these two days, and where in the world have you sprung from now? You seemed to me to come out of the floor like a jack-in-a-box."

"Ah, Mr. Mac," said Holmes, shaking a reproving forefinger, "you would not read that excellent local compilation which described the concealment of King Charles. People did not hide in those days without excellent hiding places, and the hiding place that has once been used may be again. I had persuaded myself that we should find Mr. Douglas under this roof."

"And how long have you been playing this trick upon us, Mr. Holmes?" said the inspector angrily. "How long have you allowed us to waste ourselves upon a search that you knew to be an absurd one?"

"Not one instant, my dear Mr. Mac. Only last night did I form my views of the case. As they could not be put to the proof until this evening, I invited you and your colleague to take a holiday for the day. Pray what more could I do? When I found the suit of clothes in the moat, it at once became apparent to me that the body we had found could not have been the body of Mr. John Douglas at all, but must be that of the bicyclist from Tunbridge Wells. No other conclusion was possible. Therefore I had to determine where Mr. John Douglas himself could be, and the balance of probability was that with the connivance of his wife and his friend he was concealed in a house which had such conveniences for a fugitive, and awaiting quieter times when he could make his final escape."

"Well, you figured it out about right," said Douglas approvingly. "I thought I'd dodge your British law; for I was not sure how I stood under it, and also I saw my chance to throw these hounds once for all off my track. Mind you, from first to last I have done nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing that I would not do again; but you'll judge that for yourselves when I tell you my story. Never mind warning me, Inspector: I'm ready to stand pat upon the truth.

"I'm not going to begin at the beginning. That's all there," he indicated my bundle of papers, "and a mighty queer yarn you'll find it. It all comes down to this: That there are some men that have good cause to hate me and would give their last dollar to know that they had got me. So long as I am alive and they are alive, there is no safety in this world for me. They hunted me from Chicago to California, then they chased me out of America; but when I married and settled down in this quiet spot I thought my last years were going to be peaceable.

"I never explained to my wife how things were. Why should I pull her into it? She would never have a quiet moment again; but would always be imagining trouble. I fancy she knew something, for I may have dropped a word here or a word there; but until yesterday, after you gentlemen had seen her, she never knew the rights of the matter. She told you all she knew, and so did Barker here; for on the night when this thing happened there was mighty little time for explanations. She knows everything now, and I would have been a wiser man if I had told her sooner. But it was a hard question, dear," he took her hand for an instant in his own, "and I acted for the best.

"Well, gentlemen, the day before these happenings I was over in Tunbridge Wells, and I got a glimpse of a man in the street. It was only a glimpse; but I have a quick eye for these things, and I never doubted who it was. It was the worst enemy I had among them all—one who has been after me like a hungry wolf after a caribou all these years. I knew there was trouble coming, and I came home and made ready for it. I guessed I'd fight through it all right on my own, my luck was a proverb in the States about '76. I never doubted that it would be with me still.

"I was on my guard all that next day, and never went out into the park. It's as well, or he'd have had the drop on me with that buckshot gun of his before ever I could draw on him. After the bridge was up—my mind was always more restful when that bridge was up in the evenings—I put the thing clear out of my head. I never dreamed of his getting into the house and waiting for me. But when I made my round in my dressing gown, as was my habit, I had no sooner entered the study than

I scented danger. I guess when a man has had dangers in his life—and I've had more than most in my time—there is a kind of sixth sense that waves the red flag. I saw the signal clear enough, and yet I couldn't tell you why. Next instant I spotted a boot under the window curtain, and then I saw why plain enough.

"I'd just the one candle that was in my hand; but there was a good light from the hall lamp through the open door. I put down the candle and jumped for a hammer that I'd left on the mantel. At the same moment he sprang at me. I saw the glint of a knife, and I lashed at him with the hammer. I got him somewhere; for the knife tinkled down on the floor. He dodged round the table as quick as an eel, and a moment later he'd got his gun from under his coat. I heard him cock it; but I had got hold of it before he could fire. I had it by the barrel, and we wrestled for it all ends up for a minute or more. It was death to the man that lost his grip.

"He never lost his grip; but he got it butt downward for a moment too long. Maybe it was I that pulled the trigger. Maybe we just jolted it off between us. Anyhow, he got both barrels in the face, and there I was, staring down at all that was left of Ted Baldwin. I'd recognized him in the township, and again when he sprang for me; but his own mother wouldn't recognize him as I saw him then. I'm used to rough work; but I fairly turned sick at the sight of him.

"I was hanging on the side of the table when Barker came hurrying down. I heard my wife coming, and I ran to the door and stopped her. It was no sight for a woman. I promised I'd come to her soon. I said a word or two to Barker—he took it all in at a glance—and we waited for the rest to come along. But there was no sign of them. Then we understood that they could hear nothing, and that all that had happened was known only to ourselves.

"It was at that instant that the idea came to me. I was fairly dazzled by the brilliance of it. The man's sleeve had slipped up and there was the branded mark of the lodge upon his forearm. See here!"

The man whom we had known as Douglas turned up his own coat and cuff to show a brown triangle within a circle exactly like that which we had seen upon the dead man.

"It was the sight of that which started me on it. I seemed to see it all clear at a glance. There were his height and hair and figure, about the same as my own. No one could swear to his face, poor devil! I brought down this suit of clothes, and in a quarter of an hour Barker and I had put my dressing gown on him and he lay as you found him. We tied all his things into a bundle, and I weighted them with the only weight I could find and put them through the window. The card he had meant to lay upon my body was lying beside his own.

"My rings were put on his finger; but when it came to the wedding ring," he held out his muscular hand, "you can see for yourselves that I had struck the limit. I have not moved it since the day I was married, and it would have taken a file to get it off. I don't know, anyhow, that I should have cared to part with it; but if I had wanted to I couldn't. So we just had to leave that detail to take care of itself. On the other hand, I brought a bit of plaster down and put it where I am wearing one myself at this instant. You slipped up there, Mr. Holmes, clever as you are; for if you had chanced to take off that plaster you would have found no cut underneath it.

"Well, that was the situation. If I could lie low for a while and then get away where I could be joined by my 'widow' we should have a chance at last of living in peace for the rest of our lives. These devils would give me no rest so long as I was above ground; but if they saw in the papers that Baldwin had got his man, there would be an end of all my troubles. I hadn't much time to make it all clear to Barker and to my wife; but they understood enough to be able to help me. I knew all about this hiding place, so did Ames; but it never entered his head to connect it with the matter. I retired into it, and it was up to Barker to do the rest.

"I guess you can fill in for yourselves what he did. He opened the window and made the mark on the sill to give an idea of how the murderer escaped. It was a tall order, that; but as the bridge was up there was no other way. Then, when

everything was fixed, he rang the bell for all he was worth. What happened afterward you know. And so, gentlemen, you can do what you please; but I've told you the truth and the whole truth, so help me God! What I ask you now is how do I stand by the English law?"

There was a silence which was broken by Sherlock Holmes.

"The English law is in the main a just law. You will get no worse than your deserts from that, Mr. Douglas. But I would ask you how did this man know that you lived here, or how to get into your house, or where to hide to get you?"

"I know nothing of this."

Holmes's face was very white and grave. "The story is not over yet, I fear," said he. "You may find worse dangers than the English law, or even than your enemies from America. I see trouble before you, Mr. Douglas. You'll take my advice and still be on your guard."

And now, my long-suffering readers, I will ask you to come away with me for a time, far from the Sussex Manor House of Birlstone, and far also from the year of grace in which we made our eventful journey which ended with the strange story of the man who had been known as John Douglas. I wish you to journey back some twenty years in time, and westward some thousands of miles in space, that I may lay before you a singular and terrible narrative—so singular and so terrible that you may find it hard to believe that even as I tell it, even so did it occur.

Do not think that I intrude one story before another is finished. As you read on you will find that this is not so. And when I have detailed those distant events and you have solved this mystery of the past, we shall meet once more in those rooms on Baker Street, where this, like so many other wonderful happenings, will find its end.

Part. 2

The Scowrers

THE VALLEY OF FEAR

Sherlock Holmes

CHAPTER 1 THE MAN

It was the fourth of February in the year 1875. It had been a severe winter, and the snow lay deep in the gorges of the Gilmerton Mountains. The steam ploughs had, however, kept the railroad open, and the evening train which connects the long line of coal-mining and iron-working settlements was slowly groaning its way up the steep gradients which lead from Stagville on the plain to Vermissa, the central township which lies at the head of Vermissa Valley. From this point the track sweeps downward to Bartons Crossing, Helmdale, and the purely agricultural county of Merton. It was a single track railroad; but at every siding—and they were numerous—long lines of trucks piled with coal and iron ore told of the hidden wealth which had brought a rude population and a bustling life to this most desolate corner of the United States of America.

For desolate it was! Little could the first pioneer who had traversed it have ever imagined that the fairest prairies and the most lush water pastures were valueless compared to this gloomy land of black crag and tangled forest. Above the dark and often scarcely penetrable woods upon their flanks, the high, bare crowns of the mountains, white snow, and jagged rock towered upon each flank, leaving a long, winding, tortuous valley in the centre. Up this the little train was slowly crawling.

The oil lamps had just been lit in the leading passenger car, a long, bare carriage in which some twenty or thirty people were seated. The greater number of these were workmen returning from their day's toil in the lower part of the valley. At least a dozen, by their grimed faces and the safety

lanterns which they carried, proclaimed themselves miners. These sat smoking in a group and conversed in low voices, glancing occasionally at two men on the opposite side of the car, whose uniforms and badges showed them to be policemen.

Several women of the labouring class and one or two travellers who might have been small local storekeepers made up the rest of the company, with the exception of one young man in a corner by himself. It is with this man that we are concerned. Take a good look at him; for he is worth it.

He is a fresh-complexioned, middle-sized young man, not far, one would guess, from his thirtieth year. He has large, shrewd, humorous gray eyes which twinkle inquiringly from time to time as he looks round through his spectacles at the people about him. It is easy to see that he is of a sociable and possibly simple disposition, anxious to be friendly to all men. Anyone could pick him at once as gregarious in his habits and communicative in his nature, with a quick wit and a ready smile. And yet the man who studied him more closely might discern a certain firmness of jaw and grim tightness about the lips which would warn him that there were depths beyond, and that this pleasant, brown-haired young Irishman might conceivably leave his mark for good or evil upon any society to which he was introduced.

Having made one or two tentative remarks to the nearest miner, and receiving only short, gruff replies, the traveller resigned himself to uncongenial silence, staring moodily out of the window at the fading landscape.

It was not a cheering prospect. Through the growing gloom there pulsed the red glow of the furnaces on the sides of the hills. Great heaps of slag and dumps of cinders loomed up on each side, with the high shafts of the collieries towering above them. Huddled groups of mean, wooden houses, the windows of which were beginning to outline themselves in light, were scattered here and there along the line, and the frequent halting places were crowded with their swarthy inhabitants.

The iron and coal valleys of the Vermissa district were no resorts for the leisured or the cultured. Everywhere there were

stern signs of the crudest battle of life, the rude work to be done, and the rude, strong workers who did it.

The young traveller gazed out into this dismal country with a face of mingled repulsion and interest, which showed that the scene was new to him. At intervals he drew from his pocket a bulky letter to which he referred, and on the margins of which he scribbled some notes. Once from the back of his waist he produced something which one would hardly have expected to find in the possession of so mild-mannered a man. It was a navy revolver of the largest size. As he turned it slantwise to the light, the glint upon the rims of the copper shells within the drum showed that it was fully loaded. He quickly restored it to his secret pocket, but not before it had been observed by a working man who had seated himself upon the adjoining bench.

"Hullo, mate!" said he. "You seem heeled and ready."

The young man smiled with an air of embarrassment.

"Yes," said he, "we need them sometimes in the place I come from."

"And where may that be?"

"I'm last from Chicago."

"A stranger in these parts?"

"Yes."

"You may find you need it here," said the workman.

"Ah! is that so?" The young man seemed interested.

"Have you heard nothing of doings hereabouts?"

"Nothing out of the way."

"Why, I thought the country was full of it. You'll hear quick enough. What made you come here?"

"I heard there was always work for a willing man."

"Are you a member of the union?"

"Sure."

"Then you'll get your job, I guess. Have you any friends?"

"Not yet; but I have the means of making them."

"How's that, then?"

"I am one of the Eminent Order of Freemen. There's no town without a lodge, and where there is a lodge I'll find my friends."

The remark had a singular effect upon his companion. He glanced round suspiciously at the others in the car. The miners were still whispering among themselves. The two police officers were dozing. He came across, seated himself close to the young traveller, and held out his hand.

"Put it there," he said.

A hand-grip passed between the two.

"I see you speak the truth," said the workman. "But it's well to make certain." He raised his right hand to his right eyebrow. The traveller at once raised his left hand to his left eyebrow.

"Dark nights are unpleasant," said the workman.

"Yes, for strangers to travel," the other answered.

"That's good enough. I'm Brother Scanlan, Lodge 341, Vermissa Valley. Glad to see you in these parts."

"Thank you. I'm Brother John McMurdo, Lodge 29, Chicago. Bodymaster J. H. Scott. But I am in luck to meet a brother so early."

"Well, there are plenty of us about. You won't find the order more flourishing anywhere in the States than right here in Vermissa Valley. But we could do with some lads like you. I can't understand a spry man of the union finding no work to do in Chicago."

"I found plenty of work to do," said McMurdo.

"Then why did you leave?"

McMurdo nodded towards the policemen and smiled. "I guess those chaps would be glad to know," he said.

Scanlan groaned sympathetically. "In trouble?" he asked in

a whisper.

"Deep."

"A penitentiary job?"

"And the rest."

"Not a killing!"

"It's early days to talk of such things," said McMurdo with the air of a man who had been surprised into saying more than he intended. "I've my own good reasons for leaving Chicago, and let that be enough for you. Who are you that you should take it on yourself to ask such things?" His gray eyes gleamed with sudden and dangerous anger from behind his glasses.

"All right, mate, no offense meant. The boys will think none the worse of you, whatever you may have done. Where are you bound for now?"

"Vermissa."

"That's the third halt down the line. Where are you staying?"

McMurdo took out an envelope and held it close to the murky oil lamp. "Here is the address—Jacob Shafter, Sheridan Street. It's a boarding house that was recommended by a man I knew in Chicago."

"Well, I don't know it; but Vermissa is out of my beat. I live at Hobson's Patch, and that's here where we are drawing up. But, say, there's one bit of advice I'll give you before we part: If you're in trouble in Vermissa, go straight to the Union House and see Boss McGinty. He is the Bodymaster of Vermissa Lodge, and nothing can happen in these parts unless Black Jack McGinty wants it. So long, mate! Maybe we'll meet in lodge one of these evenings. But mind my words: If you are in trouble, go to Boss McGinty."

Scanlan descended, and McMurdo was left once again to his thoughts. Night had now fallen, and the flames of the frequent furnaces were roaring and leaping in the darkness. Against their lurid background dark figures were bending and straining, twisting and turning, with the motion of winch or of

windlass, to the rhythm of an eternal clank and roar.

"I guess hell must look something like that," said a voice.

McMurdo turned and saw that one of the policemen had shifted in his seat and was staring out into the fiery waste.

"For that matter," said the other policeman, "I allow that hell must *be* something like that. If there are worse devils down yonder than some we could name, it's more than I'd expect. I guess you are new to this part, young man?"

"Well, what if I am?" McMurdo answered in a surly voice.

"Just this, mister, that I should advise you to be careful in choosing your friends. I don't think I'd begin with Mike Scanlan or his gang if I were you."

"What the hell is it to you who are my friends?" roared McMurdo in a voice which brought every head in the carriage round to witness the altercation. "Did I ask you for your advice, or did you think me such a sucker that I couldn't move without it? You speak when you are spoken to, and by the Lord you'd have to wait a long time if it was me!" He thrust out his face and grinned at the patrolmen like a snarling dog.

The two policemen, heavy, good-natured men, were taken aback by the extraordinary vehemence with which their friendly advances had been rejected.

"No offense, stranger," said one. "It was a warning for your own good, seeing that you are, by your own showing, new to the place."

"I'm new to the place; but I'm not new to you and your kind!" cried McMurdo in cold fury. "I guess you're the same in all places, shoving your advice in when nobody asks for it."

"Maybe we'll see more of you before very long," said one of the patrolmen with a grin. "You're a real hand-picked one, if I am a judge."

"I was thinking the same," remarked the other. "I guess we may meet again."

"I'm not afraid of you, and don't you think it!" cried McMurdo.

"My name's Jack McMurdo—see? If you want me, you'll find me at Jacob Shafter's on Sheridan Street, Vermissa; so I'm not hiding from you, am I? Day or night I dare to look the like of you in the face—don't make any mistake about that!"

There was a murmur of sympathy and admiration from the miners at the dauntless demeanour of the newcomer, while the two policemen shrugged their shoulders and renewed a conversation between themselves.

A few minutes later the train ran into the ill-lit station, and there was a general clearing; for Vermissa was by far the largest town on the line. McMurdo picked up his leather gripsack and was about to start off into the darkness, when one of the miners accosted him.

"By Gar, mate! you know how to speak to the cops," he said in a voice of awe. "It was grand to hear you. Let me carry your grip and show you the road. I'm passing Shafter's on the way to my own shack."

There was a chorus of friendly "Good-nights" from the other miners as they passed from the platform. Before ever he had set foot in it, McMurdo the turbulent had become a character in Vermissa.

The country had been a place of terror; but the town was in its way even more depressing. Down that long valley there was at least a certain gloomy grandeur in the huge fires and the clouds of drifting smoke, while the strength and industry of man found fitting monuments in the hills which he had spilled by the side of his monstrous excavations. But the town showed a dead level of mean ugliness and squalor. The broad street was churned up by the traffic into a horrible rutted paste of muddy snow. The sidewalks were narrow and uneven. The numerous gas-lamps served only to show more clearly a long line of wooden houses, each with its veranda facing the street, unkempt and dirty.

As they approached the centre of the town the scene was brightened by a row of well-lit stores, and even more by a cluster of saloons and gaming houses, in which the miners spent their hard-earned but generous wages.

"That's the Union House," said the guide, pointing to one saloon which rose almost to the dignity of being a hotel. "Jack McGinty is the boss there."

"What sort of a man is he?" McMurdo asked.

"What! have you never heard of the boss?"

"How could I have heard of him when you know that I am a stranger in these parts?"

"Well, I thought his name was known clear across the country. It's been in the papers often enough."

"What for?"

"Well," the miner lowered his voice— "over the affairs."

"What affairs?"

"Good Lord, mister! you are queer, if I must say it without offense. There's only one set of affairs that you'll hear of in these parts, and that's the affairs of the Scowrers."

"Why, I seem to have read of the Scowrers in Chicago. A gang of murderers, are they not?"

"Hush, on your life!" cried the miner, standing still in alarm, and gazing in amazement at his companion. "Man, you won't live long in these parts if you speak in the open street like that. Many a man has had the life beaten out of him for less."

"Well, I know nothing about them. It's only what I have read."

"And I'm not saying that you have not read the truth." The man looked nervously round him as he spoke, peering into the shadows as if he feared to see some lurking danger. "If killing is murder, then God knows there is murder and to spare. But don't you dare to breathe the name of Jack McGinty in connection with it, stranger; for every whisper goes back to him, and he is not one that is likely to let it pass. Now, that's the house you're after, that one standing back from the street. You'll find old Jacob Shafter that runs it as honest a man as lives in this township."

"I thank you," said McMurdo, and shaking hands with his

new acquaintance he plodded, gripsack in hand, up the path which led to the dwelling house, at the door of which he gave a resounding knock.

It was opened at once by someone very different from what he had expected. It was a woman, young and singularly beautiful. She was of the German type, blonde and fair-haired, with the piquant contrast of a pair of beautiful dark eyes with which she surveyed the stranger with surprise and a pleasing embarrassment which brought a wave of colour over her pale face. Framed in the bright light of the open doorway, it seemed to McMurdo that he had never seen a more beautiful picture, the more attractive for its contrast with the sordid and gloomy surroundings. A lovely violet growing upon one of those black slag-heaps of the mines would not have seemed more surprising. So entranced was he that he stood staring without a word, and it was she who broke the silence.

"I thought it was father," said she with a pleasing little touch of a German accent. "Did you come to see him? He is down town. I expect him back every minute."

McMurdo continued to gaze at her in open admiration until her eyes dropped in confusion before this masterful visitor.

"No, miss," he said at last, "I'm in no hurry to see him. But your house was recommended to me for board. I thought it might suit me—and now I know it will."

"You are quick to make up your mind," said she with a smile.

"Anyone but a blind man could do as much," the other answered.

She laughed at the compliment. "Come right in, sir," she said. "I'm Miss Ettie Shafter, Mr. Shafter's daughter. My mother's dead, and I run the house. You can sit down by the stove in the front room until father comes along— Ah, here he is! So you can fix things with him right away."

A heavy, elderly man came plodding up the path. In a few words McMurdo explained his business. A man of the name of Murphy had given him the address in Chicago. He in turn

had had it from someone else. Old Shafter was quite ready. The stranger made no bones about terms, agreed at once to every condition, and was apparently fairly flush of money. For seven dollars a week paid in advance he was to have board and lodging.

So it was that McMurdo, the self-confessed fugitive from justice, took up his abode under the roof of the Shafters, the first step which was to lead to so long and dark a train of events, ending in a far distant land.

CHAPTER 2 THE BODYMASTER

McMurdo was a man who made his mark quickly. Wherever he was the folk around soon knew it. Within a week he had become infinitely the most important person at Shafter's. There were ten or a dozen boarders there; but they were honest foremen or commonplace clerks from the stores, of a very different calibre from the young Irishman. Of an evening when they gathered together his joke was always the readiest, his conversation the brightest, and his song the best. He was a born boon companion, with a magnetism which drew good humour from all around him.

And yet he showed again and again, as he had shown in the railway carriage, a capacity for sudden, fierce anger, which compelled the respect and even the fear of those who met him. For the law, too, and all who were connected with it, he exhibited a bitter contempt which delighted some and alarmed others of his fellow boarders.

From the first he made it evident, by his open admiration, that the daughter of the house had won his heart from the instant that he had set eyes upon her beauty and her grace. He was no backward suitor. On the second day he told her that he loved her, and from then onward he repeated the same story with an absolute disregard of what she might say to discourage him.

"Someone else?" he would cry. "Well, the worse luck for someone else! Let him look out for himself! Am I to lose my life's chance and all my heart's desire for someone else? You can keep on saying no, Ettie: the day will come when you will say yes, and I'm young enough to wait."

He was a dangerous suitor, with his glib Irish tongue, and his pretty, coaxing ways. There was about him also that glamour of experience and of mystery which attracts a woman's interest, and finally her love. He could talk of the sweet valleys of County Monaghan from which he came, of the lovely, distant island, the low hills and green meadows of which seemed the more beautiful when imagination viewed them from this place of grime and snow.

Then he was versed in the life of the cities of the North, of Detroit, and the lumber camps of Michigan, and finally of Chicago, where he had worked in a planing mill. And afterwards came the hint of romance, the feeling that strange things had happened to him in that great city, so strange and so intimate that they might not be spoken of. He spoke wistfully of a sudden leaving, a breaking of old ties, a flight into a strange world, ending in this dreary valley, and Ettie listened, her dark eyes gleaming with pity and with sympathy—those two qualities which may turn so rapidly and so naturally to love.

McMurdo had obtained a temporary job as bookkeeper; for he was a well educated man. This kept him out most of the day, and he had not found occasion yet to report himself to the head of the lodge of the Eminent Order of Freemen. He was reminded of his omission, however, by a visit one evening from Mike Scanlan, the fellow member whom he had met in the train. Scanlan, the small, sharp-faced, nervous, black-eyed man, seemed glad to see him once more. After a glass or two of whisky he broached the object of his visit.

"Say, McMurdo," said he, "I remembered your address, so I made bold to call. I'm surprised that you've not reported to the Bodymaster. Why haven't you seen Boss McGinty yet?"

"Well, I had to find a job. I have been busy."

"You must find time for him if you have none for anything else. Good Lord, man! you're a fool not to have been down to the Union House and registered your name the first morning after you came here! If you run against him—well, you mustn't, that's all!"

McMurdo showed mild surprise. "I've been a member of

the lodge for over two years, Scanlan, but I never heard that duties were so pressing as all that."

"Maybe not in Chicago."

"Well, it's the same society here."

"Is it?" Scanlan looked at him long and fixedly. There was something sinister in his eyes.

"Isn't it?"

"You'll tell me that in a month's time. I hear you had a talk with the patrolmen after I left the train."

"How did you know that?"

"Oh, it got about—things do get about for good and for bad in this district."

"Well, yes. I told the hounds what I thought of them."

"By the Lord, you'll be a man after McGinty's heart!"

"What, does he hate the police too?"

Scanlan burst out laughing. "You go and see him, my lad," said he as he took his leave. "It's not the police but you that he'll hate if you don't! Now, take a friend's advice and go at once!"

It chanced that on the same evening McMurdo had another more pressing interview which urged him in the same direction. It may have been that his attentions to Ettie had been more evident than before, or that they had gradually obtruded themselves into the slow mind of his good German host; but, whatever the cause, the boarding-house keeper beckoned the young man into his private room and started on the subject without any circumlocution.

"It seems to me, mister," said he, "that you are gettin' set on my Ettie. Ain't that so, or am I wrong?"

"Yes, that is so," the young man answered.

"Vell, I vant to tell you right now that it ain't no manner of use. There's someone slipped in afore you."

"She told me so."

"Vell, you can lay that she told you truth. But did she tell you who it vas?"

"No, I asked her; but she wouldn't tell."

"I dare say not, the leetle baggage! Perhaps she did not vish to frighten you avay."

"Frighten!" McMurdo was on fire in a moment.

"Ah, yes, my friend! You need not be ashamed to be frightened of him. It is Teddy Baldwin."

"And who the devil is he?"

"He is a boss of Scowrers."

"Scowrers! I've heard of them before. It's Scowrers here and Scowrers there, and always in a whisper! What are you all afraid of? Who are the Scowrers?"

The boarding-house keeper instinctively sank his voice, as everyone did who talked about that terrible society. "The Scowrers," said he, "are the Eminent Order of Freemen!"

The young man stared. "Why, I am a member of that order myself."

"You! I vould never have had you in my house if I had known it—not if you vere to pay me a hundred dollar a veek."

"What's wrong with the order? It's for charity and good fellowship. The rules say so."

"Maybe in some places. Not here!"

"What is it here?"

"It's a murder society, that's vat it is."

McMurdo laughed incredulously. "How can you prove that?" he asked.

"Prove it! Are there not fifty murders to prove it? Vat about Milman and Van Shorst, and the Nicholson family, and old Mr. Hyam, and little Billy James, and the others? Prove it! Is there a man or a voman in this valley vat does not know it?"

"See here!" said McMurdo earnestly. "I want you to take

back what you've said, or else make it good. One or the other you must do before I quit this room. Put yourself in my place. Here am I, a stranger in the town. I belong to a society that I know only as an innocent one. You'll find it through the length and breadth of the States; but always as an innocent one. Now, when I am counting upon joining it here, you tell me that it is the same as a murder society called the Scowrers. I guess you owe me either an apology or else an explanation, Mr. Shafter."

"I can tell you vat the whole world knows, mister. The bosses of the one are the bosses of the other. If you offend the one, it is the other vat vill strike you. We have proved it too often."

"That's just gossip—I want proof!" said McMurdo.

"If you live here long you vill get your proof. But I forget that you are yourself one of them. You vill soon be as bad as the rest. But you vill find other lodgings, mister. I cannot have you here. Is it not bad enough that one of these people come courting my Ettie, and that I dare not turn him down, but that I should have another for my boarder? Yes, indeed, you shall not sleep here after to-night!"

McMurdo found himself under sentence of banishment both from his comfortable quarters and from the girl whom he loved.

He found her alone in the sitting-room that same evening, and he poured his troubles into her ear.

"Sure, your father is after giving me notice," he said. "It's little I would care if it was just my room, but indeed, Ettie, though it's only a week that I've known you, you are the very breath of life to me, and I can't live without you!"

"Oh, hush, Mr. McMurdo, don't speak so!" said the girl. "I have told you, have I not, that you are too late? There is another, and if I have not promised to marry him at once, at least I can promise no one else."

"Suppose I had been first, Ettie, would I have had a chance?"

The girl sank her face into her hands. "I wish to heaven that

you had been first!" she sobbed.

McMurdo was down on his knees before her in an instant. "For God's sake, Ettie, let it stand at that!" he cried. "Will you ruin your life and my own for the sake of this promise? Follow your heart, acushla! 'Tis a safer guide than any promise before you knew what it was that you were saying."

He had seized Ettie's white hand between his own strong brown ones.

"Say that you will be mine, and we will face it out together!"

"Not here?"

"Yes, here."

"No, no, Jack!" His arms were round her now. "It could not be here. Could you take me away?"

A struggle passed for a moment over McMurdo's face; but it ended by setting like granite. "No, here," he said. "I'll hold you against the world, Ettie, right here where we are!"

"Why should we not leave together?"

"No, Ettie, I can't leave here."

"But why?"

"I'd never hold my head up again if I felt that I had been driven out. Besides, what is there to be afraid of? Are we not free folks in a free country? If you love me, and I you, who will dare to come between?"

"You don't know, Jack. You've been here too short a time. You don't know this Baldwin. You don't know McGinty and his Scowrers."

"No, I don't know them, and I don't fear them, and I don't believe in them!" said McMurdo. "I've lived among rough men, my darling, and instead of fearing them it has always ended that they have feared me—always, Ettie. It's mad on the face of it! If these men, as your father says, have done crime after crime in the valley, and if everyone knows them by name, how comes it that none are brought to justice? You answer me that, Ettie!"

"Because no witness dares to appear against them. He would not live a month if he did. Also because they have always their own men to swear that the accused one was far from the scene of the crime. But surely, Jack, you must have read all this. I had understood that every paper in the United States was writing about it."

"Well, I have read something, it is true; but I had thought it was a story. Maybe these men have some reason in what they do. Maybe they are wronged and have no other way to help themselves."

"Oh, Jack, don't let me hear you speak so! That is how he speaks—the other one!"

"Baldwin—he speaks like that, does he?"

"And that is why I loathe him so. Oh, Jack, now I can tell you the truth. I loathe him with all my heart; but I fear him also. I fear him for myself; but above all I fear him for Father. I know that some great sorrow would come upon us if I dared to say what I really felt. That is why I have put him off with half-promises. It was in real truth our only hope. But if you would fly with me, Jack, we could take Father with us and live forever far from the power of these wicked men."

Again there was the struggle upon McMurdo's face, and again it set like granite. "No harm shall come to you, Ettie—nor to your father either. As to wicked men, I expect you may find that I am as bad as the worst of them before we're through."

"No, no, Jack! I would trust you anywhere."

McMurdo laughed bitterly. "Good Lord! how little you know of me! Your innocent soul, my darling, could not even guess what is passing in mine. But, hullo, who's the visitor?"

The door had opened suddenly, and a young fellow came swaggering in with the air of one who is the master. He was a handsome, dashing young man of about the same age and build as McMurdo himself. Under his broad-brimmed black felt hat, which he had not troubled to remove, a handsome face with fierce, domineering eyes and a curved hawk-bill of a nose looked savagely at the pair who sat by the stove.

Ettie had jumped to her feet full of confusion and alarm. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Baldwin," said she. "You're earlier than I had thought. Come and sit down."

Baldwin stood with his hands on his hips looking at McMurdo. "Who is this?" he asked curtly.

"It's a friend of mine, Mr. Baldwin, a new boarder here. Mr. McMurdo, may I introduce you to Mr. Baldwin?"

The young men nodded in surly fashion to each other.

"Maybe Miss Ettie has told you how it is with us?" said Baldwin.

"I didn't understand that there was any relation between you."

"Didn't you? Well, you can understand it now. You can take it from me that this young lady is mine, and you'll find it a very fine evening for a walk."

"Thank you, I am in no humour for a walk."

"Aren't you?" The man's savage eyes were blazing with anger. "Maybe you are in a humour for a fight, Mr. Boarder!"

"That I am!" cried McMurdo, springing to his feet. "You never said a more welcome word."

"For God's sake, Jack! Oh, for God's sake!" cried poor, distracted Ettie. "Oh, Jack, Jack, he will hurt you!"

"Oh, it's Jack, is it?" said Baldwin with an oath. "You've come to that already, have you?"

"Oh, Ted, be reasonable—be kind! For my sake, Ted, if ever you loved me, be big-hearted and forgiving!"

"I think, Ettie, that if you were to leave us alone we could get this thing settled," said McMurdo quietly. "Or maybe, Mr. Baldwin, you will take a turn down the street with me. It's a fine evening, and there's some open ground beyond the next block."

"I'll get even with you without needing to dirty my hands," said his enemy. "You'll wish you had never set foot in this house

before I am through with you!"

"No time like the present," cried McMurdo.

"I'll choose my own time, mister. You can leave the time to me. See here!" He suddenly rolled up his sleeve and showed upon his forearm a peculiar sign which appeared to have been branded there. It was a circle with a triangle within it. "D'you know what that means?"

"I neither know nor care!"

"Well, you will know, I'll promise you that. You won't be much older, either. Perhaps Miss Ettie can tell you something about it. As to you, Ettie, you'll come back to me on your knees—d'ye hear, girl?—on your knees—and then I'll tell you what your punishment may be. You've sowed—and by the Lord, I'll see that you reap!" He glanced at them both in fury. Then he turned upon his heel, and an instant later the outer door had banged behind him.

For a few moments McMurdo and the girl stood in silence. Then she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, Jack, how brave you were! But it is no use, you must fly! To-night—Jack—to-night! It's your only hope. He will have your life. I read it in his horrible eyes. What chance have you against a dozen of them, with Boss McGinty and all the power of the lodge behind them?"

McMurdo disengaged her hands, kissed her, and gently pushed her back into a chair. "There, acushla, there! Don't be disturbed or fear for me. I'm a Freeman myself. I'm after telling your father about it. Maybe I am no better than the others; so don't make a saint of me. Perhaps you hate me too, now that I've told you as much?"

"Hate you, Jack? While life lasts I could never do that! I've heard that there is no harm in being a Freeman anywhere but here; so why should I think the worse of you for that? But if you are a Freeman, Jack, why should you not go down and make a friend of Boss McGinty? Oh, hurry, Jack, hurry! Get your word in first, or the hounds will be on your trail."

"I was thinking the same thing," said McMurdo. "I'll go

right now and fix it. You can tell your father that I'll sleep here to-night and find some other quarters in the morning."

The bar of McGinty's saloon was crowded as usual; for it was the favourite loafing place of all the rougher elements of the town. The man was popular; for he had a rough, jovial disposition which formed a mask, covering a great deal which lay behind it. But apart from this popularity, the fear in which he was held throughout the township, and indeed down the whole thirty miles of the valley and past the mountains on each side of it, was enough in itself to fill his bar; for none could afford to neglect his good will.

Besides those secret powers which it was universally believed that he exercised in so pitiless a fashion, he was a high public official, a municipal councillor, and a commissioner of roads, elected to the office through the votes of the ruffians who in turn expected to receive favours at his hands. Assessments and taxes were enormous; the public works were notoriously neglected, the accounts were slurred over by bribed auditors, and the decent citizen was terrorized into paying public blackmail, and holding his tongue lest some worse thing befall him.

Thus it was that, year by year, Boss McGinty's diamond pins became more obtrusive, his gold chains more weighty across a more gorgeous vest, and his saloon stretched farther and farther, until it threatened to absorb one whole side of the Market Square.

McMurdo pushed open the swinging door of the saloon and made his way amid the crowd of men within, through an atmosphere blurred with tobacco smoke and heavy with the smell of spirits. The place was brilliantly lighted, and the huge, heavily gilt mirrors upon every wall reflected and multiplied the garish illumination. There were several bartenders in their shirt sleeves, hard at work mixing drinks for the loungers who fringed the broad, brass-trimmed counter.

At the far end, with his body resting upon the bar and a cigar stuck at an acute angle from the corner of his mouth, stood a tall, strong, heavily built man who could be none other than the famous McGinty himself. He was a black-maned

giant, bearded to the cheek-bones, and with a shock of raven hair which fell to his collar. His complexion was as swarthy as that of an Italian, and his eyes were of a strange dead black, which, combined with a slight squint, gave them a particularly sinister appearance.

All else in the man—his noble proportions, his fine features, and his frank bearing—fitted in with that jovial, man-to-man manner which he affected. Here, one would say, is a bluff, honest fellow, whose heart would be sound however rude his outspoken words might seem. It was only when those dead, dark eyes, deep and remorseless, were turned upon a man that he shrank within himself, feeling that he was face to face with an infinite possibility of latent evil, with a strength and courage and cunning behind it which made it a thousand times more deadly.

Having had a good look at his man, McMurdo elbowed his way forward with his usual careless audacity, and pushed himself through the little group of courtiers who were fawning upon the powerful boss, laughing uproariously at the smallest of his jokes. The young stranger's bold gray eyes looked back fearlessly through their glasses at the deadly black ones which turned sharply upon him.

"Well, young man, I can't call your face to mind."

"I'm new here, Mr. McGinty."

"You are not so new that you can't give a gentleman his proper title."

"He's Councillor McGinty, young man," said a voice from the group.

"I'm sorry, Councillor. I'm strange to the ways of the place. But I was advised to see you."

"Well, you see me. This is all there is. What d'you think of me?"

"Well, it's early days. If your heart is as big as your body, and your soul as fine as your face, then I'd ask for nothing better," said McMurdo.

"By Gar! you've got an Irish tongue in your head anyhow," cried the saloon-keeper, not quite certain whether to humour this audacious visitor or to stand upon his dignity. "So you are good enough to pass my appearance?"

"Sure," said McMurdo.

"And you were told to see me?"

"I was."

"And who told you?"

"Brother Scanlan of Lodge 341, Vermissa. I drink your health, Councillor, and to our better acquaintance." He raised a glass with which he had been served to his lips and elevated his little finger as he drank it.

McGinty, who had been watching him narrowly, raised his thick black eyebrows. "Oh, it's like that, is it?" said he. "I'll have to look a bit closer into this, Mister—"

"McMurdo."

"A bit closer, Mr. McMurdo; for we don't take folk on trust in these parts, nor believe all we're told neither. Come in here for a moment, behind the bar."

There was a small room there, lined with barrels. McGinty carefully closed the door, and then seated himself on one of them, biting thoughtfully on his cigar and surveying his companion with those disquieting eyes. For a couple of minutes he sat in complete silence. McMurdo bore the inspection cheerfully, one hand in his coat pocket, the other twisting his brown moustache. Suddenly McGinty stooped and produced a wicked-looking revolver.

"See here, my joker," said he, "if I thought you were playing any game on us, it would be short work for you."

"This is a strange welcome," McMurdo answered with some dignity, "for the Bodymaster of a lodge of Freemen to give to a stranger brother."

"Ay, but it's just that same that you have to prove," said McGinty, "and God help you if you fail! Where were you

made?"

"Lodge 29, Chicago."

"When?"

"June 24, 1872."

"What Bodymaster?"

"James H. Scott."

"Who is your district ruler?"

"Bartholomew Wilson."

"Hum! You seem glib enough in your tests. What are you doing here?"

"Working, the same as you—but a poorer job."

"You have your back answer quick enough."

"Yes, I was always quick of speech."

"Are you quick of action?"

"I have had that name among those that knew me best."

"Well, we may try you sooner than you think. Have you heard anything of the lodge in these parts?"

"I've heard that it takes a man to be a brother."

"True for you, Mr. McMurdo. Why did you leave Chicago?"

"I'm damned if I tell you that!"

McGinty opened his eyes. He was not used to being answered in such fashion, and it amused him. "Why won't you tell me?"

"Because no brother may tell another a lie."

"Then the truth is too bad to tell?"

"You can put it that way if you like."

"See here, mister, you can't expect me, as Bodymaster, to pass into the lodge a man for whose past he can't answer."

McMurdo looked puzzled. Then he took a worn newspaper cutting from an inner pocket.

"You wouldn't squeal on a fellow?" said he.

"I'll wipe my hand across your face if you say such words to me!" cried McGinty hotly.

"You are right, Councillor," said McMurdo meekly. "I should apologize. I spoke without thought. Well, I know that I am safe in your hands. Look at that clipping."

McGinty glanced his eyes over the account of the shooting of one Jonas Pinto, in the Lake Saloon, Market Street, Chicago, in the New Year week of 1874.

"Your work?" he asked, as he handed back the paper.

McMurdo nodded.

"Why did you shoot him?"

"I was helping Uncle Sam to make dollars. Maybe mine were not as good gold as his, but they looked as well and were cheaper to make. This man Pinto helped me to shove the queer—"

"To do what?"

"Well, it means to pass the dollars out into circulation. Then he said he would split. Maybe he did split. I didn't wait to see. I just killed him and lighted out for the coal country."

"Why the coal country?"

" 'Cause I'd read in the papers that they weren't too particular in those parts."

McGinty laughed. "You were first a coiner and then a murderer, and you came to these parts because you thought you'd be welcome."

"That's about the size of it," McMurdo answered.

"Well, I guess you'll go far. Say, can you make those dollars yet?"

McMurdo took half a dozen from his pocket. "Those never passed the Philadelphia mint," said he.

"You don't say!" McGinty held them to the light in his enormous hand, which was hairy as a gorilla's. "I can see no

difference. Gar! you'll be a mighty useful brother, I'm thinking! We can do with a bad man or two among us, Friend McMurdo: for there are times when we have to take our own part. We'd soon be against the wall if we didn't shove back at those that were pushing us."

"Well, I guess I'll do my share of shoving with the rest of the boys."

"You seem to have a good nerve. You didn't squirm when I shoved this gun at you."

"It was not me that was in danger."

"Who then?"

"It was you, Councillor." McMurdo drew a cocked pistol from the side pocket of his pea-jacket. "I was covering you all the time. I guess my shot would have been as quick as yours."

"By Gar!" McGinty flushed an angry red and then burst into a roar of laughter. "Say, we've had no such holy terror come to hand this many a year. I reckon the lodge will learn to be proud of you.... Well, what the hell do you want? And can't I speak alone with a gentleman for five minutes but you must butt in on us?"

The bartender stood abashed. "I'm sorry, Councillor, but it's Ted Baldwin. He says he must see you this very minute."

The message was unnecessary; for the set, cruel face of the man himself was looking over the servant's shoulder. He pushed the bartender out and closed the door on him.

"So," said he with a furious glance at McMurdo, "you got here first, did you? I've a word to say to you, Councillor, about this man."

"Then say it here and now before my face," cried McMurdo.

"I'll say it at my own time, in my own way."

"Tut! Tut!" said McGinty, getting off his barrel. "This will never do. We have a new brother here, Baldwin, and it's not for us to greet him in such fashion. Hold out your hand, man, and make it up!"

"Never!" cried Baldwin in a fury.

"I've offered to fight him if he thinks I have wronged him," said McMurdo. "I'll fight him with fists, or, if that won't satisfy him, I'll fight him any other way he chooses. Now, I'll leave it to you, Councillor, to judge between us as a Bodymaster should."

"What is it, then?"

"A young lady. She's free to choose for herself."

"Is she?" cried Baldwin.

"As between two brothers of the lodge I should say that she was," said the Boss.

"Oh, that's your ruling, is it?"

"Yes, it is, Ted Baldwin," said McGinty, with a wicked stare. "Is it you that would dispute it?"

"You would throw over one that has stood by you this five years in favour of a man that you never saw before in your life? You're not Bodymaster for life, Jack McGinty, and by God! when it comes to a vote—"

The Councillor sprang at him like a tiger. His hand closed round the other's neck, and he hurled him back across one of the barrels. In his mad fury he would have squeezed the life out of him if McMurdo had not interfered.

"Easy, Councillor! For heaven's sake, go easy!" he cried, as he dragged him back.

McGinty released his hold, and Baldwin, cowed and shaken gasping for breath, and shivering in every limb, as one who has looked over the very edge of death, sat up on the barrel over which he had been hurled.

"You've been asking for it this many a day, Ted Baldwin—now you've got it!" cried McGinty, his huge chest rising and falling. "Maybe you think if I was voted down from Bodymaster you would find yourself in my shoes. It's for the lodge to say that. But so long as I am the chief I'll have no man lift his voice against me or my rulings."

"I have nothing against you," mumbled Baldwin, feeling his

throat.

"Well, then," cried the other, relapsing in a moment into a bluff joviality, "we are all good friends again and there's an end of the matter."

He took a bottle of champagne down from the shelf and twisted out the cork.

"See now," he continued, as he filled three high glasses. "Let us drink the quarrelling toast of the lodge. After that, as you know, there can be no bad blood between us. Now, then, the left hand on the apple of my throat. I say to you, Ted Baldwin, what is the offense, sir?"

"The clouds are heavy," answered Baldwin.

"But they will forever brighten."

"And this I swear!"

The men drank their glasses, and the same ceremony was performed between Baldwin and McMurdo.

"There!" cried McGinty, rubbing his hands. "That's the end of the black blood. You come under lodge discipline if it goes further, and that's a heavy hand in these parts, as Brother Baldwin knows—and as you will damn soon find out, Brother McMurdo, if you ask for trouble!"

"Faith, I'd be slow to do that," said McMurdo. He held out his hand to Baldwin. "I'm quick to quarrel and quick to forgive. It's my hot Irish blood, they tell me. But it's over for me, and I bear no grudge."

Baldwin had to take the proffered hand; for the baleful eye of the terrible Boss was upon him. But his sullen face showed how little the words of the other had moved him.

McGinty clapped them both on the shoulders. "Tut! These girls! These girls!" he cried. "To think that the same petticoats should come between two of my boys! It's the devil's own luck! Well, it's the colleen inside of them that must settle the question; for it's outside the jurisdiction of a Bodymaster—and the Lord be praised for that! We have enough on us, without the women as well. You'll have to be affiliated to Lodge 341,

Brother McMurdo. We have our own ways and methods, different from Chicago. Saturday night is our meeting, and if you come then, we'll make you free forever of the Vermissa Valley."

CHAPTER 3 LODGE 341, VERMISSA

On the day following the evening which had contained so many exciting events, McMurdo moved his lodgings from old Jacob Shafter's and took up his quarters at the Widow MacNamara's on the extreme outskirts of the town. Scanlan, his original acquaintance aboard the train, had occasion shortly afterwards to move into Vermissa, and the two lodged together. There was no other boarder, and the hostess was an easy-going old Irishwoman who left them to themselves; so that they had a freedom for speech and action welcome to men who had secrets in common.

Shafter had relented to the extent of letting McMurdo come to his meals there when he liked; so that his intercourse with Ettie was by no means broken. On the contrary, it drew closer and more intimate as the weeks went by.

In his bedroom at his new abode McMurdo felt it safe to take out the coining moulds, and under many a pledge of secrecy a number of brothers from the lodge were allowed to come in and see them, each carrying away in his pocket some examples of the false money, so cunningly struck that there was never the slightest difficulty or danger in passing it. Why, with such a wonderful art at his command, McMurdo should condescend to work at all was a perpetual mystery to his companions; though he made it clear to anyone who asked him that if he lived without any visible means it would very quickly bring the police upon his track.

One policeman was indeed after him already; but the incident, as luck would have it, did the adventurer a great deal more good than harm.

After the first introduction there were few evenings when he did not find his way to McGinty's saloon, there to make closer acquaintance with "the boys," which was the jovial title by which the dangerous gang who infested the place were known to one another. His dashing manner and fearlessness of speech made him a favourite with them all; while the rapid and scientific way in which he polished off his antagonist in an "all in" bar-room scrap earned the respect of that rough community. Another incident, however, raised him even higher in their estimation.

Just at the crowded hour one night, the door opened and a man entered with the quiet blue uniform and peaked cap of the mine police. This was a special body raised by the railways and colliery owners to supplement the efforts of the ordinary civil police, who were perfectly helpless in the face of the organized ruffianism which terrorized the district. There was a hush as he entered, and many a curious glance was cast at him; but the relations between policemen and criminals are peculiar in some parts of the States, and McGinty himself, standing behind his counter, showed no surprise when the policeman enrolled himself among his customers.

"A straight whisky; for the night is bitter," said the police officer. "I don't think we have met before, Councillor?"

"You'll be the new captain?" said McGinty.

"That's so. We're looking to you, Councillor, and to the other leading citizens, to help us in upholding law and order in this township. Captain Marvin is my name."

"We'd do better without you, Captain Marvin," said McGinty coldly; "for we have our own police of the township, and no need for any imported goods. What are you but the paid tool of the capitalists, hired by them to club or shoot your poorer fellow citizen?"

"Well, well, we won't argue about that," said the police officer good-humouredly. "I expect we all do our duty same as we see it; but we can't all see it the same." He had drunk off his glass and had turned to go, when his eyes fell upon the face of Jack McMurdo, who was scowling at his elbow. "Hullo!

Hullo!" he cried, looking him up and down. "Here's an old acquaintance!"

McMurdo shrank away from him. "I was never a friend to you nor any other cursed copper in my life," said he.

"An acquaintance isn't always a friend," said the police captain, grinning. "You're Jack McMurdo of Chicago, right enough, and don't you deny it!"

McMurdo shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not denying it," said he. "D'ye think I'm ashamed of my own name?"

"You've got good cause to be, anyhow."

"What the devil d'you mean by that?" he roared with his fists clenched.

"No, no, Jack, bluster won't do with me. I was an officer in Chicago before ever I came to this darned coal bunker, and I know a Chicago crook when I see one."

McMurdo's face fell. "Don't tell me that you're Marvin of the Chicago Central!" he cried.

"Just the same old Teddy Marvin, at your service. We haven't forgotten the shooting of Jonas Pinto up there."

"I never shot him."

"Did you not? That's good impartial evidence, ain't it? Well, his death came in uncommon handy for you, or they would have had you for shoving the queer. Well, we can let that be bygones; for, between you and me—and perhaps I'm going further than my duty in saying it—they could get no clear case against you, and Chicago's open to you to-morrow."

"I'm very well where I am."

"Well, I've given you the pointer, and you're a sulky dog not to thank me for it."

"Well, I suppose you mean well, and I do thank you," said McMurdo in no very gracious manner.

"It's mum with me so long as I see you living on the straight," said the captain. "But, by the Lord! if you get off after

this, it's another story! So good-night to you—and good-night, Councillor."

He left the bar-room; but not before he had created a local hero. McMurdo's deeds in far Chicago had been whispered before. He had put off all questions with a smile, as one who did not wish to have greatness thrust upon him. But now the thing was officially confirmed. The bar loafers crowded round him and shook him heartily by the hand. He was free of the community from that time on. He could drink hard and show little trace of it; but that evening, had his mate Scanlan not been at hand to lead him home, the fêted hero would surely have spent his night under the bar.

On a Saturday night McMurdo was introduced to the lodge. He had thought to pass in without ceremony as being an initiate of Chicago; but there were particular rites in Vermissa of which they were proud, and these had to be undergone by every postulant. The assembly met in a large room reserved for such purposes at the Union House. Some sixty members assembled at Vermissa; but that by no means represented the full strength of the organization, for there were several other lodges in the valley, and others across the mountains on each side, who exchanged members when any serious business was afoot, so that a crime might be done by men who were strangers to the locality. Altogether there were not less than five hundred scattered over the coal district.

In the bare assembly room the men were gathered round a long table. At the side was a second one laden with bottles and glasses, on which some members of the company were already turning their eyes. McGinty sat at the head with a flat black velvet cap upon his shock of tangled black hair, and a coloured purple stole round his neck; so that he seemed to be a priest presiding over some diabolical ritual. To right and left of him were the higher lodge officials, the cruel, handsome face of Ted Baldwin among them. Each of these wore some scarf or medallion as emblem of his office.

They were, for the most part, men of mature age; but the rest of the company consisted of young fellows from eighteen to twenty-five, the ready and capable agents who carried out

the commands of their seniors. Among the older men were many whose features showed the tigerish, lawless souls within; but looking at the rank and file it was difficult to believe that these eager and open-faced young fellows were in very truth a dangerous gang of murderers, whose minds had suffered such complete moral perversion that they took a horrible pride in their proficiency at the business, and looked with deepest respect at the man who had the reputation of making what they called "a clean job."

To their contorted natures it had become a spirited and chivalrous thing to volunteer for service against some man who had never injured them, and whom in many cases they had never seen in their lives. The crime committed, they quarrelled as to who had actually struck the fatal blow, and amused one another and the company by describing the cries and contortions of the murdered man.

At first they had shown some secrecy in their arrangements; but at the time which this narrative describes their proceedings were extraordinarily open, for the repeated failures of the law had proved to them that on the one hand, no one would dare to witness against them, and on the other they had an unlimited number of stanch witnesses upon whom they could call, and a well-filled treasure chest from which they could draw the funds to engage the best legal talent in the state. In ten long years of outrage there had been no single conviction, and the only danger that ever threatened the Scowrers lay in the victim himself—who, however outnumbered and taken by surprise, might and occasionally did leave his mark upon his assailants.

McMurdo had been warned that some ordeal lay before him; but no one would tell him in what it consisted. He was led now into an outer room by two solemn brothers. Through the partition he could hear the murmur of many voices from the assembly. Once or twice he caught the sound of his own name, and he knew that they were discussing his candidacy. Then there entered an inner guard with a green and gold sash across his chest.

"The Bodymaster orders that he shall be trussed, blinded, and entered," said he.

The three of them removed his coat, turned up the sleeve of his right arm, and finally passed a rope round above the elbows and made it fast. They next placed a thick black cap right over his head and the upper part of his face, so that he could see nothing. He was then led into the assembly hall.

It was pitch dark and very oppressive under his hood. He heard the rustle and murmur of the people round him, and then the voice of McGinty sounded dull and distant through the covering of his ears.

"John McMurdo," said the voice, "are you already a member of the Ancient Order of Freemen?"

He bowed in assent.

"Is your lodge No. 29, Chicago?"

He bowed again.

"Dark nights are unpleasant," said the voice.

"Yes, for strangers to travel," he answered.

"The clouds are heavy."

"Yes, a storm is approaching."

"Are the brethren satisfied?" asked the Bodymaster.

There was a general murmur of assent.

"We know, Brother, by your sign and by your countersign that you are indeed one of us," said McGinty. "We would have you know, however, that in this county and in other counties of these parts we have certain rites, and also certain duties of our own which call for good men. Are you ready to be tested?"

"I am."

"Are you of stout heart?"

"I am."

"Take a stride forward to prove it."

As the words were said he felt two hard points in front of his eyes, pressing upon them so that it appeared as if he could not move forward without a danger of losing them. None

the less, he nerved himself to step resolutely out, and as he did so the pressure melted away. There was a low murmur of applause.

"He is of stout heart," said the voice. "Can you bear pain?"

"As well as another," he answered.

"Test him!"

It was all he could do to keep himself from screaming out, for an agonizing pain shot through his forearm. He nearly fainted at the sudden shock of it; but he bit his lip and clenched his hands to hide his agony.

"I can take more than that," said he.

This time there was loud applause. A finer first appearance had never been made in the lodge. Hands clapped him on the back, and the hood was plucked from his head. He stood blinking and smiling amid the congratulations of the brothers.

"One last word, Brother McMurdo," said McGinty. "You have already sworn the oath of secrecy and fidelity, and you are aware that the punishment for any breach of it is instant and inevitable death?"

"I am," said McMurdo.

"And you accept the rule of the Bodymaster for the time being under all circumstances?"

"I do."

"Then in the name of Lodge 341, Vermissa, I welcome you to its privileges and debates. You will put the liquor on the table, Brother Scanlan, and we will drink to our worthy brother."

McMurdo's coat had been brought to him; but before putting it on he examined his right arm, which still smarted heavily. There on the flesh of the forearm was a circle with a triangle within it, deep and red, as the branding iron had left it. One or two of his neighbours pulled up their sleeves and showed their own lodge marks.

"We've all had it," said one; "but not all as brave as you over

it."

"Tut! It was nothing," said he; but it burned and ached all the same.

When the drinks which followed the ceremony of initiation had all been disposed of, the business of the lodge proceeded. McMurdo, accustomed only to the prosaic performances of Chicago, listened with open ears and more surprise than he ventured to show to what followed.

"The first business on the agenda paper," said McGinty, "is to read the following letter from Division Master Windle of Merton County Lodge 249. He says:

"Dear Sir:

There is a job to be done on Andrew Rae of Rae & Sturmash, coal owners near this place. You will remember that your lodge owes us a return, having had the service of two brethren in the matter of the patrolman last fall. You will send two good men, they will be taken charge of by Treasurer Higgins of this lodge, whose address you know. He will show them when to act and where. Yours in freedom,

J. W. Windle, D. M. A. O. F.

"Windle has never refused us when we have had occasion to ask for the loan of a man or two, and it is not for us to refuse him." McGinty paused and looked round the room with his dull, malevolent eyes. "Who will volunteer for the job?"

Several young fellows held up their hands. The Bodymaster looked at them with an approving smile.

"You'll do, Tiger Cormac. If you handle it as well as you did the last, you won't be wrong. And you, Wilson."

"I've no pistol," said the volunteer, a mere boy in his teens.

"It's your first, is it not? Well, you have to be blooded some time. It will be a great start for you. As to the pistol, you'll find it waiting for you, or I'm mistaken. If you report yourselves on Monday, it will be time enough. You'll get a great welcome when you return."

"Any reward this time?" asked Cormac, a thick-set, dark-faced, brutal-looking young man, whose ferocity had earned him the nickname of "Tiger."

"Never mind the reward. You just do it for the honour of the thing. Maybe when it is done there will be a few odd dollars at the bottom of the box."

"What has the man done?" asked young Wilson.

"Sure, it's not for the likes of you to ask what the man has done. He has been judged over there. That's no business of ours. All we have to do is to carry it out for them, same as they would for us. Speaking of that, two brothers from the Merton lodge are coming over to us next week to do some business in this quarter."

"Who are they?" asked someone.

"Faith, it is wiser not to ask. If you know nothing, you can testify nothing, and no trouble can come of it. But they are men who will make a clean job when they are about it."

"And time, too!" cried Ted Baldwin. "Folk are gettin' out of hand in these parts. It was only last week that three of our men were turned off by Foreman Blaker. It's been owing him a long time, and he'll get it full and proper."

"Get what?" McMurdo whispered to his neighbour.

"The business end of a buckshot cartridge!" cried the man with a loud laugh. "What think you of our ways, Brother?'

McMurdo's criminal soul seemed to have already absorbed the spirit of the vile association of which he was now a member. "I like it well," said he. "'Tis a proper place for a lad of mettle."

Several of those who sat around heard his words and applauded them.

"What's that?" cried the black-maned Bodymaster from the end of the table.

"'Tis our new brother, sir, who finds our ways to his taste."

McMurdo rose to his feet for an instant. "I would say, Eminent Bodymaster, that if a man should be wanted I should

take it as an honour to be chosen to help the lodge."

There was great applause at this. It was felt that a new sun was pushing its rim above the horizon. To some of the elders it seemed that the progress was a little too rapid.

"I would move," said the secretary, Harraway, a vulture-faced old graybeard who sat near the chairman, "that Brother McMurdo should wait until it is the good pleasure of the lodge to employ him."

"Sure, that was what I meant, I'm in your hands," said McMurdo.

"Your time will come, Brother," said the chairman. "We have marked you down as a willing man, and we believe that you will do good work in these parts. There is a small matter to-night in which you may take a hand if it so please you."

"I will wait for something that is worthwhile."

"You can come to-night, anyhow, and it will help you to know what we stand for in this community. I will make the announcement later. Meanwhile," he glanced at his agenda paper, "I have one or two more points to bring before the meeting. First of all, I will ask the treasurer as to our bank balance. There is the pension to Jim Carnaway's widow. He was struck down doing the work of the lodge, and it is for us to see that she is not the loser."

"Jim was shot last month when they tried to kill Chester Wilcox of Marley Creek," McMurdo's neighbour informed him.

"The funds are good at the moment," said the treasurer, with the bankbook in front of him. "The firms have been generous of late. Max Linder & Co. paid five hundred to be left alone. Walker Brothers sent in a hundred; but I took it on myself to return it and ask for five. If I do not hear by Wednesday, their winding gear may get out of order. We had to burn their breaker last year before they became reasonable. Then the West Section Coaling Company has paid its annual contribution. We have enough on hand to meet any obligations."

"What about Archie Swindon?" asked a brother.

"He has sold out and left the district. The old devil left a note for us to say that he had rather be a free crossing sweeper in New York than a large mine owner under the power of a ring of blackmailers. By Gar! it was as well that he made a break for it before the note reached us! I guess he won't show his face in this valley again."

An elderly, clean-shaved man with a kindly face and a good brow rose from the end of the table which faced the chairman. "Mr. Treasurer," he asked, "may I ask who has bought the property of this man that we have driven out of the district?"

"Yes, Brother Morris. It has been bought by the State & Merton County Railroad Company."

"And who bought the mines of Todman and of Lee that came into the market in the same way last year?"

"The same company, Brother Morris."

"And who bought the ironworks of Manson and of Shuman, and of Van Deher and of Atwood, which have all been given up of late?"

"They were all bought by the West Gilmerton General Mining Company."

"I don't see, Brother Morris," said the chairman, "that it matters to us who buys them, since they can't carry them out of the district."

"With all respect to you, Eminent Bodymaster, I think it may matter very much to us. This process has been going on now for ten long years. We are gradually driving all the small men out of trade. What is the result? We find in their places great companies like the Railroad or the General Iron, who have their directors in New York or Philadelphia, and care nothing for our threats. We can take it out of their local bosses; but it only means that others will be sent in their stead. And we are making it dangerous for ourselves. The small men could not harm us. They had not the money nor the power. So long as we did not squeeze them too dry, they would stay on under our power. But if these big companies find that we stand between them and their profits, they will spare no pains and no expense

to hunt us down and bring us to court."

There was a hush at these ominous words, and every face darkened as gloomy looks were exchanged. So omnipotent and unchallenged had they been that the very thought that there was possible retribution in the background had been banished from their minds. And yet the idea struck a chill to the most reckless of them.

"It is my advice," the speaker continued, "that we go easier upon the small men. On the day that they have all been driven out the power of this society will have been broken."

Unwelcome truths are not popular. There were angry cries as the speaker resumed his seat. McGinty rose with gloom upon his brow.

"Brother Morris," said he, "you were always a croaker. So long as the members of this lodge stand together there is no power in the United States that can touch them. Sure, have we not tried it often enough in the law courts? I expect the big companies will find it easier to pay than to fight, same as the little companies do. And now, Brethren," McGinty took off his black velvet cap and his stole as he spoke, "this lodge has finished its business for the evening, save for one small matter which may be mentioned when we are parting. The time has now come for fraternal refreshment and for harmony."

Strange indeed is human nature. Here were these men, to whom murder was familiar, who again and again had struck down the father of the family, some man against whom they had no personal feeling, without one thought of compunction or of compassion for his weeping wife or helpless children, and yet the tender or pathetic in music could move them to tears. McMurdo had a fine tenor voice, and if he had failed to gain the good will of the lodge before, it could no longer have been withheld after he had thrilled them with "I'm Sitting on the Stile, Mary," and "On the Banks of Allan Water."

In his very first night the new recruit had made himself one of the most popular of the brethren, marked already for advancement and high office. There were other qualities needed, however, besides those of good fellowship, to make a

worthy Freeman, and of these he was given an example before the evening was over. The whisky bottle had passed round many times, and the men were flushed and ripe for mischief when their Bodymaster rose once more to address them.

"Boys," said he, "there's one man in this town that wants trimming up, and it's for you to see that he gets it. I'm speaking of James Stanger of the *Herald*. You've seen how he's been opening his mouth against us again?"

There was a murmur of assent with many a muttered oath. McGinty took a slip of paper from his waistcoat pocket.

"LAW AND ORDER!"

That's how he heads it.

> "REIGN OF TERROR IN THE COAL AND IRON DISTRICT"
>
> Twelve years have now elapsed since the first assassinations which proved the existence of a criminal organization in our midst. From that day these outrages have never ceased, until now they have reached a pitch which makes us the opprobrium of the civilized world. Is it for such results as this that our great country welcomes to its bosom the alien who flies from the despotisms of Europe? Is it that they shall themselves become tyrants over the very men who have given them shelter, and that a state of terrorism and lawlessness should be established under the very shadow of the sacred folds of the starry Flag of Freedom which would raise horror in our minds if we read of it as existing under the most effete monarchy of the East? The men are known. The organization is patent and public. How long are we to endure it? Can we forever live—

"Sure, I've read enough of the slush!" cried the chairman, tossing the paper down upon the table. "That's what he says of us. The question I'm asking you is what shall we say to him?"

"Kill him!" cried a dozen fierce voices.

"I protest against that," said Brother Morris, the man of the good brow and shaved face. "I tell you, Brethren, that our hand is too heavy in this valley, and that there will come a point where in self-defense every man will unite to crush us out. James Stanger is an old man. He is respected in the township

and the district. His paper stands for all that is solid in the valley. If that man is struck down, there will be a stir through this state that will only end with our destruction."

"And how would they bring about our destruction, Mr. Standback?" cried McGinty. "Is it by the police? Sure, half of them are in our pay and half of them afraid of us. Or is it by the law courts and the judge? Haven't we tried that before now, and what ever came of it?"

"There is a Judge Lynch that might try the case," said Brother Morris.

A general shout of anger greeted the suggestion.

"I have but to raise my finger," cried McGinty, "and I could put two hundred men into this town that would clear it out from end to end." Then suddenly raising his voice and bending his huge black brows into a terrible frown, "See here, Brother Morris, I have my eye on you, and have had for some time! You've no heart yourself, and you try to take the heart out of others. It will be an ill day for you, Brother Morris, when your own name comes on our agenda paper, and I'm thinking that it's just there that I ought to place it."

Morris had turned deadly pale, and his knees seemed to give way under him as he fell back into his chair. He raised his glass in his trembling hand and drank before he could answer. "I apologize, Eminent Bodymaster, to you and to every brother in this lodge if I have said more than I should. I am a faithful member—you all know that—and it is my fear lest evil come to the lodge which makes me speak in anxious words. But I have greater trust in your judgment than in my own, Eminent Bodymaster, and I promise you that I will not offend again."

The Bodymaster's scowl relaxed as he listened to the humble words. "Very good, Brother Morris. It's myself that would be sorry if it were needful to give you a lesson. But so long as I am in this chair we shall be a united lodge in word and in deed. And now, boys," he continued, looking round at the company, "I'll say this much, that if Stanger got his full deserts there would be more trouble than we need ask for. These editors hang together, and every journal in the state would be

crying out for police and troops. But I guess you can give him a pretty severe warning. Will you fix it, Brother Baldwin?"

"Sure!" said the young man eagerly.

"How many will you take?"

"Half a dozen, and two to guard the door. You'll come, Gower, and you, Mansel, and you, Scanlan, and the two Willabys."

"I promised the new brother he should go," said the chairman.

Ted Baldwin looked at McMurdo with eyes which showed that he had not forgotten nor forgiven. "Well, he can come if he wants," he said in a surly voice. "That's enough. The sooner we get to work the better."

The company broke up with shouts and yells and snatches of drunken song. The bar was still crowded with revellers, and many of the brethren remained there. The little band who had been told off for duty passed out into the street, proceeding in twos and threes along the sidewalk so as not to provoke attention. It was a bitterly cold night, with a half-moon shining brilliantly in a frosty, star-spangled sky. The men stopped and gathered in a yard which faced a high building. The words "Vermissa Herald" were printed in gold lettering between the brightly lit windows. From within came the clanking of the printing press.

"Here, you," said Baldwin to McMurdo, "you can stand below at the door and see that the road is kept open for us. Arthur Willaby can stay with you. You others come with me. Have no fears, boys; for we have a dozen witnesses that we are in the Union Bar at this very moment."

It was nearly midnight, and the street was deserted save for one or two revellers upon their way home. The party crossed the road, and, pushing open the door of the newspaper office, Baldwin and his men rushed in and up the stair which faced them. McMurdo and another remained below. From the room above came a shout, a cry for help, and then the sound of trampling feet and of falling chairs. An instant later a gray-

haired man rushed out on the landing.

He was seized before he could get farther, and his spectacles came tinkling down to McMurdo's feet. There was a thud and a groan. He was on his face, and half a dozen sticks were clattering together as they fell upon him. He writhed, and his long, thin limbs quivered under the blows. The others ceased at last, but Baldwin, his cruel face set in an infernal smile, was hacking at the man's head, which he vainly endeavoured to defend with his arms. His white hair was dabbled with patches of blood. Baldwin was still stooping over his victim, putting in a short, vicious blow whenever he could see a part exposed, when McMurdo dashed up the stair and pushed him back.

"You'll kill the man," said he. "Drop it!"

Baldwin looked at him in amazement. "Curse you!" he cried. "Who are you to interfere—you that are new to the lodge? Stand back!" He raised his stick, but McMurdo had whipped his pistol out of his hip pocket.

"Stand back yourself!" he cried. "I'll blow your face in if you lay a hand on me. As to the lodge, wasn't it the order of the Bodymaster that the man was not to be killed—and what are you doing but killing him?"

"It's truth he says," remarked one of the men.

"By Gar! you'd best hurry yourselves!" cried the man below. "The windows are all lighting up, and you'll have the whole town here inside of five minutes."

There was indeed the sound of shouting in the street, and a little group of compositors and pressmen was forming in the hall below and nerving itself to action. Leaving the limp and motionless body of the editor at the head of the stair, the criminals rushed down and made their way swiftly along the street. Having reached the Union House, some of them mixed with the crowd in McGinty's saloon, whispering across the bar to the Boss that the job had been well carried through. Others, and among them McMurdo, broke away into side streets, and so by devious paths to their own homes.

CHAPTER 4 THE VALLEY OF FEAR

When McMurdo awoke next morning he had good reason to remember his initiation into the lodge. His head ached with the effect of the drink, and his arm, where he had been branded, was hot and swollen. Having his own peculiar source of income, he was irregular in his attendance at his work; so he had a late breakfast, and remained at home for the morning writing a long letter to a friend. Afterwards he read the *Daily Herald*. In a special column put in at the last moment he read:

> OUTRAGE AT THE HERALD OFFICE—EDITOR SERIOUSLY INJURED.

It was a short account of the facts with which he was himself more familiar than the writer could have been. It ended with the statement:

> The matter is now in the hands of the police; but it can hardly be hoped that their exertions will be attended by any better results than in the past. Some of the men were recognized, and there is hope that a conviction be obtained. The source of the outrage was, it need hardly be said, that infamous society which has held this community in bondage for so long a period, and against which the *Herald* has taken so uncompromising a stand. Mr. Stanger's many friends will rejoice to hear that though he has been cruelly and brutally beaten, and though he has sustained severe injuries about the head, there is no immediate danger to his life.

Below it stated that a guard of police, armed with Winchester rifles, had been requisitioned for the defense of the office.

McMurdo had laid down the paper, and was

lighting his pipe with a hand which was shaky from the excesses of the previous evening, when there was a knock outside, and his landlady brought to him a note which had just been handed in by a lad. It was unsigned, and ran thus:

> I should wish to speak to you; but would rather not do so in your house. You will find me beside the flagstaff upon Miller Hill. If you will come there now, I have something which it is important for you to hear and for me to say.

McMurdo read the note twice with the utmost surprise; for he could not imagine what it meant or who was the author of it. Had it been in a feminine hand, he might have imagined that it was the beginning of one of those adventures which had been familiar enough in his past life. But it was the writing of a man, and of a well educated one, too. Finally, after some hesitation, he determined to see the matter through.

Miller Hill is an ill-kept public park in the very centre of the town. In summer it is a favourite resort of the people; but in winter it is desolate enough. From the top of it one has a view not only of the whole straggling, grimy town, but of the winding valley beneath, with its scattered mines and factories blackening the snow on each side of it, and of the wooded and white-capped ranges flanking it.

McMurdo strolled up the winding path hedged in with evergreens until he reached the deserted restaurant which forms the centre of summer gaiety. Beside it was a bare flagstaff, and underneath it a man, his hat drawn down and the collar of his overcoat turned up. When he turned his face McMurdo saw that it was Brother Morris, he who had incurred the anger of the Bodymaster the night before. The lodge sign was given and exchanged as they met.

"I wanted to have a word with you, Mr. McMurdo," said the older man, speaking with a hesitation which showed that he was on delicate ground. "It was kind of you to come."

"Why did you not put your name to the note?"

"One has to be cautious, mister. One never knows in times like these how a thing may come back to one. One never knows either who to trust or who not to trust."

"Surely one may trust brothers of the lodge."

"No, no, not always," cried Morris with vehemence. "Whatever we say, even what we think, seems to go back to that man McGinty."

"Look here!" said McMurdo sternly. "It was only last night, as you know well, that I swore good faith to our Bodymaster. Would you be asking me to break my oath?"

"If that is the view you take," said Morris sadly, "I can only say that I am sorry I gave you the trouble to come and meet me. Things have come to a bad pass when two free citizens cannot speak their thoughts to each other."

McMurdo, who had been watching his companion very narrowly, relaxed some in his bearing. "Sure I spoke for myself only," said he. "I am a newcomer, as you know, and I am strange to it all. It is not for me to open my mouth, Mr. Morris, and if you think well to say anything to me I am here to hear it."

"And to take it back to Boss McGinty!" said Morris bitterly.

"Indeed, then, you do me injustice there," cried McMurdo. "For myself I am loyal to the lodge, and so I tell you straight; but I would be a poor creature if I were to repeat to any other what you might say to me in confidence. It will go no further than me; though I warn you that you may get neither help nor sympathy."

"I have given up looking for either the one or the other," said Morris. "I may be putting my very life in your hands by what I say; but, bad as you are—and it seemed to me last night that you were shaping to be as bad as the worst—still you are new to it, and your conscience cannot yet be as hardened as theirs. That was why I thought to speak with you."

"Well, what have you to say?"

"If you give me away, may a curse be on you!"

"Sure, I said I would not."

"I would ask you, then, when you joined the Freeman's society in Chicago and swore vows of charity and fidelity, did ever it cross your mind that you might find it would lead you to

crime?"

"If you call it crime," McMurdo answered.

"Call it crime!" cried Morris, his voice vibrating with passion. "You have seen little of it if you can call it anything else. Was it crime last night when a man old enough to be your father was beaten till the blood dripped from his white hairs? Was that crime—or what else would you call it?"

"There are some would say it was war," said McMurdo, "a war of two classes with all in, so that each struck as best it could."

"Well, did you think of such a thing when you joined the Freeman's society at Chicago?"

"No, I'm bound to say I did not."

"Nor did I when I joined it at Philadelphia. It was just a benefit club and a meeting place for one's fellows. Then I heard of this place—curse the hour that the name first fell upon my ears!—and I came to better myself! My God! to better myself! My wife and three children came with me. I started a drygoods store on Market Square, and I prospered well. The word had gone round that I was a Freeman, and I was forced to join the local lodge, same as you did last night. I've the badge of shame on my forearm and something worse branded on my heart. I found that I was under the orders of a black villain and caught in a meshwork of crime. What could I do? Every word I said to make things better was taken as treason, same as it was last night. I can't get away; for all I have in the world is in my store. If I leave the society, I know well that it means murder to me, and God knows what to my wife and children. Oh, man, it is awful—awful!" He put his hands to his face, and his body shook with convulsive sobs.

McMurdo shrugged his shoulders. "You were too soft for the job," said he. "You are the wrong sort for such work."

"I had a conscience and a religion; but they made me a criminal among them. I was chosen for a job. If I backed down, I knew well what would come to me. Maybe I'm a coward. Maybe it's the thought of my poor little woman and

the children that makes me one. Anyhow I went. I guess it will haunt me forever.

"It was a lonely house, twenty miles from here, over the range yonder. I was told off for the door, same as you were last night. They could not trust me with the job. The others went in. When they came out their hands were crimson to the wrists. As we turned away a child was screaming out of the house behind us. It was a boy of five who had seen his father murdered. I nearly fainted with the horror of it, and yet I had to keep a bold and smiling face; for well I knew that if I did not it would be out of my house that they would come next with their bloody hands, and it would be my little Fred that would be screaming for his father.

"But I was a criminal then, part sharer in a murder, lost forever in this world, and lost also in the next. I am a good Catholic; but the priest would have no word with me when he heard I was a Scowrer, and I am excommunicated from my faith. That's how it stands with me. And I see you going down the same road, and I ask you what the end is to be. Are you ready to be a cold-blooded murderer also, or can we do anything to stop it?"

"What would you do?" asked McMurdo abruptly. "You would not inform?"

"God forbid!" cried Morris. "Sure, the very thought would cost me my life."

"That's well," said McMurdo. "I'm thinking that you are a weak man and that you make too much of the matter."

"Too much! Wait till you have lived here longer. Look down the valley! See the cloud of a hundred chimneys that overshadows it! I tell you that the cloud of murder hangs thicker and lower than that over the heads of the people. It is the Valley of Fear, the Valley of Death. The terror is in the hearts of the people from the dusk to the dawn. Wait, young man, and you will learn for yourself."

"Well, I'll let you know what I think when I have seen more," said McMurdo carelessly. "What is very clear is that you are not the man for the place, and that the sooner you sell

out—if you only get a dime a dollar for what the business is worth—the better it will be for you. What you have said is safe with me; but, by Gar! if I thought you were an informer—"

"No, no!" cried Morris piteously.

"Well, let it rest at that. I'll bear what you have said in mind, and maybe some day I'll come back to it. I expect you meant kindly by speaking to me like this. Now I'll be getting home."

"One word before you go," said Morris. "We may have been seen together. They may want to know what we have spoken about."

"Ah! that's well thought of."

"I offer you a clerkship in my store."

"And I refuse it. That's our business. Well, so long, Brother Morris, and may you find things go better with you in the future."

That same afternoon, as McMurdo sat smoking, lost in thought, beside the stove of his sitting-room, the door swung open and its framework was filled with the huge figure of Boss McGinty. He passed the sign, and then seating himself opposite to the young man he looked at him steadily for some time, a look which was as steadily returned.

"I'm not much of a visitor, Brother McMurdo," he said at last. "I guess I am too busy over the folk that visit me. But I thought I'd stretch a point and drop down to see you in your own house."

"I'm proud to see you here, Councillor," McMurdo answered heartily, bringing his whisky bottle out of the cupboard. "It's an honour that I had not expected."

"How's the arm?" asked the Boss.

McMurdo made a wry face. "Well, I'm not forgetting it," he said; "but it's worth it."

"Yes, it's worth it," the other answered, "to those that are loyal and go through with it and are a help to the lodge. What

were you speaking to Brother Morris about on Miller Hill this morning?"

The question came so suddenly that it was well that he had his answer prepared. He burst into a hearty laugh. "Morris didn't know I could earn a living here at home. He shan't know either, for he has got too much conscience for the likes of me. But he's a good-hearted old chap. It was his idea that I was at a loose end, and that he would do me a good turn by offering me a clerkship in a drygoods store."

"Oh, that was it?"

"Yes, that was it."

"And you refused it?"

"Sure. Couldn't I earn ten times as much in my own bedroom with four hours' work?"

"That's so. But I wouldn't get about too much with Morris."

"Why not?"

"Well, I guess because I tell you not. That's enough for most folk in these parts."

"It may be enough for most folk, but it ain't enough for me, Councillor," said McMurdo boldly. "If you are a judge of men, you'll know that."

The swarthy giant glared at him, and his hairy paw closed for an instant round the glass as though he would hurl it at the head of his companion. Then he laughed in his loud, boisterous, insincere fashion.

"You're a queer card, for sure," said he. "Well, if you want reasons, I'll give them. Did Morris say nothing to you against the lodge?"

"No."

"Nor against me?"

"No."

"Well, that's because he daren't trust you. But in his heart he is not a loyal brother. We know that well. So we watch him

and we wait for the time to admonish him. I'm thinking that the time is drawing near. There's no room for scabby sheep in our pen. But if you keep company with a disloyal man, we might think that you were disloyal, too. See?"

"There's no chance of my keeping company with him; for I dislike the man," McMurdo answered. "As to being disloyal, if it was any man but you he would not use the word to me twice."

"Well, that's enough," said McGinty, draining off his glass. "I came down to give you a word in season, and you've had it."

"I'd like to know," said McMurdo, "how you ever came to learn that I had spoken with Morris at all?"

McGinty laughed. "It's my business to know what goes on in this township," said he. "I guess you'd best reckon on my hearing all that passes. Well, time's up, and I'll just say—"

But his leave-taking was cut short in a very unexpected fashion. With a sudden crash the door flew open, and three frowning, intent faces glared in at them from under the peaks of police caps. McMurdo sprang to his feet and half drew his revolver; but his arm stopped midway as he became conscious that two Winchester rifles were levelled at his head. A man in uniform advanced into the room, a six-shooter in his hand. It was Captain Marvin, once of Chicago, and now of the Mine Constabulary. He shook his head with a half-smile at McMurdo.

"I thought you'd be getting into trouble, Mr. Crooked McMurdo of Chicago," said he. "Can't keep out of it, can you? Take your hat and come along with us."

"I guess you'll pay for this, Captain Marvin," said McGinty. "Who are you, I'd like to know, to break into a house in this fashion and molest honest, law-abiding men?"

"You're standing out in this deal, Councillor McGinty," said the police captain. "We are not out after you, but after this man McMurdo. It is for you to help, not to hinder us in our duty."

"He is a friend of mine, and I'll answer for his conduct," said the Boss.

"By all accounts, Mr. McGinty, you may have to answer for your own conduct some of these days," the captain answered. "This man McMurdo was a crook before ever he came here, and he's a crook still. Cover him, Patrolman, while I disarm him."

"There's my pistol," said McMurdo coolly. "Maybe, Captain Marvin, if you and I were alone and face to face you would not take me so easily."

"Where's your warrant?" asked McGinty. "By Gar! a man might as well live in Russia as in Vermissa while folk like you are running the police. It's a capitalist outrage, and you'll hear more of it I reckon."

"You do what you think is your duty the best way you can, Councillor. We'll look after ours."

"What am I accused of?" asked McMurdo.

"Of being concerned in the beating of old Editor Stanger at the *Herald* office. It wasn't your fault that it isn't a murder charge."

"Well, if that's all you have against him," cried McGinty with a laugh, "you can save yourself a deal of trouble by dropping it right now. This man was with me in my saloon playing poker up to midnight and I can bring a dozen to prove it."

"That's your affair, and I guess you can settle it in court tomorrow. Meanwhile, come on, McMurdo, and come quietly if you don't want a gun across your head. You stand wide, Mr. McGinty; for I warn you I will stand no resistance when I am on duty!"

So determined was the appearance of the captain that both McMurdo and his boss were forced to accept the situation. The latter managed to have a few whispered words with the prisoner before they parted.

"What about—" he jerked his thumb upward to signify the coining plant.

"All right," whispered McMurdo, who had devised a safe hiding place under the floor.

"I'll bid you good-bye," said the Boss, shaking hands. "I'll see Reilly the lawyer and take the defense upon myself. Take my word for it that they won't be able to hold you."

"I wouldn't bet on that. Guard the prisoner, you two, and shoot him if he tries any games. I'll search the house before I leave."

He did so; but apparently found no trace of the concealed plant. When he had descended he and his men escorted McMurdo to headquarters. Darkness had fallen, and a keen blizzard was blowing so that the streets were nearly deserted; but a few loiterers followed the group, and emboldened by invisibility shouted imprecations at the prisoner.

"Lynch the cursed Scowrer!" they cried. "Lynch him!" They laughed and jeered as he was pushed into the police station. After a short, formal examination from the inspector in charge he was put into the common cell. Here he found Baldwin and three other criminals of the night before, all arrested that afternoon and waiting their trial next morning.

But even within this inner fortress of the law the long arm of the Freemen was able to extend. Late at night there came a jailer with a straw bundle for their bedding, out of which he extracted two bottles of whisky, some glasses, and a pack of cards. They spent a hilarious night, without an anxious thought as to the ordeal of the morning.

Nor had they cause, as the result was to show. The magistrate could not possibly, on the evidence, have held them for a higher court. On the one hand the compositors and pressmen were forced to admit that the light was uncertain, that they were themselves much perturbed, and that it was difficult for them to swear to the identity of the assailants; although they believed that the accused were among them. Cross examined by the clever attorney who had been engaged by McGinty, they were even more nebulous in their evidence.

The injured man had already deposed that he was so taken by surprise by the suddenness of the attack that he could state nothing beyond the fact that the first man who struck him wore a moustache. He added that he knew them to be Scowrers,

since no one else in the community could possibly have any enmity to him, and he had long been threatened on account of his outspoken editorials.

On the other hand, it was clearly shown by the united and unfaltering evidence of six citizens, including that high municipal official, Councillor McGinty, that the men had been at a card party at the Union House until an hour very much later than the commission of the outrage.

Needless to say that they were discharged with something very near to an apology from the bench for the inconvenience to which they had been put, together with an implied censure of Captain Marvin and the police for their officious zeal.

The verdict was greeted with loud applause by a court in which McMurdo saw many familiar faces. Brothers of the lodge smiled and waved. But there were others who sat with compressed lips and brooding eyes as the men filed out of the dock. One of them, a little, dark-bearded, resolute fellow, put the thoughts of himself and comrades into words as the ex-prisoners passed him.

"You damned murderers!" he said. "We'll fix you yet!"

CHAPTER 5 THE DARKEST HOUR

If anything had been needed to give an impetus to Jack McMurdo's popularity among his fellows it would have been his arrest and acquittal. That a man on the very night of joining the lodge should have done something which brought him before the magistrate was a new record in the annals of the society. Already he had earned the reputation of a good boon companion, a cheery reveller, and withal a man of high temper, who would not take an insult even from the all-powerful Boss himself. But in addition to this he impressed his comrades with the idea that among them all there was not one whose brain was so ready to devise a bloodthirsty scheme, or whose hand would be more capable of carrying it out. "He'll be the boy for the clean job," said the oldsters to one another, and waited their time until they could set him to his work.

McGinty had instruments enough already, but he recognized that this was a supremely able one. He felt like a man holding a fierce bloodhound in leash. There were curs to do the smaller work; but some day he would slip this creature upon its prey. A few members of the lodge, Ted Baldwin among them, resented the rapid rise of the stranger and hated him for it; but they kept clear of him, for he was as ready to fight as to laugh.

But if he gained favour with his fellows, there was another quarter, one which had become even more vital to him, in which he lost it. Ettie Shafter's father would have nothing more to do with him, nor would he allow him to enter the house. Ettie herself was too deeply in love to give him up altogether, and yet her own good sense warned her of what would come from a marriage with a man

who was regarded as a criminal.

One morning, after a sleepless night she determined to see him, possibly for the last time, and make one strong endeavour to draw him from those evil influences which were sucking him down. She went to his house, as he had often begged her to do, and made her way into the room which he used as his sitting-room. He was seated at a table with his back turned and a letter in front of him. A sudden spirit of girlish mischief came over her—she was still only nineteen. He had not heard her when she pushed open the door. Now she tiptoed forward and laid her hand lightly upon his bended shoulders.

If she had expected to startle him, she certainly succeeded; but only in turn to be startled herself. With a tiger spring he turned on her, and his right hand was feeling for her throat. At the same instant with the other hand he crumpled up the paper that lay before him. For an instant he stood glaring. Then astonishment and joy took the place of the ferocity which had convulsed his features—a ferocity which had sent her shrinking back in horror as from something which had never before intruded into her gentle life.

"It's you!" said he, mopping his brow. "And to think that you should come to me, heart of my heart, and I should find nothing better to do than to want to strangle you! Come then, darling," and he held out his arms, "let me make it up to you."

But she had not recovered from that sudden glimpse of guilty fear which she had read in the man's face. All her woman's instinct told her that it was not the mere fright of a man who is startled. Guilt—that was it—guilt and fear!

"What's come over you, Jack?" she cried. "Why were you so scared of me? Oh, Jack, if your conscience was at ease, you would not have looked at me like that!"

"Sure, I was thinking of other things, and when you came tripping so lightly on those fairy feet of yours—"

"No, no, it was more than that, Jack." Then a sudden suspicion seized her. "Let me see that letter you were writing."

"Ah, Ettie, I couldn't do that."

Her suspicions became certainties. “It’s to another woman,” she cried. “I know it! Why else should you hold it from me? Was it to your wife that you were writing? How am I to know that you are not a married man—you, a stranger, that nobody knows?”

“I am not married, Ettie. See now, I swear it! You’re the only one woman on earth to me. By the cross of Christ I swear it!”

He was so white with passionate earnestness that she could not but believe him.

“Well, then,” she cried, “why will you not show me the letter?”

“I’ll tell you, acushla,” said he. “I’m under oath not to show it, and just as I wouldn’t break my word to you so I would keep it to those who hold my promise. It’s the business of the lodge, and even to you it’s secret. And if I was scared when a hand fell on me, can’t you understand it when it might have been the hand of a detective?”

She felt that he was telling the truth. He gathered her into his arms and kissed away her fears and doubts.

“Sit here by me, then. It’s a queer throne for such a queen; but it’s the best your poor lover can find. He’ll do better for you some of these days, I’m thinking. Now your mind is easy once again, is it not?”

“How can it ever be at ease, Jack, when I know that you are a criminal among criminals, when I never know the day that I may hear you are in court for murder? ‘McMurdo the Scowrer,’ that’s what one of our boarders called you yesterday. It went through my heart like a knife.”

“Sure, hard words break no bones.”

“But they were true.”

“Well, dear, it’s not so bad as you think. We are but poor men that are trying in our own way to get our rights.”

Ettie threw her arms round her lover’s neck. “Give it up, Jack! For my sake, for God’s sake, give it up! It was to ask you

that I came here to-day. Oh, Jack, see—I beg it of you on my bended knees! Kneeling here before you I implore you to give it up!"

He raised her and soothed her with her head against his breast.

"Sure, my darlin', you don't know what it is you are asking. How could I give it up when it would be to break my oath and to desert my comrades? If you could see how things stand with me you could never ask it of me. Besides, if I wanted to, how could I do it? You don't suppose that the lodge would let a man go free with all its secrets?"

"I've thought of that, Jack. I've planned it all. Father has saved some money. He is weary of this place where the fear of these people darkens our lives. He is ready to go. We would fly together to Philadelphia or New York, where we would be safe from them."

McMurdo laughed. "The lodge has a long arm. Do you think it could not stretch from here to Philadelphia or New York?"

"Well, then, to the West, or to England, or to Germany, where father came from—anywhere to get away from this Valley of Fear!"

McMurdo thought of old Brother Morris. "Sure it is the second time I have heard the valley so named," said he. "The shadow does indeed seem to lie heavy on some of you."

"It darkens every moment of our lives. Do you suppose that Ted Baldwin has ever forgiven us? If it were not that he fears you, what do you suppose our chances would be? If you saw the look in those dark, hungry eyes of his when they fall on me!"

"By Gar! I'd teach him better manners if I caught him at it! But see here, little girl. I can't leave here. I can't—take that from me once and for all. But if you will leave me to find my own way, I will try to prepare a way of getting honourably out of it."

"There is no honour in such a matter."

"Well, well, it's just how you look at it. But if you'll give me six months, I'll work it so that I can leave without being ashamed to look others in the face."

The girl laughed with joy. "Six months!" she cried. "Is it a promise?"

"Well, it may be seven or eight. But within a year at the furthest we will leave the valley behind us."

It was the most that Ettie could obtain, and yet it was something. There was this distant light to illuminate the gloom of the immediate future. She returned to her father's house more light-hearted than she had ever been since Jack McMurdo had come into her life.

It might be thought that as a member, all the doings of the society would be told to him; but he was soon to discover that the organization was wider and more complex than the simple lodge. Even Boss McGinty was ignorant as to many things; for there was an official named the County Delegate, living at Hobson's Patch farther down the line, who had power over several different lodges which he wielded in a sudden and arbitrary way. Only once did McMurdo see him, a sly, little gray-haired rat of a man, with a slinking gait and a sidelong glance which was charged with malice. Evans Pott was his name, and even the great Boss of Vermissa felt towards him something of the repulsion and fear which the huge Danton may have felt for the puny but dangerous Robespierre.

One day Scanlan, who was McMurdo's fellow boarder, received a note from McGinty inclosing one from Evans Pott, which informed him that he was sending over two good men, Lawler and Andrews, who had instructions to act in the neighbourhood; though it was best for the cause that no particulars as to their objects should be given. Would the Bodymaster see to it that suitable arrangements be made for their lodgings and comfort until the time for action should arrive? McGinty added that it was impossible for anyone to remain secret at the Union House, and that, therefore, he would be obliged if McMurdo and Scanlan would put the strangers up for a few days in their boarding house.

The same evening the two men arrived, each carrying his gripsack. Lawler was an elderly man, shrewd, silent, and self-contained, clad in an old black frock coat, which with his soft felt hat and ragged, grizzled beard gave him a general resemblance to an itinerant preacher. His companion Andrews was little more than a boy, frank-faced and cheerful, with the breezy manner of one who is out for a holiday and means to enjoy every minute of it. Both men were total abstainers, and behaved in all ways as exemplary members of the society, with the one simple exception that they were assassins who had often proved themselves to be most capable instruments for this association of murder. Lawler had already carried out fourteen commissions of the kind, and Andrews three.

They were, as McMurdo found, quite ready to converse about their deeds in the past, which they recounted with the half-bashful pride of men who had done good and unselfish service for the community. They were reticent, however, as to the immediate job in hand.

"They chose us because neither I nor the boy here drink," Lawler explained. "They can count on us saying no more than we should. You must not take it amiss, but it is the orders of the County Delegate that we obey."

"Sure, we are all in it together," said Scanlan, McMurdo's mate, as the four sat together at supper.

"That's true enough, and we'll talk till the cows come home of the killing of Charlie Williams or of Simon Bird, or any other job in the past. But till the work is done we say nothing."

"There are half a dozen about here that I have a word to say to," said McMurdo, with an oath. "I suppose it isn't Jack Knox of Ironhill that you are after. I'd go some way to see him get his deserts."

"No, it's not him yet."

"Or Herman Strauss?"

"No, nor him either."

"Well, if you won't tell us we can't make you; but I'd be glad to know."

Lawler smiled and shook his head. He was not to be drawn.

In spite of the reticence of their guests, Scanlan and McMurdo were quite determined to be present at what they called "the fun." When, therefore, at an early hour one morning McMurdo heard them creeping down the stairs he awakened Scanlan, and the two hurried on their clothes. When they were dressed they found that the others had stolen out, leaving the door open behind them. It was not yet dawn, and by the light of the lamps they could see the two men some distance down the street. They followed them warily, treading noiselessly in the deep snow.

The boarding house was near the edge of the town, and soon they were at the crossroads which is beyond its boundary. Here three men were waiting, with whom Lawler and Andrews held a short, eager conversation. Then they all moved on together. It was clearly some notable job which needed numbers. At this point there are several trails which lead to various mines. The strangers took that which led to the Crow Hill, a huge business which was in strong hands which had been able, thanks to their energetic and fearless New England manager, Josiah H. Dunn, to keep some order and discipline during the long reign of terror.

Day was breaking now, and a line of workmen were slowly making their way, singly and in groups, along the blackened path.

McMurdo and Scanlan strolled on with the others, keeping in sight of the men whom they followed. A thick mist lay over them, and from the heart of it there came the sudden scream of a steam whistle. It was the ten-minute signal before the cages descended and the day's labour began.

When they reached the open space round the mine shaft there were a hundred miners waiting, stamping their feet and blowing on their fingers; for it was bitterly cold. The strangers stood in a little group under the shadow of the engine house. Scanlan and McMurdo climbed a heap of slag from which the whole scene lay before them. They saw the mine engineer, a great bearded Scotchman named Menzies, come out of the

engine house and blow his whistle for the cages to be lowered.

At the same instant a tall, loose-framed young man with a clean-shaved, earnest face advanced eagerly towards the pit head. As he came forward his eyes fell upon the group, silent and motionless, under the engine house. The men had drawn down their hats and turned up their collars to screen their faces. For a moment the presentiment of Death laid its cold hand upon the manager's heart. At the next he had shaken it off and saw only his duty towards intrusive strangers.

"Who are you?" he asked as he advanced. "What are you loitering there for?"

There was no answer, but the lad Andrews stepped forward and shot him in the stomach. The hundred waiting miners stood as motionless and helpless as if they were paralyzed. The manager clapped his two hands to the wound and doubled himself up. Then he staggered away; but another of the assassins fired, and he went down sidewise, kicking and clawing among a heap of clinkers. Menzies, the Scotchman, gave a roar of rage at the sight and rushed with an iron spanner at the murderers; but was met by two balls in the face which dropped him dead at their very feet.

There was a surge forward of some of the miners, and an inarticulate cry of pity and of anger, but a couple of the strangers emptied their six-shooters over the heads of the crowd, and they broke and scattered, some of them rushing wildly back to their homes in Vermissa. When a few of the bravest had rallied, and there was a return to the mine, the murderous gang had vanished in the mists of morning, without a single witness being able to swear to the identity of these men who in front of a hundred spectators had wrought this double crime.

Scanlan and McMurdo made their way back; Scanlan somewhat subdued, for it was the first murder job that he had seen with his own eyes, and it appeared less funny than he had been led to believe. The horrible screams of the dead manager's wife pursued them as they hurried to the town. McMurdo was absorbed and silent; but he showed no sympathy for the

weakening of his companion.

"Sure, it is like a war," he repeated. "What is it but a war between us and them, and we hit back where we best can."

There was high revel in the lodge room at the Union House that night, not only over the killing of the manager and engineer of the Crow Hill mine, which would bring this organization into line with the other blackmailed and terror-stricken companies of the district, but also over a distant triumph which had been wrought by the hands of the lodge itself.

It would appear that when the County Delegate had sent over five good men to strike a blow in Vermissa he had demanded that in return three Vermissa men should be secretly selected and sent across to kill William Hales of Stake Royal, one of the best known and most popular mine owners in the Gilmerton district, a man who was believed not to have an enemy in the world; for he was in all ways a model employer. He had insisted, however, upon efficiency in the work, and had, therefore, paid off certain drunken and idle employees who were members of the all-powerful society. Coffin notices hung outside his door had not weakened his resolution, and so in a free, civilized country he found himself condemned to death.

The execution had now been duly carried out. Ted Baldwin, who sprawled now in the seat of honour beside the Bodymaster, had been chief of the party. His flushed face and glazed, bloodshot eyes told of sleeplessness and drink. He and his two comrades had spent the night before among the mountains. They were unkempt and weather-stained. But no heroes, returning from a forlorn hope, could have had a warmer welcome from their comrades.

The story was told and retold amid cries of delight and shouts of laughter. They had waited for their man as he drove home at nightfall, taking their station at the top of a steep hill, where his horse must be at a walk. He was so furred to keep out the cold that he could not lay his hand on his pistol. They had pulled him out and shot him again and again. He had screamed for mercy. The screams were repeated for the amusement of

the lodge.

"Let's hear again how he squealed," they cried.

None of them knew the man; but there is eternal drama in a killing, and they had shown the Scowrers of Gilmerton that the Vermissa men were to be relied upon.

There had been one contretemps; for a man and his wife had driven up while they were still emptying their revolvers into the silent body. It had been suggested that they should shoot them both; but they were harmless folk who were not connected with the mines, so they were sternly bidden to drive on and keep silent, lest a worse thing befall them. And so the blood-mottled figure had been left as a warning to all such hard-hearted employers, and the three noble avengers had hurried off into the mountains where unbroken nature comes down to the very edge of the furnaces and the slag heaps. Here they were, safe and sound, their work well done, and the plaudits of their companions in their ears.

It had been a great day for the Scowrers. The shadow had fallen even darker over the valley. But as the wise general chooses the moment of victory in which to redouble his efforts, so that his foes may have no time to steady themselves after disaster, so Boss McGinty, looking out upon the scene of his operations with his brooding and malicious eyes, had devised a new attack upon those who opposed him. That very night, as the half-drunken company broke up, he touched McMurdo on the arm and led him aside into that inner room where they had their first interview.

"See here, my lad," said he, "I've got a job that's worthy of you at last. You'll have the doing of it in your own hands."

"Proud I am to hear it," McMurdo answered.

"You can take two men with you—Manders and Reilly. They have been warned for service. We'll never be right in this district until Chester Wilcox has been settled, and you'll have the thanks of every lodge in the coal fields if you can down him."

"I'll do my best, anyhow. Who is he, and where shall I find

him?"

McGinty took his eternal half-chewed, half-smoked cigar from the corner of his mouth, and proceeded to draw a rough diagram on a page torn from his notebook.

"He's the chief foreman of the Iron Dike Company. He's a hard citizen, an old colour sergeant of the war, all scars and grizzle. We've had two tries at him; but had no luck, and Jim Carnaway lost his life over it. Now it's for you to take it over. That's the house—all alone at the Iron Dike crossroad, same as you see here on the map—without another within earshot. It's no good by day. He's armed and shoots quick and straight, with no questions asked. But at night—well, there he is with his wife, three children, and a hired help. You can't pick or choose. It's all or none. If you could get a bag of blasting powder at the front door with a slow match to it—"

"What's the man done?"

"Didn't I tell you he shot Jim Carnaway?"

"Why did he shoot him?"

"What in thunder has that to do with you? Carnaway was about his house at night and he shot him. That's enough for me and you. You've got to settle the thing right."

"There's these two women and the children. Do they go up too?"

"They have to—else how can we get him?"

"It seems hard on them; for they've done nothing."

"What sort of fool's talk is this? Do you back out?"

"Easy, Councillor, easy! What have I ever said or done that you should think I would be after standing back from an order of the Bodymaster of my own lodge? If it's right or if it's wrong, it's for you to decide."

"You'll do it, then?"

"Of course I will do it."

"When?"

"Well, you had best give me a night or two that I may see the house and make my plans. Then—"

"Very good," said McGinty, shaking him by the hand. "I leave it with you. It will be a great day when you bring us the news. It's just the last stroke that will bring them all to their knees."

McMurdo thought long and deeply over the commission which had been so suddenly placed in his hands. The isolated house in which Chester Wilcox lived was about five miles off in an adjacent valley. That very night he started off all alone to prepare for the attempt. It was daylight before he returned from his reconnaissance. Next day he interviewed his two subordinates, Manders and Reilly, reckless youngsters who were as elated as if it were a deer-hunt.

Two nights later they met outside the town, all three armed, and one of them carrying a sack stuffed with the powder which was used in the quarries. It was two in the morning before they came to the lonely house. The night was a windy one, with broken clouds drifting swiftly across the face of a three-quarter moon. They had been warned to be on their guard against bloodhounds; so they moved forward cautiously, with their pistols cocked in their hands. But there was no sound save the howling of the wind, and no movement but the swaying branches above them.

McMurdo listened at the door of the lonely house—but all was still within. Then he leaned the powder bag against it, ripped a hole in it with his knife, and attached the fuse. When it was well alight he and his two companions took to their heels, and were some distance off, safe and snug in a sheltering ditch, before the shattering roar of the explosion, with the low, deep rumble of the collapsing building, told them that their work was done. No cleaner job had ever been carried out in the bloodstained annals of the society.

But alas that work so well organized and boldly carried out should all have gone for nothing! Warned by the fate of the various victims, and knowing that he was marked down for destruction, Chester Wilcox had moved himself and his family only the day before to some safer and less known quarters,

where a guard of police should watch over them. It was an empty house which had been torn down by the gunpowder, and the grim old colour sergeant of the war was still teaching discipline to the miners of Iron Dike.

"Leave him to me," said McMurdo. "He's my man, and I'll get him sure if I have to wait a year for him."

A vote of thanks and confidence was passed in full lodge, and so for the time the matter ended. When a few weeks later it was reported in the papers that Wilcox had been shot at from an ambuscade, it was an open secret that McMurdo was still at work upon his unfinished job.

Such were the methods of the Society of Freemen, and such were the deeds of the Scowrers by which they spread their rule of fear over the great and rich district which was for so long a period haunted by their terrible presence. Why should these pages be stained by further crimes? Have I not said enough to show the men and their methods?

These deeds are written in history, and there are records wherein one may read the details of them. There one may learn of the shooting of Policemen Hunt and Evans because they had ventured to arrest two members of the society—a double outrage planned at the Vermissa lodge and carried out in cold blood upon two helpless and disarmed men. There also one may read of the shooting of Mrs. Larbey when she was nursing her husband, who had been beaten almost to death by orders of Boss McGinty. The killing of the elder Jenkins, shortly followed by that of his brother, the mutilation of James Murdoch, the blowing up of the Staphouse family, and the murder of the Stendals all followed hard upon one another in the same terrible winter.

Darkly the shadow lay upon the Valley of Fear. The spring had come with running brooks and blossoming trees. There was hope for all Nature bound so long in an iron grip; but nowhere was there any hope for the men and women who lived under the yoke of the terror. Never had the cloud above them been so dark and hopeless as in the early summer of the year 1875.

CHAPTER 6 DANGER

It was the height of the reign of terror. McMurdo, who had already been appointed Inner Deacon, with every prospect of some day succeeding McGinty as Bodymaster, was now so necessary to the councils of his comrades that nothing was done without his help and advice. The more popular he became, however, with the Freemen, the blacker were the scowls which greeted him as he passed along the streets of Vermissa. In spite of their terror the citizens were taking heart to band themselves together against their oppressors. Rumours had reached the lodge of secret gatherings in the *Herald* office and of distribution of firearms among the law-abiding people. But McGinty and his men were undisturbed by such reports. They were numerous, resolute, and well armed. Their opponents were scattered and powerless. It would all end, as it had done in the past, in aimless talk and possibly in impotent arrests. So said McGinty, McMurdo, and all the bolder spirits.

It was a Saturday evening in May. Saturday was always the lodge night, and McMurdo was leaving his house to attend it when Morris, the weaker brother of the order, came to see him. His brow was creased with care, and his kindly face was drawn and haggard.

"Can I speak with you freely, Mr. McMurdo?"

"Sure."

"I can't forget that I spoke my heart to you once, and that you kept it to yourself, even though the Boss himself came to ask you about it."

"What else could I do if you trusted me? It wasn't that I agreed with what you said."

"I know that well. But you are the one that I can speak to and be safe. I've a secret here," he put his hand to his breast, "and it is just burning the life out of me. I wish it had come to any one of you but me. If I tell it, it will mean murder, for sure. If I don't, it may bring the end of us all. God help me, but I am near out of my wits over it!"

McMurdo looked at the man earnestly. He was trembling in every limb. He poured some whisky into a glass and handed it to him. "That's the physic for the likes of you," said he. "Now let me hear of it."

Morris drank, and his white face took a tinge of colour. "I can tell it to you all in one sentence," said he. "There's a detective on our trail."

McMurdo stared at him in astonishment. "Why, man, you're crazy," he said. "Isn't the place full of police and detectives, and what harm did they ever do us?"

"No, no, he's no man of the district. As you say, we know them, and it is little that they can do. But you've heard of Pinkerton's?"

"I've read of some folk of that name."

"Well, you can take it from me you've no show when they are on your trail. It's not a take-it-or-miss-it government concern. It's a dead earnest business proposition that's out for results and keeps out till by hook or crook it gets them. If a Pinkerton man is deep in this business, we are all destroyed."

"We must kill him."

"Ah, it's the first thought that came to you! So it will be up at the lodge. Didn't I say to you that it would end in murder?"

"Sure, what is murder? Isn't it common enough in these parts?"

"It is, indeed; but it's not for me to point out the man that is to be murdered. I'd never rest easy again. And yet it's our own necks that may be at stake. In God's name what shall I do?" He rocked to and fro in his agony of indecision.

But his words had moved McMurdo deeply. It was easy to

see that he shared the other's opinion as to the danger, and the need for meeting it. He gripped Morris's shoulder and shook him in his earnestness.

"See here, man," he cried, and he almost screeched the words in his excitement, "you won't gain anything by sitting keening like an old wife at a wake. Let's have the facts. Who is the fellow? Where is he? How did you hear of him? Why did you come to me?"

"I came to you; for you are the one man that would advise me. I told you that I had a store in the East before I came here. I left good friends behind me, and one of them is in the telegraph service. Here's a letter that I had from him yesterday. It's this part from the top of the page. You can read it yourself."

This was what McMurdo read:

> How are the Scowrers getting on in your parts? We read plenty of them in the papers. Between you and me I expect to hear news from you before long. Five big corporations and the two railroads have taken the thing up in dead earnest. They mean it, and you can bet they'll get there! They are right deep down into it. Pinkerton has taken hold under their orders, and his best man, Birdy Edwards, is operating. The thing has got to be stopped right now.

"Now read the postscript."

> Of course, what I give you is what I learned in business; so it goes no further. It's a queer cipher that you handle by the yard every day and can get no meaning from.

McMurdo sat in silence for some time, with the letter in his listless hands. The mist had lifted for a moment, and there was the abyss before him.

"Does anyone else know of this?" he asked.

"I have told no one else."

"But this man—your friend—has he any other person that he would be likely to write to?"

"Well, I dare say he knows one or two more."

"Of the lodge?"

"It's likely enough."

"I was asking because it is likely that he may have given some description of this fellow Birdy Edwards—then we could get on his trail."

"Well, it's possible. But I should not think he knew him. He is just telling me the news that came to him by way of business. How would he know this Pinkerton man?"

McMurdo gave a violent start.

"By Gar!" he cried, "I've got him. What a fool I was not to know it. Lord! but we're in luck! We will fix him before he can do any harm. See here, Morris, will you leave this thing in my hands?"

"Sure, if you will only take it off mine."

"I'll do that. You can stand right back and let me run it. Even your name need not be mentioned. I'll take it all on myself, as if it were to me that this letter has come. Will that content you?"

"It's just what I would ask."

"Then leave it at that and keep your head shut. Now I'll get down to the lodge, and we'll soon make old man Pinkerton sorry for himself."

"You wouldn't kill this man?"

"The less you know, Friend Morris, the easier your conscience will be, and the better you will sleep. Ask no questions, and let these things settle themselves. I have hold of it now."

Morris shook his head sadly as he left. "I feel that his blood is on my hands," he groaned.

"Self-protection is no murder, anyhow," said McMurdo, smiling grimly. "It's him or us. I guess this man would destroy us all if we left him long in the valley. Why, Brother Morris, we'll have to elect you Bodymaster yet; for you've surely saved the lodge."

And yet it was clear from his actions that he thought more seriously of this new intrusion than his words would show. It may have been his guilty conscience, it may have been the reputation of the Pinkerton organization, it may have been the knowledge that great, rich corporations had set themselves the task of clearing out the Scowrers; but, whatever his reason, his actions were those of a man who is preparing for the worst. Every paper which would incriminate him was destroyed before he left the house. After that he gave a long sigh of satisfaction; for it seemed to him that he was safe. And yet the danger must still have pressed somewhat upon him; for on his way to the lodge he stopped at old man Shafter's. The house was forbidden him; but when he tapped at the window Ettie came out to him. The dancing Irish deviltry had gone from her lover's eyes. She read his danger in his earnest fix.

"Something has happened!" she cried. "Oh, Jack, you are in danger!"

"Sure, it is not very bad, my sweetheart. And yet it may be wise that we make a move before it is worse."

"Make a move?"

"I promised you once that I would go some day. I think the time is coming. I had news to-night, bad news, and I see trouble coming."

"The police?"

"Well, a Pinkerton. But, sure, you wouldn't know what that is, acushla, nor what it may mean to the likes of me. I'm too deep in this thing, and I may have to get out of it quick. You said you would come with me if I went."

"Oh, Jack, it would be the saving of you!"

"I'm an honest man in some things, Ettie. I wouldn't hurt a hair of your bonny head for all that the world can give, nor ever pull you down one inch from the golden throne above the clouds where I always see you. Would you trust me?"

She put her hand in his without a word.

"Well, then, listen to what I say, and do as I order you; for

indeed it's the only way for us. Things are going to happen in this valley. I feel it in my bones. There may be many of us that will have to look out for ourselves. I'm one, anyhow. If I go, by day or night, it's you that must come with me!"

"I'd come after you, Jack."

"No, no, you shall come *with* me. If this valley is closed to me and I can never come back, how can I leave you behind, and me perhaps in hiding from the police with never a chance of a message? It's with me you must come. I know a good woman in the place I come from, and it's there I'd leave you till we can get married. Will you come?"

"Yes, Jack, I will come."

"God bless you for your trust in me! It's a fiend out of hell that I should be if I abused it. Now, mark you, Ettie, it will be just a word to you, and when it reaches you, you will drop everything and come right down to the waiting room at the depot and stay there till I come for you."

"Day or night, I'll come at the word, Jack."

Somewhat eased in mind, now that his own preparations for escape had been begun, McMurdo went on to the lodge. It had already assembled, and only by complicated signs and countersigns could he pass through the outer guard and inner guard who close-tiled it. A buzz of pleasure and welcome greeted him as he entered. The long room was crowded, and through the haze of tobacco smoke he saw the tangled black mane of the Bodymaster, the cruel, unfriendly features of Baldwin, the vulture face of Harraway, the secretary, and a dozen more who were among the leaders of the lodge. He rejoiced that they should all be there to take counsel over his news.

"Indeed, it's glad we are to see you, Brother!" cried the chairman. "There's business here that wants a Solomon in judgment to set it right."

"It's Lander and Egan," explained his neighbour as he took his seat. "They both claim the head money given by the lodge for the shooting of old man Crabbe over at Stylestown, and

who's to say which fired the bullet?"

McMurdo rose in his place and raised his hand. The expression of his face froze the attention of the audience. There was a dead hush of expectation.

"Eminent Bodymaster," he said, in a solemn voice, "I claim urgency!"

"Brother McMurdo claims urgency," said McGinty. "It's a claim that by the rules of this lodge takes precedence. Now, Brother, we attend you."

McMurdo took the letter from his pocket.

"Eminent Bodymaster and Brethren," he said, "I am the bearer of ill news this day; but it is better that it should be known and discussed, than that a blow should fall upon us without warning which would destroy us all. I have information that the most powerful and richest organizations in this state have bound themselves together for our destruction, and that at this very moment there is a Pinkerton detective, one Birdy Edwards, at work in the valley collecting the evidence which may put a rope round the necks of many of us, and send every man in this room into a felon's cell. That is the situation for the discussion of which I have made a claim of urgency."

There was a dead silence in the room. It was broken by the chairman.

"What is your evidence for this, Brother McMurdo?" he asked.

"It is in this letter which has come into my hands," said McMurdo. He read the passage aloud. "It is a matter of honour with me that I can give no further particulars about the letter, nor put it into your hands; but I assure you that there is nothing else in it which can affect the interests of the lodge. I put the case before you as it has reached me."

"Let me say, Mr. Chairman," said one of the older brethren, "that I have heard of Birdy Edwards, and that he has the name of being the best man in the Pinkerton service."

"Does anyone know him by sight?" asked McGinty.

"Yes," said McMurdo, "I do."

There was a murmur of astonishment through the hall.

"I believe we hold him in the hollow of our hands," he continued with an exulting smile upon his face. "If we act quickly and wisely, we can cut this thing short. If I have your confidence and your help, it is little that we have to fear."

"What have we to fear, anyhow? What can he know of our affairs?"

"You might say so if all were as stanch as you, Councillor. But this man has all the millions of the capitalists at his back. Do you think there is no weaker brother among all our lodges that could not be bought? He will get at our secrets, maybe has got them already. There's only one sure cure."

"That he never leaves the valley," said Baldwin.

McMurdo nodded. "Good for you, Brother Baldwin," he said. "You and I have had our differences, but you have said the true word to-night."

"Where is he, then? Where shall we know him?"

"Eminent Bodymaster," said McMurdo, earnestly, "I would put it to you that this is too vital a thing for us to discuss in open lodge. God forbid that I should throw a doubt on anyone here; but if so much as a word of gossip got to the ears of this man, there would be an end of any chance of our getting him. I would ask the lodge to choose a trusty committee, Mr. Chairman—yourself, if I might suggest it, and Brother Baldwin here, and five more. Then I can talk freely of what I know and of what I advise should be done."

The proposition was at once adopted, and the committee chosen. Besides the chairman and Baldwin there were the vulture-faced secretary, Harraway, Tiger Cormac, the brutal young assassin, Carter, the treasurer, and the brothers Willaby, fearless and desperate men who would stick at nothing.

The usual revelry of the lodge was short and subdued: for there was a cloud upon the men's spirits, and many there for the first time began to see the cloud of avenging law drifting

up in that serene sky under which they had dwelt so long. The horrors they had dealt out to others had been so much a part of their settled lives that the thought of retribution had become a remote one, and so seemed the more startling now that it came so closely upon them. They broke up early and left their leaders to their council.

"Now, McMurdo!" said McGinty when they were alone. The seven men sat frozen in their seats.

"I said just now that I knew Birdy Edwards," McMurdo explained. "I need not tell you that he is not here under that name. He's a brave man, but not a crazy one. He passes under the name of Steve Wilson, and he is lodging at Hobson's Patch."

"How do you know this?'

"Because I fell into talk with him. I thought little of it at the time, nor would have given it a second thought but for this letter, but now I'm sure it's the man. I met him on the cars when I went down the line on Wednesday—a hard case if ever there was one. He said he was a reporter. I believed it for the moment. Wanted to know all he could about the Scowrers and what he called "the outrages" for a New York paper. Asked me every kind of question so as to get something. You bet I was giving nothing away. 'I'd pay for it and pay well,' said he, 'if I could get some stuff that would suit my editor.' I said what I thought would please him best, and he handed me a twenty-dollar bill for my information. 'There's ten times that for you,' said he, 'if you can find me all that I want.'"

"What did you tell him, then?"

"Any stuff I could make up."

"How do you know he wasn't a newspaper man?"

"I'll tell you. He got out at Hobson's Patch, and so did I. I chanced into the telegraph bureau, and he was leaving it.

" 'See here,' said the operator after he'd gone out, 'I guess we should charge double rates for this.'—'I guess you should,' said I. He had filled the form with stuff that might have been Chinese, for all we could make of it. 'He fires a sheet of this off every day,' said the clerk. 'Yes,' said I; 'it's special news for his paper,

and he's scared that the others should tap it.' That was what the operator thought and what I thought at the time, but I think differently now."

"By Gar! I believe you are right," said McGinty. "But what do you allow that we should do about it?"

"Why not go right down now and fix him?" someone suggested.

"Ay, the sooner the better."

"I'd start this next minute if I knew where we could find him," said McMurdo. "He's in Hobson's Patch; but I don't know the house. I've got a plan, though, if you'll only take my advice."

"Well, what is it?"

"I'll go to the Patch to-morrow morning. I'll find him through the operator. He can locate him, I guess. Well, then I'll tell him that I'm a Freeman myself. I'll offer him all the secrets of the lodge for a price. You bet he'll tumble to it. I'll tell him the papers are at my house, and that it's as much as my life would be worth to let him come while folk were about. He'll see that that's horse sense. Let him come at ten o'clock at night and he shall see everything. That will fetch him sure."

"Well?"

"You can plan the rest for yourselves. Widow MacNamara's is a lonely house. She's as true as steel and as deaf as a post. There's only Scanlan and me in the house. If I get his promise—and I'll let you know if I do—I'd have the whole seven of you come to me by nine o'clock. We'll get him in. If ever he gets out alive—well, he can talk of Birdy Edwards' luck for the rest of his days!"

"There's going to be a vacancy at Pinkerton's or I'm mistaken. Leave it at that, McMurdo. At nine to-morrow we'll be with you. You once get the door shut behind him, and you can leave the rest with us."

CHAPTER 7 THE TRAPPING OF BIRDY EDWARDS

As McMurdo had said, the house in which he lived was a lonely one and very well suited for such a crime as they had planned. It was on the extreme fringe of the town and stood well back from the road. In any other case the conspirators would have simply called out their man, as they had many a time before, and emptied their pistols into his body; but in this instance it was very necessary to find out how much he knew, how he knew it, and what had been passed on to his employers.

It was possible that they were already too late and that the work had been done. If that was indeed so, they could at least have their revenge upon the man who had done it. But they were hopeful that nothing of great importance had yet come to the detective's knowledge, as otherwise, they argued, he would not have troubled to write down and forward such trivial information as McMurdo claimed to have given him. However, all this they would learn from his own lips. Once in their power, they would find a way to make him speak. It was not the first time that they had handled an unwilling witness.

McMurdo went to Hobson's Patch as agreed. The police seemed to take particular interest in him that morning, and Captain Marvin—he who had claimed the old acquaintance with him at Chicago—actually addressed him as he waited at the station. McMurdo turned away and refused to speak with him. He was back from his mission in the afternoon, and saw McGinty at the Union House.

"He is coming," he said.

"Good!" said McGinty. The giant was in his shirt sleeves, with chains and seals gleaming athwart his ample waistcoat and a diamond twinkling through the fringe of his bristling beard. Drink and politics had made the Boss a very rich as well as powerful man. The more terrible, therefore, seemed that glimpse of the prison or the gallows which had risen before him the night before.

"Do you reckon he knows much?" he asked anxiously.

McMurdo shook his head gloomily. "He's been here some time—six weeks at the least. I guess he didn't come into these parts to look at the prospect. If he has been working among us all that time with the railroad money at his back, I should expect that he has got results, and that he has passed them on."

"There's not a weak man in the lodge," cried McGinty. "True as steel, every man of them. And yet, by the Lord! there is that skunk Morris. What about him? If any man gives us away, it would be he. I've a mind to send a couple of the boys round before evening to give him a beating up and see what they can get from him."

"Well, there would be no harm in that," McMurdo answered. "I won't deny that I have a liking for Morris and would be sorry to see him come to harm. He has spoken to me once or twice over lodge matters, and though he may not see them the same as you or I, he never seemed the sort that squeals. But still it is not for me to stand between him and you."

"I'll fix the old devil!" said McGinty with an oath. "I've had my eye on him this year past."

"Well, you know best about that," McMurdo answered. "But whatever you do must be to-morrow; for we must lie low until the Pinkerton affair is settled up. We can't afford to set the police buzzing, to-day of all days."

"True for you," said McGinty. "And we'll learn from Birdy Edwards himself where he got his news if we have to cut his heart out first. Did he seem to scent a trap?"

McMurdo laughed. "I guess I took him on his weak point!" he said. "If he could get on a good trail of the Scowrers, he's

ready to follow it into hell. I took his money," McMurdo grinned as he produced a wad of dollar notes, "and as much more when he has seen all my papers."

"What papers?"

"Well, there are no papers. But I filled him up about constitutions and books of rules and forms of membership. He expects to get right down to the end of everything before he leaves."

"Faith, he's right there," said McGinty grimly. "Didn't he ask you why you didn't bring him the papers?"

"As if I would carry such things, and me a suspected man, and Captain Marvin after speaking to me this very day at the depot!"

"Ay, I heard of that," said McGinty. "I guess the heavy end of this business is coming on to you. We could put him down an old shaft when we've done with him; but however we work it we can't get past the man living at Hobson's Patch and you being there to-day."

McMurdo shrugged his shoulders. "If we handle it right, they can never prove the killing," said he. "No one can see him come to the house after dark, and I'll lay to it that no one will see him go. Now see here, Councillor, I'll show you my plan and I'll ask you to fit the others into it. You will all come in good time. Very well. He comes at ten. He is to tap three times, and me to open the door for him. Then I'll get behind him and shut it. He's our man then."

"That's all easy and plain."

"Yes; but the next step wants considering. He's a hard proposition. He's heavily armed. I've fooled him proper, and yet he is likely to be on his guard. Suppose I show him right into a room with seven men in it where he expected to find me alone. There is going to be shooting, and somebody is going to be hurt."

"That's so."

"And the noise is going to bring every damned copper in the

township on top of it."

"I guess you are right."

"This is how I should work it. You will all be in the big room—same as you saw when you had a chat with me. I'll open the door for him, show him into the parlour beside the door, and leave him there while I get the papers. That will give me the chance of telling you how things are shaping. Then I will go back to him with some faked papers. As he is reading them I will jump for him and get my grip on his pistol arm. You'll hear me call and in you will rush. The quicker the better, for he is as strong a man as I, and I may have more than I can manage. But I allow that I can hold him till you come."

"It's a good plan," said McGinty. "The lodge will owe you a debt for this. I guess when I move out of the chair I can put a name to the man that's coming after me."

"Sure, Councillor, I am little more than a recruit," said McMurdo; but his face showed what he thought of the great man's compliment.

When he had returned home he made his own preparations for the grim evening in front of him. First he cleaned, oiled, and loaded his Smith & Wesson revolver. Then he surveyed the room in which the detective was to be trapped. It was a large apartment with a long deal table in the centre, and the big stove at one side. At each of the other sides were windows. There were no shutters on these: only light curtains which drew across. McMurdo examined these attentively. No doubt it must have struck him that the apartment was very exposed for so secret a meeting. Yet its distance from the road made it of less consequence. Finally he discussed the matter with his fellow lodger. Scanlan, though a Scowrer, was an inoffensive little man who was too weak to stand against the opinion of his comrades, but was secretly horrified by the deeds of blood at which he had sometimes been forced to assist. McMurdo told him shortly what was intended.

"And if I were you, Mike Scanlan, I would take a night off and keep clear of it. There will be bloody work here before morning."

"Well, indeed then, Mac," Scanlan answered. "It's not the will but the nerve that is wanting in me. When I saw Manager Dunn go down at the colliery yonder it was just more than I could stand. I'm not made for it, same as you or McGinty. If the lodge will think none the worse of me, I'll just do as you advise and leave you to yourselves for the evening."

The men came in good time as arranged. They were outwardly respectable citizens, well clad and cleanly; but a judge of faces would have read little hope for Birdy Edwards in those hard mouths and remorseless eyes. There was not a man in the room whose hands had not been reddened a dozen times before. They were as hardened to human murder as a butcher to sheep.

Foremost, of course, both in appearance and in guilt was the formidable Boss. Harraway, the secretary, was a lean, bitter man with a long, scraggy neck and nervous, jerky limbs, a man of incorruptible fidelity where the finances of the order were concerned, and with no notion of justice or honesty to anyone beyond. The treasurer, Carter, was a middle-aged man, with an impassive, rather sulky expression, and a yellow parchment skin. He was a capable organizer, and the actual details of nearly every outrage had sprung from his plotting brain. The two Willabys were men of action, tall, lithe young fellows with determined faces, while their companion, Tiger Cormac, a heavy, dark youth, was feared even by his own comrades for the ferocity of his disposition. These were the men who assembled that night under the roof of McMurdo for the killing of the Pinkerton detective.

Their host had placed whisky upon the table, and they had hastened to prime themselves for the work before them. Baldwin and Cormac were already half-drunk, and the liquor had brought out all their ferocity. Cormac placed his hands on the stove for an instant—it had been lighted, for the nights were still cold.

"That will do," said he, with an oath.

"Ay," said Baldwin, catching his meaning. "If he is strapped to that, we will have the truth out of him."

"We'll have the truth out of him, never fear," said McMurdo. He had nerves of steel, this man; for though the whole weight of the affair was on him his manner was as cool and unconcerned as ever. The others marked it and applauded.

"You are the one to handle him," said the Boss approvingly. "Not a warning will he get till your hand is on his throat. It's a pity there are no shutters to your windows."

McMurdo went from one to the other and drew the curtains tighter. "Sure no one can spy upon us now. It's close upon the hour."

"Maybe he won't come. Maybe he'll get a sniff of danger," said the secretary.

"He'll come, never fear," McMurdo answered. "He is as eager to come as you can be to see him. Hark to that!"

They all sat like wax figures, some with their glasses arrested halfway to their lips. Three loud knocks had sounded at the door.

"Hush!" McMurdo raised his hand in caution. An exulting glance went round the circle, and hands were laid upon hidden weapons.

"Not a sound, for your lives!" McMurdo whispered, as he went from the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

With strained ears the murderers waited. They counted the steps of their comrade down the passage. Then they heard him open the outer door. There were a few words as of greeting. Then they were aware of a strange step inside and of an unfamiliar voice. An instant later came the slam of the door and the turning of the key in the lock. Their prey was safe within the trap. Tiger Cormac laughed horribly, and Boss McGinty clapped his great hand across his mouth.

"Be quiet, you fool!" he whispered. "You'll be the undoing of us yet!"

There was a mutter of conversation from the next room. It seemed interminable. Then the door opened, and McMurdo appeared, his finger upon his lip.

He came to the end of the table and looked round at them. A subtle change had come over him. His manner was as of one who has great work to do. His face had set into granite firmness. His eyes shone with a fierce excitement behind his spectacles. He had become a visible leader of men. They stared at him with eager interest, but he said nothing. Still with the same singular gaze he looked from man to man.

"Well!" cried Boss McGinty at last. "Is he here? Is Birdy Edwards here?"

"Yes," McMurdo answered slowly. "Birdy Edwards is here. I am Birdy Edwards!"

There were ten seconds after that brief speech during which the room might have been empty, so profound was the silence. The hissing of a kettle upon the stove rose sharp and strident to the ear. Seven white faces, all turned upward to this man who dominated them, were set motionless with utter terror. Then, with a sudden shivering of glass, a bristle of glistening rifle barrels broke through each window, while the curtains were torn from their hangings.

At the sight Boss McGinty gave the roar of a wounded bear and plunged for the half-opened door. A levelled revolver met him there with the stern blue eyes of Captain Marvin of the Mine Police gleaming behind the sights. The Boss recoiled and fell back into his chair.

"You're safer there, Councillor," said the man whom they had known as McMurdo. "And you, Baldwin, if you don't take your hand off your pistol, you'll cheat the hangman yet. Pull it out, or by the Lord that made me—There, that will do. There are forty armed men around this house, and you can figure it out for yourself what chance you have. Take their pistols, Marvin!"

There was no possible resistance under the menace of those rifles. The men were disarmed. Sulky, sheepish, and amazed, they still sat round the table.

"I'd like to say a word to you before we separate," said the man who had trapped them. "I guess we may not meet again until you see me on the stand in the courthouse. I'll give you

something to think over between now and then. You know me now for what I am. At last I can put my cards on the table. I am Birdy Edwards of Pinkerton's. I was chosen to break up your gang. I had a hard and dangerous game to play. Not a soul, not one soul, not my nearest and dearest knew that I was playing it. Only Captain Marvin here and my employers knew that. But it's over to-night thank God, and I am the winner!"

The seven pale, rigid faces looked up at him. There was unappeasable hatred in their eyes. He read the relentless threat.

"Maybe you think that the game is not over yet. Well, I take my chance of that. Anyhow, some of you will take no further hand, and there are sixty more besides yourselves that will see a jail this night. I'll tell you this, that when I was put upon this job I never believed there was such a society as yours. I thought it was paper talk, and that I would prove it so. They told me it was to do with the Freemen; so I went to Chicago and was made one. Then I was surer than ever that it was just paper talk, for I found no harm in the society, but a deal of good.

"Still, I had to carry out my job, and I came to the coal valleys. When I reached this place I learned that I was wrong and that it wasn't a dime novel after all. So I stayed to look after it. I never killed a man in Chicago. I never minted a dollar in my life. Those I gave you were as good as any others; but I never spent money better. But I knew the way into your good wishes, and so I pretended to you that the law was after me. It all worked just as I thought.

"So I joined your infernal lodge, and I took my share in your councils. Maybe they will say that I was as bad as you. They can say what they like, so long as I get you. But what is the truth? The night I joined you beat up old man Stanger. I could not warn him, for there was no time, but I held your hand, Baldwin, when you would have killed him. If ever I have suggested things, so as to keep my place among you, they were things which I knew I could prevent. I could not save Dunn and Menzies, for I did not know enough, but I will see that their murderers are hanged. I gave Chester Wilcox warning, so that when I blew his house in he and his folk were in hiding.

There was many a crime that I could not stop; but if you look back and think how often your man came home the other road, or was down in town when you went for him, or stayed indoors when you thought he would come out, you'll see my work."

"You blasted traitor!" hissed McGinty through his closed teeth.

"Ay, John McGinty, you may call me that if it eases your smart. You and your like have been the enemy of God and man in these parts. It took a man to get between you and the poor devils of men and women that you held under your grip. There was just one way of doing it, and I did it. You call me a traitor; but I guess there's many a thousand will call me a deliverer that went down into hell to save them. I've had three months of it. I wouldn't have three such months again if they let me loose in the treasury at Washington for it. I had to stay till I had it all, every man and every secret right here in this hand. I'd have waited a little longer if it hadn't come to my knowledge that my secret was coming out. A letter had come into the town that would have set you wise to it all. Then I had to act and act quickly.

"I've nothing more to say to you, except that when my time comes I'll die the easier when I think of the work I have done in this valley. Now, Marvin, I'll keep you no more. Take them in and get it over."

There is little more to tell. Scanlan had been given a sealed note to be left at the address of Miss Ettie Shafter, a mission which he had accepted with a wink and a knowing smile. In the early hours of the morning a beautiful woman and a much muffled man boarded a special train which had been sent by the railroad company, and made a swift, unbroken journey out of the land of danger. It was the last time that ever either Ettie or her lover set foot in the Valley of Fear. Ten days later they were married in Chicago, with old Jacob Shafter as witness of the wedding.

The trial of the Scowrers was held far from the place where their adherents might have terrified the guardians of the law. In vain they struggled. In vain the money of the lodge—money

squeezed by blackmail out of the whole countryside—was spent like water in the attempt to save them. That cold, clear, unimpassioned statement from one who knew every detail of their lives, their organization, and their crimes was unshaken by all the wiles of their defenders. At last after so many years they were broken and scattered. The cloud was lifted forever from the valley.

McGinty met his fate upon the scaffold, cringing and whining when the last hour came. Eight of his chief followers shared his fate. Fifty-odd had various degrees of imprisonment. The work of Birdy Edwards was complete.

And yet as he had guessed, the game was not over yet. There was another hand to be played, and yet another and another. Ted Baldwin, for one, had escaped the scaffold; so had the Willabys; so had several others of the fiercest spirits of the gang. For ten years they were out of the world, and then came a day when they were free once more—a day which Edwards, who knew his men, was very sure would be an end of his life of peace. They had sworn an oath on all that they thought holy to have his blood as a vengeance for their comrades. And well they strove to keep their vow!

From Chicago he was chased, after two attempts so near success that it was sure that the third would get him. From Chicago he went under a changed name to California, and it was there that the light went for a time out of his life when Ettie Edwards died. Once again he was nearly killed, and once again under the name of Douglas he worked in a lonely cañon, where with an English partner named Barker he amassed a fortune. At last there came a warning to him that the bloodhounds were on his track once more, and he cleared—only just in time—for England. And thence came the John Douglas who for a second time married a worthy mate, and lived for five years as a Sussex county gentleman, a life which ended with the strange happenings of which we have heard.

EPILOGUE

The police trial had passed, in which the case of John Douglas was referred to a higher court. So had the Quarter Sessions, at which he was acquitted as having acted in self-defense.

"Get him out of England at any cost," wrote Holmes to the wife. "There are forces here which may be more dangerous than those he has escaped. There is no safety for your husband in England."

Two months had gone by, and the case had to some extent passed from our minds. Then one morning there came an enigmatic note slipped into our letterbox. "Dear me, Mr. Holmes. Dear me!" said this singular epistle. There was neither superscription nor signature. I laughed at the quaint message; but Holmes showed unwonted seriousness.

"Deviltry, Watson!" he remarked, and sat long with a clouded brow.

Late last night Mrs. Hudson, our landlady, brought up a message that a gentleman wished to see Holmes, and that the matter was of the utmost importance. Close at the heels of his messenger came Cecil Barker, our friend of the moated Manor House. His face was drawn and haggard.

"I've had bad news—terrible news, Mr. Holmes," said he.

"I feared as much," said Holmes.

"You have not had a cable, have you?"

"I have had a note from someone who has."

"It's poor Douglas. They tell me his name is Edwards; but he will always be Jack Douglas of

Benito Cañon to me. I told you that they started together for South Africa in the *Palmyra* three weeks ago."

"Exactly."

"The ship reached Cape Town last night. I received this cable from Mrs. Douglas this morning:

> Jack has been lost overboard in gale off St. Helena. No one knows how accident occurred.
>
> IVY DOUGLAS."

"Ha! It came like that, did it?" said Holmes thoughtfully. "Well, I've no doubt it was well stage-managed."

"You mean that you think there was no accident?"

"None in the world."

"He was murdered?"

"Surely!"

"So I think also. These infernal Scowrers, this cursed vindictive nest of criminals—"

"No, no, my good sir," said Holmes. "There is a master hand here. It is no case of sawed-off shotguns and clumsy six-shooters. You can tell an old master by the sweep of his brush. I can tell a Moriarty when I see one. This crime is from London, not from America."

"But for what motive?"

"Because it is done by a man who cannot afford to fail, one whose whole unique position depends upon the fact that all he does must succeed. A great brain and a huge organization have been turned to the extinction of one man. It is crushing the nut with the triphammer—an absurd extravagance of energy—but the nut is very effectually crushed all the same."

"How came this man to have anything to do with it?"

"I can only say that the first word that ever came to us of the business was from one of his lieutenants. These Americans were well advised. Having an English job to do, they took into partnership, as any foreign criminal could do, this great

consultant in crime. From that moment their man was doomed. At first he would content himself by using his machinery in order to find their victim. Then he would indicate how the matter might be treated. Finally, when he read in the reports of the failure of this agent, he would step in himself with a master touch. You heard me warn this man at Birlstone Manor House that the coming danger was greater than the past. Was I right?"

Barker beat his head with his clenched fist in his impotent anger. "Do not tell me that we have to sit down under this? Do you say that no one can ever get level with this king devil?"

"No, I don't say that," said Holmes, and his eyes seemed to be looking far into the future. "I don't say that he can't be beat. But you must give me time—you must give me time!"

We all sat in silence for some minutes while those fateful eyes still strained to pierce the veil.

译后记

遵嘱译此巨帙，虽自知才学寡浅，亦勉力而为，唯愿不负读者及出版各方之望。此帙成书已久，英文文本大致定型，虑或有脱漏异文，故采兰登书屋、牛津大学出版社、美国Wings Books出版社纸本及古腾堡计划电子版本参照校译。如此费时虽久，亦得多见各家论说，于译事大有裨益也。

所幸赋闲无事，兼之每日焚膏继晷，一载之间，终告功成。虽曰苦辛，亦有见闻增广之趣，雕琢文字，究不失为赏心乐事。

此译本与前贤译本多有不同，非欲标新立异、故为怪诞，实因原作文字所限、不得不然。略举数例如下：

与旧译相异之书名及篇名（括号中为此本所用译名）：

A Study in Scarlet（《暗红习作》），旧译或作“血字的研究”，或作“暗红色的研究”。故事当中，在解释本篇得名缘由的时候，福尔摩斯说道：“……咱们就叫它‘A Study in Scarlet’，怎么样？用那么一点儿艺术词藻，我看也无伤大雅。生活的乱麻苍白平淡，凶案却像一缕贯串其中的暗红丝线，咱们的任务就是找到这缕丝线，将它孤立出来，让它纤毫毕现地暴露人前……”由此可知，这里的“A Study in Scarlet”是借用艺术术语，而在艺术术语当中，“study”有“习作”的意思，故此译为“暗红习作”。艺术作品如此命名在在多有，比如同时期美国著名画家惠斯勒（James McNeill Whistler, 1834—1903）的《玫瑰色及褐色习作》（*A Study in Rose and Brown*）以及法国著名画家夏

加尔（Marc Chagall, 1887—1985）的早年作品《绿色背景之粉色习作》（*A Study in Pink on Green Background*），音乐之中的“练习曲”英文亦为“study”。除此而外，“A Study in Scarlet”是柯南·道尔爵士创作的第一篇福尔摩斯故事，亦暗合“习作”之意。

His Last Bow（《福尔摩斯谢幕演出》），此书名来自集中同名故事，以故事发生时间而论，该篇为全集六十案当中的最后一案，故此译为“福尔摩斯谢幕演出”。

The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes（《福尔摩斯案件簿》），旧译或作“新探案”，此处采取直译，集中所有故事皆发生于“福尔摩斯谢幕演出”之前，同时又发表于“福尔摩斯谢幕演出”之后，故此译为“福尔摩斯案件簿”。

The Blue Carbuncle（《蓝色石榴石》），旧译或作“蓝宝石案”。“carbuncle”一词为泛泛统称，几乎可指任何椭圆形无琢面红色宝石，尤指红色石榴石。此处冠以“blue”（蓝色），正为说明其稀有珍贵（世间似无蓝色石榴石，然则此为小说家言，不可拘执），故照字面译为“蓝色石榴石”。

The Beryl Coronet（《绿宝石王冠》），此据字面直译，旧译或作“绿玉皇冠案”，然则玉文化似为我国独有，且英国君主通常称“王”，甚少称“皇”。

Silver Blaze（《白额闪电》），旧译“银色马”或“银斑驹”。此英文短语为故事中热门赛马之名，字面上可以表示马的额头带有银白色斑点，也可以直译为“银色烈焰”，暗示马的速度非常快。由故事情节可知此马毛色枣红，仅仅是额头白色、前腿有斑。“Silver Blaze”既为马名，译名或以无“马”字为佳，故译为“白额闪电”。

Abbey Grange（《福田宅邸》），旧译“格兰其庄园”。此英文短语本义为附属于修道院的田庄，故事中为宅邸名称，为免文字繁冗，故取寺院田产之称谓“福田”，译为“福田宅邸”。

The Bruce-Partington Plans（《布鲁斯-帕廷顿图纸》），

旧译“布鲁斯-帕廷顿计划”，“plan”虽有“计划”之意，然亦有“设计图”之意，此处“plans”为复数，由故事情节可知此“plans”实为十张潜水艇图纸之统称，故译为“布鲁斯-帕廷顿图纸”。

The Three Gables（《三尖别墅》），旧译“三角墙山庄”或“三面人形墙案”。这个英文短语是故事中一座别墅的名称，“gable”指三角形山墙，故事中有云：“顶层窗户的上方有三个小小的尖顶，勉强可以证明房子的名字不是胡诌。”别墅得名因由既然如此，故译为“三尖别墅”。

The Mazarin Stone（《马泽林钻石》），旧译“王冠宝石案”。这篇故事改编自柯南·道尔同年早些时候推出的独幕剧《王冠钻石》（*The Crown Diamond*），故事中并多处以“diamond”（钻石）取代泛称宝石之“stone”。篇名“The Mazarin Stone”借自意大利裔法国枢机主教儒勒·马泽林（Jules Mazarin, 1602—1661），此人将自己收藏的珠宝遗赠法国王室，其中包括18颗钻石，统称“马泽林钻石”（Mazarin Diamonds）。自从法国大革命之后，这些钻石流离失散，按照卢浮宫以及法国国家自然史博物馆网站的说法，部分钻石如今保存在卢浮宫。参照前述事实，故取“马泽林钻石”之译名。

……

与旧译相异之书中名物（括号中为此本所用译名）：

全集中多处出现“the City”（故城），通常译名为“伦敦城”，特指伦敦市中心一小片历史悠久的区域，有时也称“方里”（the Square Mile），因为这片区域的面积恰好是一平方英里左右。为免与泛指伦敦全城的“伦敦城”发生混淆，此本均译作“故城”，旧译或径以“市区”代之，似嫌不妥。出现在《巴斯克维尔的猎犬》当中的“故区”（the Borough）正与“故城”隔泰晤士河相望，名字亦与“故城”相对而言。除此而外，“故城”不在苏格兰场管辖范围之内，《证券行办事员》当中即有相

关叙述，若不以专名译出，此事实无从体现。

全集中多处出现的“gorse”及“furze”（荆豆），旧译“金雀花”，然则“gorse”与“furze”意义相同，皆为豆科蝶形花亚科一属常绿灌木的统称，原产于西欧及北非，开黄花，中文作“荆豆”。荆豆与同属蝶形花亚科的金雀花（英文为“broom”）亲缘相近且形态相似，但却不能混为一谈，区别在于荆豆长有大量棘刺。

全集中多处出现的“tin box”（马口铁箱子），旧译或作“锡箱子”，或作“铁皮箱”，或作“铁箱子”，然则故事当中的“tin”指的是经过镀锡防锈处理的薄钢板或铁板，常用于制造各种容器。这种材料的确切名称应为“镀锡薄板”，虑及此书时代，仍采“马口铁”之通用旧名。

全集中多处提及遮窗之物，有“curtain”（窗帘）、“blind”（百叶帘）和“shutter”（窗板）三种说法，分别指纺织品制作的普通帘子、百叶帘子（维多利亚时代的百叶窗帘通常为木片串成，纵向开合，故施于百叶帘之英文动词常带状语“down”）以及遮光兼防盗的木板或金属板，旧译或未作区分，不尽妥帖。

《巴斯克维尔的猎犬》当中的“moor”（荒原），旧译或作“沼地”。“moor”虽有“沼地”之意，故事中的“moor”则指高地荒原，迥异于通常与“沼泽”意义相近的“沼地”。译为“沼地”，则与故事中环境描写有所牴牾。又如 *The “Gloria Scott”*（《“苏格兰之星号”三桅帆船》）当中的“the Broads”（诺福克湿地），旧译或作“布罗德”，或作“博洛兹郊区”，然则“the Broads”为专有名词，特指主要位于英格兰诺福克郡东部的一大片水道纵横的湿地，若不译为“湿地”，故事中的一些环境描写便无着落。

全集当中唯一的一个有名有姓的我国同胞出现在《显赫的主顾》当中，英文作“T’ang Ying”，中文应为“唐英”，旧译“唐

寅”，不确。据译者有限见闻，旧式及新式拼音皆未有将“唐寅”拼作“T’ang Ying”之例。唐英（1682—1756）为清代雍正乾隆年间陶瓷艺术家，曾任景德镇督陶官，并曾奉敕编写讲述制瓷工艺的《陶冶图》，恰与故事情节相符。唐英的《陶冶图》在十九世纪即已由英国汉学家及中国陶瓷鉴赏权威卜士礼（Stephen Wootton Bushell, 1844—1908）译成英文，可为柯南·道尔爵士所知。

《恐怖谷》当中的“the Scowrers”（扫魂帮），“Scowrer”为“scourer”的异体，曾经指夜间在街上四处游荡、为非作歹的流氓。故事中为黑帮名称，故音义兼取译为“扫魂帮”。

The Devil’s Foot（《魔鬼之足》）当中的拉丁文“Radix pedis diaboli”（魔鬼之足根），旧译或作“魔鬼之足”，或作“魔鬼的脚”，省略了“根”字，不尽妥帖。这个拉丁短语是作者臆造的一个草药拉丁学名，“Radix”的意思是“根部”，“pedis diaboli”的字面意思是“魔鬼之足”，连起来表示这种草药来源于拉丁学名为“pedis diaboli”的植物，入药部位为根部。叫这个名字的源植物既然不存在，这种草药自然出于虚构，与此同时，这个臆造的名字确乎符合草药命名规范。中草药也使用这样的学名，比如强筋活血的刺五加根，拉丁学名即“Radix Acanthopanacis Senticosi”。

《魔鬼之足》当中的“Cornish”为“Cornwall”（康沃尔郡）的形容词形式，径译“康沃尔”即可，比如“Cornish language”即为“康沃尔语”，无需另行音译为“科尼什语”。

《失踪的中卫》当中的“Gray’s Inn Road”（格雷学院路），旧译“格雷旅店路”或“格雷旅馆路”，然则此路因“Gray’s Inn”而得名，“Gray’s Inn”与《波希米亚丑闻》当中的“Inner Temple”（内殿律师学院）同在伦敦四大律师学院之列，并非旅舍，应译为“格雷学院”。

《失踪的中卫》当中的“undertaker’s mute”（专业吊客），

旧译或作“殡仪馆的工人”，或作“葬仪馆的工人”，然则“undertaker’s mute”指的是受雇在别人家的葬礼上哭丧的人，今日亦有此种职业，故此译为“专业吊客”。

《布鲁斯-帕廷顿图纸》当中的图纸失窃地点“Woolwich”（伍利奇），旧译或作“乌尔维奇”，或作“乌尔威奇”，然则“Woolwich”当中的“w”并不发音；类似例子尚有《跳舞小人》当中的“Norwich”（诺里奇）以及多处出现的“Greenwich”（格林尼治）。次如《福田宅邸》当中的伦敦区域名“Sydenham”（希登讷姆），旧译“西顿汉姆”，然则“Sydenham”当中的“h”并不发音。又如全集中多有出现之“Sussex”（萨塞克斯），旧译“苏塞克斯”，然以发音而论，应以“萨塞克斯”更为接近。再如《四签名》等故事当中的“Langham Hotel”，旧译或作“兰海旅馆”，或作“朗厄姆旅馆”，然则该旅舍真实存在，中文自称“朗廷酒店”，自应名从主人；《狮子鬃毛》当中服饰品牌“Burberry”之译名“博柏利”亦同此理。

《布鲁斯-帕廷顿图纸》当中，福尔摩斯提及其兄服务于“British Government”（中央政府），此英文短语虽可直译为“英国政府”，然则福尔摩斯本人即为英国人，此种说法略嫌不近情理（同理可知，全集中所有“pound”都不宜译为“英镑”）。由此看来，这里的“British”应该是强调其兄服务于大英帝国政府，而非帝国境内某地之地方政府，故译为“中央政府”。

《波希米亚丑闻》当中的“spirit case”（酒樽）指的是一种可以上锁的玻璃酒瓶，“gasogene”（苏打水瓶）则是维多利亚时代晚期一种制造苏打水的家用装置，通常由上下相连的两个玻璃瓶构成，上面的瓶子装的是能够产生碳酸气的化学品，下面的瓶子装的是需要加气的水或其他饮料。

《红发俱乐部》当中的共济会标记“arc-and-compass”（圆规加量角器），旧译或作“弓形指南针”，不确。共济会通常标志为“圆规加曲尺”（square-and-compass），“圆规加量角器”

为资深会员标记。

《空屋子》结尾处的塞巴斯蒂安·莫兰上校简历中有“despatches”（军令嘉奖）一词，旧译“派遣”，不确。此“despatches”实为“mentioned in despatches”之省写，指的是军人因表现卓异而名登战报。

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凡此种种，皆非为考据而考据，更无卖弄之意，学海无涯，卖弄只可覆舟。所以如此，但为尽一己之所知所能、如实反映作品原貌及时代特征而已。书中千余条注释，用意无非简略说明相关历史及文化背景，为读者省却翻检参考书籍之劳，绝非故为障碍、令读者不得畅快淋漓之乐也。柯南·道尔爵士志趣宏远，不以此著自矜，书中叙述遂屡有明显谬误及自相矛盾之处。此类牴牾凡有发现，译者亦尽己之力，一一注明，其余揣测悬想之侦探趣味，则留待读者诸君自行发掘。译者单拳只手、才具有限，译文及注释之中倘有失于考订之处，尚祈高明指正、发我愚蒙。

有鉴于原作时代，译文之中杂有少许浅易文言，用意但为稍添阅读之乐、聊助思古幽情，设若弄巧反拙，诸君海涵。

此帙我所深爱，以故搜刮枯肠，务求文气贯通、字句优美。文章得失，各人所见或不尽同，倘有片言只字能得读者诸君嘉赏，是我之幸。

啰唆至此，方家或已忍俊不禁，先此告罪。

二〇一二年四月二十四日