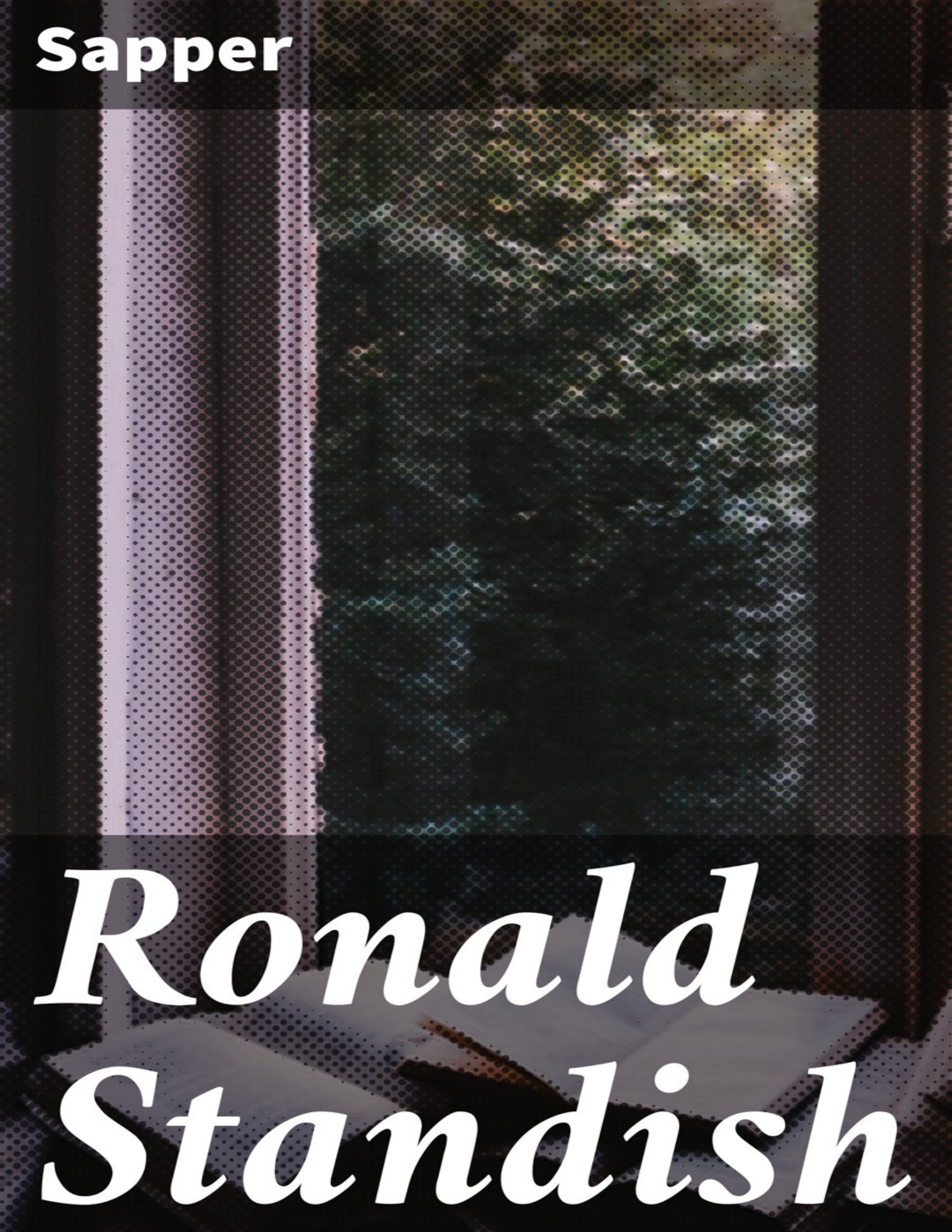
Sapper



Ronald Standish

Sapper

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I. — THE CREAKING DOOR

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§ 1

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RONALD STANDISH lay back in his chair with a worried look on his usually cheerful face. In his hand he held a letter, which he read over for the second time before tossing it across to me.

"The devil and all, Bob," he said, shaking his head. "From what I saw in the papers a clearer case never existed."

I glanced at the note.

Dear Mr. Standish (it ran),—I do hope you will forgive a complete stranger writing to you, but I am in desperate trouble. You will probably remember a very great friend of mine—Isabel Blount, whom you helped some months ago. Well, it was she who advised me to come to you. Would it be possible for you to see me tomorrow after noon at three o'clock? I shall come, anyway, on the chance of finding you disengaged.

Yours sincerely,

Katherine Moody.

"Which means today, in a quarter of an hour," he said, as I laid down the note.

"And I fear it's pretty hopeless."

"You know who she is, then?" I remarked.

He nodded gravely and crossed to a corner of the room where a pile of newspapers was lying on a chair. And as I watched him I wondered, not for the first time what had

made him take up the profession he had. A born player of games, wealthy, and distinctly good-looking, he seemed the last person in the world to become a detective. And yet that was what he was when one boiled down to hard facts. True, he picked and chose his cases, and sometimes for months on end he never handled one at all. But sooner or later some crime would interest him, and then he would drop everything until he had either solved it or was beaten. With the official police he was on excellent terms, which was not to be wondered at in view of the fact that on many occasions he had put them on the right track. At times some new man was tempted to smile contemptuously at the presumption of an amateur pitting himself against the official force, but the smile generally faded before long. For there was no denying that he had a most uncanny flair for picking out the points that mattered from a mass of irrelevant detail.

"It's bad to prejudge a case," he remarked, coming back with two papers, "but this looks pretty damaging on the face of it."

He pointed to a paragraph, and I ran my eye down it.

SHOCKING TRAGEDY IN LEICESTERSHIRE

BRUTAL MURDER OF YOUNG ARTIST

"A crime of unparalleled ferocity was committed yesterday in the grounds of Mexbury Hall, the home of Mr. John Playfair, who has lived there for some years with his ward, Miss Katherine Moody, and her companion. Standing amongst the trees, some way from the Hall and out of sight of it, there is a summer-house which commands a

magnificent view over the surrounding country. And it was in this summer-house that the tragedy occurred.

"It appears that for some weeks past Mr. Playfair has allowed a young artist named Bernard Power to use it as a studio. Yesterday, on returning in the afternoon from a motor trip, Mr. Playfair, while taking a stroll in the grounds, happened to pass by the summer-house, where he was horrified to see a red stream dripping sluggishly down the wooden steps that led to the door. He rushed in, to find the unfortunate young man lying dead on the floor with his head literally crushed in like a broken egg-shell.

"Touching nothing, he rushed back to the house, where he telephoned for the police and a doctor, who arrived post-haste.

"The doctor stated, after examining the body, that Mr. Power had been dead about five hours, which placed the time of the crime at ten o'clock that morning. Then, with the help of Inspector Savage, who has charge of the case, the body was moved, and instantly the weapon with which the deed was done was discovered. A huge stone weighing over fourteen pounds was lying on the floor, and adhering to it were blood and several hairs that obviously had belonged to the dead man. Mr. Playfair explained that the stone had originally come from an old heap which had been left over when the foundations of the summer-house had been laid. This particular one, he went on to say, had been used as a weight on the floor to prevent the door from banging when the artist wanted it open: he had suggested it to him some weeks previously.

"It is clear that a particularly brutal murder has been committed, as any possibility of accident or suicide can be ruled out. The murderer must have approached from behind while the unfortunate young man was at work on his picture, and bashed in his head with one blow.

"The police are in possession of several clues, and sensational developments are expected."

I looked at the date. It was yesterday's paper. Then I looked at the other paragraph he was indicating.

"These are the sensational developments," said Ronald, "which are doubtless responsible for Miss Moody's letter."

"The police have lost no time in following up the clues they obtained in the shocking tragedy that occurred the day before yesterday at Mexbury Hall. It will be recalled that the body of a young artist named Bernard Power was found in the summer house with the head battered in in a fashion which proved conclusively that a singularly brutal murder had been committed.

"Yesterday Inspector Savage arrested a neighbouring landowner, Mr. Hubert Daynton, on the charge of being the murderer. It is understood that a stick belonging to the accused was found in the summer and the butt end of a cigarette of a brand he habitually smokes was discovered lying on the floor.

"The accused protests his complete ignorance of the affair, a further developments are awaited hourly. Needless to say, Mr. Playfair, in whose grounds the tragedy occurred, is much upset, as the dead man was a protegÚ of his."

I put down the paper and glanced at my companion.

"It certainly seems pretty bad for Mr. Hubert Daynton," I said. "He seems to have gone out of his way to leave the evidence lying about."

"Exactly," Standish remarked. "Which may be a point in his favour. However, there goes the bell. We'll hear what Miss Moody has to say."

The door opened, and his man ushered in a delightfully pretty girl of about twenty-one or two, who looked from one to the other of us with a worried expression on her face.

"Sit down, Miss Moody," said Ronald. "And let me introduce a great pal of mine, Bob Miller. You can say anything you like in front of him."

"I suppose you know what I've come about, Mr. Standish," cried the girl.

"I know what has appeared in the papers," said Ronald, "which summarises into the fact that Hubert Daynton has been arrested for the murder of an artist called Bernard Power in the summer-house of your guardian's place."

"But he never did it, Mr. Standish," she cried, clasping her hands together.

"So, I gather, he states. At the same time, the police seem to think otherwise. Now will you be good enough to fill in all the gaps, as far as you can, which have been left by the papers? And one thing I beg of you— don't keep anything back. It is absolutely imperative that I should have all the facts, even if they appear to you to be damaging."

"I will conceal nothing," she said. "You know from the papers that I live at Mexbury Hall with my guardian, and Hubert Daynton has the neighbouring house, Gadsby. Tower.

He was often over with us, and we did the same thing at his place—"

"Was?" put in Ronald. "Do you imply anything by using the past tense?"

"During recent months matters have become a little strained," she said, a slightly heightened colour coming into her cheeks. "To be brief, he wanted to marry me, and my guardian didn't like the idea."

"Why not?" said Ronald bluntly. "Was there any particular reason, or just general disapproval?"

"I don't know," she answered, "Uncle John—he's not really any relation, of course—is very old-fashioned in some ways, and has the most absurd ideas about what girls ought to be told. But one thing is certain: the moment Hubert made it clear that he wanted to marry me, Uncle John's manner towards him changed completely."

"One further point, Miss Moody," said Ronald, with a faint smile. "What were your feelings on the subject?"

"Well," she answered frankly, "I didn't say I would and I didn't say I wouldn't. He's rather a dear, and I like him immensely, but I can't say I'm in love with him. In addition, I'm terribly fond of Uncle John who has been a sort of mother and father to me, and the fact that he disapproved did influence me. There was an idea at the back of my mind, I think, that in time I might get him to change his mind about Hubert, which would have made a difference."

"I understand perfectly," said Ronald. "And that was the condition of affairs between you and Hubert Daynton at the time of his arrest?"

"I'm afraid it wasn't," she answered slowly. "Two months ago Bernard Power came to stay at the village inn. He was an artist, as you know, and in some way or other he got to know Uncle John. Now, my guardian is a photographic maniac—it is the one absorbing hobby of his life—and as Bernard went in for landscape work they seemed to find something in common. He was continually asking Bernard to dinner; and fitted him up, as you read in the papers, in the summer-house as a studio."

She paused for a moment, and glanced from Ronald to me.

"The poor man is dead now," she went on, "and if it wasn't for Hubert's sake, I'd say nothing. But there's no getting away from the fact that Bernard Power was a nasty bit of work. You both of you look thoroughly uman, and you'll know what I mean when I say he was always pawing one, touching one's arm or something like that—a thing I loathe. But matters came to a head three days ago. I happened to be passing the summer-house when he called out to me to come and have a look at his picture.

"Without thinking, I went in. To do him justice, he was a very clever painter. And before I knew where I was, he'd seized me in his arms and was trying to kiss me. I was perfectly furious. I'd never given him the slightest encouragement. However, after I'd smacked his face as hard as I could, he let me go. And then I told him a few home truths and left."

Again she paused, and bit her lip.

"I left, Mr. Standish, and, as evil fortune would have it, I ran into Hubert paying one of his very infrequent visits, He

had come over to see me about a spaniel I wanted. If only it had been an hour later it wouldn't have mattered; I should have recovered. As it was he saw, of course, that I was angry, and realising I'd come from the direction of the summer-house, he jumped at once to the correct conclusion.

"'Has that damned painter been up to his monkey tricks again?' he cried.

"And very foolishly I told him what had happened. He was furious, and there's no denying that Hubert has a very nasty temper when roused. I regretted having said anything the moment the words were out of my mouth, but then it was too late. And it was only with the greatest difficulty that I prevented him going on then and there to put it across Bernard Power. I told him that I was quite capable of looking after myself, and that the matter was over and done with.

"In the middle of our conversation Uncle John joined us. He saw at once that something was up and asked what had happened. Hubert told him and he didn't mince his words, which got Uncle John's back up. And finally the two of them very nearly had a row.

"Uncle John's point of view was that he was the proper person for me to go to, and that it was no business of Hubert's. Hubert on the contrary said it was any decent man's business if some swab of a painter kissed a girl against her will. And then he made the damning statement that he personally proposed to interview Mr. Bernard Power the following morning."

"Did anyone else hear that remark besides you and your guardian?" asked Ronald.

"No one," she said. "Of that I'm positive."

"Why did he specify the following morning? Why didn't he go right away?"

"He had people coming to lunch, and it was getting late."

"And the following morning was the morning of the murder," said Ronald thoughtfully. "Now let's hear exactly what Daynton says took place."

"He says that he started from Gadsby Tower at half-past nine and walked over to the summer-house. He found Bernard Power had no yet arrived, so he lit a cigarette and waited for him—a cigarette which he admits he threw on the floor and put out with his shoe.

"Then Bernard Power came in, and apparently Hubert went for him like a pickpocket. He called him a leprous mess, and a few more things of that sort, and they had a fearful quarrel, in the course of which Hubert put his stick up against the wall, because he was afraid he might hit the other with it, and he was a much smaller man than Hubert. Then he left, and went back to his own house, which he reached at twenty past ten."

Ronald Standish nodded thoughtfully.

"Forgetting all about his stick," he remarked. "A very important point, that."

"He was so excited, Mr. Standish," said the girl. "I know the police think as you do, but surely it's understandable"

"My dear Miss Moody," he said with a smile, "you quite mistake my meaning. Now that I've heard your full story I think it tells enormously in his favour. It is certain that he must have discovered he had left his stick in the summer-house on his way back to Gadsby Tower. There is nothing that a man notices quicker. If, then, he had murdered Power

he would at all costs have had to go back to get it. To leave such a damning piece of evidence lying about was tantamount to putting a noose round his neck. But what was more natural than that he, rather than renew the quarrel, should decide to leave it there, and get it some other time?"

"Then you don't think he did it?" she cried eagerly.

"What I may think," said Ronald guardedly, "is one thing. What we've got to prove is another. If he didn't do it—who did? The crime, according to the doctor's evidence, must have been committed very shortly after Daynton left the summer-house. It is, therefore, I think, a justifiable assumption that the murderer was near by during the interview, heard the quarrel, and seized the opportunity of throwing suspicion on somebody else. So that at any rate one line of exploration must be to find out if this man Power had an enemy who was so bitter against him that he wouldn't stick at murder. And from what you tell me of his manners with you, it would not be surprising if he has gone even further with some other girl. In which case there may be a man who was not as forbearing as Daynton."

"Then you'll help Hubert?" she cried.

"Certainly, Miss Moody," he said. "Now that I've heard the details my opinion is quite different. Bob and I will come down with you this afternoon. But before we start there are just one or two points I'd like cleared up. First—what were your movements on the day of the murder?"

"I stayed in the house till lunch; and in the afternoon I played tennis at a house five miles away."

"You had no communication with Daynton of any sort—over the telephone, for instance?"

"None."

"And Mr. Playfair—what did he do?"

"He went out on one of his photography expeditions. He started in the car about half-past eight in the morning, and was not back till after lunch."

"One last point. You have already said that no one could have overheard the conversation between the three of you on the drive. But did you by any chance mention it to anybody afterwards?"

"No," she said. "I said nothing about it. And I'm sure Uncle John didn't either, as he was in the whole afternoon fiddling about with his latest camera."

"Then it must either have been an unfortunate coincidence for Bernard Power or—" He broke off and stared out of the window thoughtfully.

"Come along," he said, rousing himself at length. "Let's go down and look at this summer-house. I hope your nerves are good, Miss Moody. Bob generally drives, and never at less than sixty miles an hour."

§ 2

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THE grounds of Mexbury Hall were extensive, and the summer- house was a good quarter of a mile from the Hall itself. Trees surrounded it on three sides, affording admirable cover for anyone who wished to hide. The fourth was open, and gave a magnificent view over the country to the south. It was simply built of wood, with a sunblind that could be let down over the big window.

A policeman was on guard as we approached, and he looked doubtful when Ronald explained his business.

"Inspector's orders, sir, were that no one was to be allowed in. Still, I suppose you're different."

"Come in yourself, officer, and you'll see that I'm not going to touch anything. I take it nothing has been moved except the body?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Were you here yourself when the body was found?"

"I came with the Inspector, sir."

Ronald knelt down by the wooden steps leading to the door, and carefully examined the ominous red stain. Then, with a shake of his head, he got up.

"Too late," he said, "Nothing to be got out of that now."

He pushed open the door and stepped inside. Then, according to his invariable custom, he stood absolutely motionless, with only his eyes moving from side to side as he absorbed every detail. On the easel stood the half-finished picture spattered with the dead man's blood. The overturned chair still lay where it had fallen as the artist had crashed to the floor.

"Not much doubt about what happened, sir," remarked the constable. "Never seen a clearer case in all ray service. Fair battered to pieces, he was, poor gentleman."

"What's the meaning of this, Roberts?" said a gruff voice from outside. "I ordered you to admit no one."

Ronald Standish swung round. A choleric looking man in uniform was standing in the doorway.

"Inspector Savage, I take it?" Standish said genially. "I have been commissioned by Miss Moody to make a few

inquiries on behalf of Mr. Daynton."

He held out his card, and the Inspector grunted.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Standish," he remarked. "And if I was you I'd wash my hands of it. You'll get no credit out of this case."

"Perhaps not," agreed Ronald. "Still, when a lady asks one to do something for her it is hard to refuse."

"Kinder in the long run," said the other. "There's no good in raising false hopes in her mind. You've seen in the newspapers what we've discovered. What you may not know is that Daynton admits to having had a furious quarrel with the murdered man at the very time the deed was done."

"It was that fact, amongst others, my dear Inspector, that caused me to take up the case. Surely no one out of a lunatic asylum would go out of his way to damn himself so completely if he had done the murder. His stick, I admit, he couldn't get over, since he was imbecile enough to leave it here; the cigarette stump is awkward. But why he should then add a quarrel which no one had heard is really more than one can swallow."

He was swinging the door backwards and forwards as he spoke, and I saw by the glint in his eye that he was hot on something.

"Very clever, Mr. Standish," laughed the Inspector, "but not quite clever enough. Both Miss Moody and Mr. Playfair knew of his intention. So how could he deny it? I say, sir, must you go on making that squeaking noise with the door?"

"Both ways, you notice," said Ronald. "It creaks when it opens and it creaks when it shuts. Moreover, it shuts of its own accord. Very interesting."

We stared at him in amazement, but he took no notice, and at last the Inspector turned to go, with a significant glance at me.

"By the way, Inspector," said Ronald suddenly, "had the dead man got a brush in his hand?"

"No; but one was lying on the floor beside him."

"Was there any paint on it?"

For a moment the Inspector looked nonplussed.

"I really couldn't tell you at the moment," he said, and Ronald shook his head.

"My dear fellow," he remarked, "you surprise me. Get hold of it and examine it. And if there's paint on it, sit down and think things over, bearing in mind the fact that the door creaks."

"And if there isn't paint on it?" said the other with ponderous sarcasm.

"There will be," answered Ronald quietly.

"Anything else you can suggest?"

"Yes; but I don't think you're likely to do it."

"What's that?"

"Release that unfortunate chap, Daynton."

"Release Daynton?" gasped the other.

"Why not? For I can assure you that he had no more to do with the murder of Bernard Power than you or I had."

"Then who did do it?"

"I promise you shall know at the first possible moment," said Ronald.

"Well, until I do," grinned the other, "Mr. Daynton remains under lock and key."

Ronald was silent as we strolled back to the house, and I knew him too well to interrupt his reverie.

"By the way, Bob," he said suddenly, as we neared the door, "say nothing—even to Miss Moody—about our thinking Daynton innocent. It might get round to the servants."

She met us on the drive, and with her was a man of about forty-five, who we correctly surmised was her guardian, Mr. Playfair.

"Well," she cried, after introducing us, "what luck?"

Ronald shook his head. "Early days yet, Miss Moody," he said gravely. "I've seen the Inspector, and I'm bound to confess it doesn't look too good."

"I blame myself very much," said her guardian, "but never in my wildest imagination did I dream of such a tragedy occurring."

"In what way do you blame yourself, Mr. Playfair?" asked Ronald.

"In going out so early that morning. I ought to have waited here and been present at the interview. Hubert is such a hot headed chap."

"But, Uncle John, he didn't do it!" cried the girl.

"My dear," said the other sadly, "I wish I could think so. And let us hope that Mr. Standish succeeds in proving it. Candidly," he went on as she left us, "I wish she hadn't been to you. You understand how I mean it. The case is so painfully clear that I fear even you can do no good. And the sooner she realises it the better."

"Perhaps so," agreed Ronald. "As you say, it's a pity you went out as early as you did."

"Well, I wanted to get to Comber Ness by noon, and it's very nearly a four hours' run. I don't know whether my ward has told you," he went on, with a faint smile, "but I'm a most enthusiastic photographer. And I have just acquired a new toy. Are you by any chance interested?"

"Very," said Ronald. "I do a bit that way myself."

"Then come and have a drink, and I will show it to you." He led the way into the house and we followed him. "It is a stereoscopic camera," he explained, as he took it off a table in the hall. "And doubtless you know the principle on which it works. The two lenses are the same distance apart as one's eyes, and two negatives are taken at each exposure. Then by making positives and holding them in one of those machines that you probably remember from your early youth, the whole thing stands out as in real life."

"And you went over to Comber Ness to get a photograph," said Ronald.

"Exactly," said the other, and then gave a rueful laugh. "And didn't get it—at least, not what I wanted. I've only just got the machine. In fact, it was my first load of plates. Now, if you examine it, you will see a little number at one end of the plate-carrier. Every time you change a plate after taking a photo the number goes up one, so that you always know how many plates are left. The numbers range from one to twelve, and the night before Wilkinson, my butler, who is almost as keen as I am on it, happened to mention to me that number twelve was showing, which meant that there

was only one more plate left. And I forgot all about it till I arrived at Comber Ness."

"But one exposure was surely enough?" said Ronald.

"Quite—if I hadn't wanted to take two different views. It is, as you know, one of the most celebrated beauty spots of England, and I had promised an American friend of mine two photographs taken from totally separate points. And I had only one plate. So there was nothing for it but to use the camera as an ordinary one by covering one lens with a cap and taking one view on half the plate, and then covering the other lens and taking the second view on the other half. But, of course, it spoiled things from a stereoscopic point altogether. However, I'm glad to say they both came out well. I left them to be developed that day, and they were sent up this afternoon with the other eleven."

He was examining some of the results as he was speaking, and at moment his ward came into the hall.

"Good Heavens! Uncle John," she cried, "this is hardly the time photographs."

"Sorry, dear," he said contritely. "The matter came up in the course of conversation with Mr. Standish. You see, this was the camera I was using that day at Comber Ness."

She seemed sorry at having spoken so sharply, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"It's all right, old 'un," she said "So that's the new toy, is it? Can we see the pretty pictures?"

"I've got to make the positives first," he answered. "These are the negatives."

"Well, it's all beyond me. And I thought they were going to be much bigger. Each of them seems just the same size

as that other camera takes—the little one."

"Quite right. This camera takes two identical pictures on every plate, each of which is the same size as the little one."

"And when were these very goo views of the grounds here taken?" said Ronald.

"Let the see. I think I took those the day before I went to Comber Ness."

"A very fine machine," cried Ronald. "They are so clear cut. And these two separate ones of Comber Ness. Beautiful! Beautiful! I should very much like prints of those myself, if you would be good enough."

"Certainly," said our host. "Delighted. And now I expect you'd like to see your rooms."

He led the way upstairs and, having told us the time of dinner, left us. And shortly after Ronald came sauntering into my room and sat on the bed.

"What do you make of it, Bob?" he said.

"Nothing at all," I answered. "And though you may be perfectly clear in your own mind, old lad, that this man Daynton didn't do it, I don't see that you've got much forrader as to who did."

He made no reply, and was staring out of the window as the butler knocked to find out if there was anything we wanted.

"I hear you're very keen on photography, Wilkinson," said Ronald pleasantly.

"In a small way I dabble in it, sir."

"Mr. Playfair was telling me it was a great hobby of yours. What do you think of that new camera of his?"

"I've only seen it once, sir. He asked me to tell him the number showing at the end. Twelve it was, I remember. That was the night before the tragedy, sir. I do hope that you may be able to do something for poor Mr. Daynton. Such a nice gentleman, sir."

"I hope so, too, Wilkinson. By the way, Mr. Playfair does most of his developing himself, doesn't he?"

"Invariably, sir," said the butler, looking faintly surprised.

"But he had this last lot developed for him?" persisted Ronald.

"Yes, sir. He apparently lunched at Barminster on the day of the murder, and left them with a chemist there."

"Thank you, Wilkinson. No—nothing to drink."

The butler left the room, and I stared at him.

"You seem very interested in our host's photography," I said.

"Bob;" he remarked, "if you had just bought a new stereoscopic camera and had motored over a hundred miles for a view, would you suddenly be so overcome by a promise given to an American friend that you wouldn't use your new acquisition as such?"

"What in the name of fortune are you driving at?" I cried. "Anyway, whatever I might or might not do, we have seen what our host did. There's the proof in the negative. Why, good Lord, man, you can't suspect him."

"I didn't say I did. I merely asked a question. You see, Bob, one thing is perfectly clear. A man who was at Comber Ness in the morning and arrived at Barminster for lunch could not possibly have left here as late as ten o'clock."

"Very well, then?"

"A perfect alibi. But it would have been an equally good alibi if he had carried out the same time-table and taken a stereoscopic picture there instead of two separate views. So again I ask—why those two different views?"

"It must be the American," I cried.

"Must it? Or is it because he couldn't take a stereoscopic picture?"

"Then he couldn't have taken the other two?"

"Sound logic," he grinned. "Well, time to change, I suppose."

"Look here, Ronald," I almost shouted, "what do you mean?"

The grin departed, and he looked at me gravely. "It means," he said, "that we are dealing with a particularly dangerous and unprincipled man, whose only slip up to date is that he did not expend a pennyworth of oil on the hinges of the summer-house door."

And with that he left the room.

All through the evening his words kept recurring to me, and the more I thought of them the more amazing did they become. It seemed to me he must be wrong, and yet Ronald Standish was not in the habit of making a definite statement without good reason. And when, next morning, he suddenly announced his intention of returning to London, I was even more dumbfounded.

The girl was terribly disappointed, and it struck me that his attempts at consolation were very half-hearted. He seemed to have lost interest in the case, though he gave her a few perfunctory words of hope.

"I'll be back this evening, Miss Moody," he said, "and perhaps by then I may have something to report."

But I heard him expressing a different opinion to our host when she was out of hearing. For some reason he did not want me to go with him, and so I spent most of the day with her trying to cheer her up. It was a little difficult, since I manifestly could not allude to the amazing hints he had dropped the preceding evening. In fact, the more I thought of them the more fantastic did they seem. If Ronald had a fault it was that he sometimes seemed to go out of his way to find a complicated solution to a thing when a simple one fitted the facts. And for the life of me I could not see wherein lay the difficulty over our host's explanation of the two different photos on the one plate.

He returned about six, looking weary and dispirited, and my heart sank.

"Waste of time, I fear," he said, as we all met him in the hall. "I'm afraid it's a case of going back to London for good."

"And throwing up the case?" cried the girl.

"I fear I was to blame, Miss Moody, in speaking too hopefully in my rooms," he said. "So if you could give orders for our things to be packed, we'll be getting along. By the way, Mr. Playfair, don't forget those two photographs you promised me."

"I did them for you today," said our host. "I'll see if they are dry."

He left the hall, and for a moment we were alone.

"Got him, Bob," he said, and his eyes were blazing with excitement, "by an amazing piece of luck."

But he was his apathetic self when Playfair returned with the prints.

"Astoundingly good," he remarked, as he examined them. "How did you manage to do it, Mr. Playfair?"

"Do what?" cried the other, staring at him.

"Avoid taking the steam-roller which has been standing idle in the centre of this particular view for the last ten days."

For a moment there was dead silence, and I saw that every atom of colour had left our host's face.

"I did not go to London today," went on Ronald. "I went to Comber Ness, where I took this photograph. Not fixed yet—but look at it."

He flung it on the table; it was the same as the other. But in the centre was a steam-roller with a tarpaulin over it.

"You devil!" screamed Playfair, and made a dash for the passage leading to the back of the house.

"Hold him, Bob!" roared Ronald, and I collared him. He struggled like a maniac, but I kept him till Ronald came running back with the plate in his hand.

"He was going to destroy that," he cried. "Well, Mr. Playfair, have you any explanation as to why that steam-roller is missing from your photo?" And then with a sudden shout—"Stop him, Bob!"

But it was too late. I felt his body relax in my arms, almost immediately after his hand came away from his mouth. Then he slithered to the floor—dead.

§ 3

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"I'M blowed if I see how you did it, Mr. Standish."

It was three hours later, and Inspector Savage was gazing at Ronald in undisguised admiration.

"By starting with a theory diametrically opposed to yours," said Ronald. "You were convinced Hubert Daynton had done it; I was convinced he hadn't. Then who had? My first idea was that the murderer was some man Power had wronged—probably over some woman. He had been hiding near by, and had taken advantage of the quarrel he heard to do the deed and throw the suspicion on someone else. Then I suddenly realised the enormous significance of the fact that the door creaked, and shut of its own accord.

"Now, Power was sitting at his easel some four yards from the door. Suppose the door was shut when the murderer entered; it would creak as he opened it. Suppose it was being kept open by the stone with which the deed was done; it would creak as it shut, after the stone was picked up. In either event it would creak.

"Now, what does anybody do who hears a door creak behind him— especially if there has just been a quarrel and the creak may mean that the other person has returned? He looks over his shoulder to see who it is. And if he sees some enemy of his, someone he has wronged, he does not continue his job with his back to the newcomer. But Power went on with his painting. There fore the person he saw he did not regard as an enemy, but looked on as a friend. So much of a friend, in fact, that he did not object to this new arrival walking about behind his back—always an uncomfortable sensation unless your mind is completely at

rest. And at once a very different complexion was put on the matter.

"Then came my interview with Mr. John Playfair, and the question of the two separate pictures of different views of Comber Ness on the one plate—the point that puzzled you so much, Bob. You remember that when I said it might be because he couldn't take a stereoscopic picture, you countered by saying that in that case he equally could not have taken the two separate views. Which was right, up to a point. He couldn't have taken either, but that doesn't prevent a negative appearing on a plate.

"The man was a skilled photographer, and he was faced with the necessity of proving to the world that he had been to Comber Ness. If he could do so he was safe. But since he had ho intention of going anywhere near Comber Ness, what was he to do? He knew that if you take a negative and make a positive from it, you can produce a second negative in a dark room on exactly the same principle as you produce a print. But he had no stereoscopic picture of Comber Ness; he'd only just bought the machine. What he had got were two separate views taken with his smaller camera!

"So he makes two positives—you remember Miss Moody told us he was fiddling about in the dark room all the afternoon before the murder—and then he takes out his last stereoscopic plate. You see the importance of its being the last one; that accounted for his having to put them both on one plate. And that was why he took three unnecessary photos of his own grounds. On to that last plate he clips the two positives, side by side, exposes it in his dark room, and

returns the plate to the camera. There is his alibi. He need never go near Comber Ness, and, in fact, he never did.

"He had Wilkinson's evidence that twelve was the number showing—you noticed there, Bob, the slight discrepancy between Playfair's statement and the butler's. He had the chemist's evidence that the plates were handed over to him to be developed; he had the hotel evidence that he lunched at Barminster.

"Exactly what he did we shall never know. He drove away at eight-thirty, and presumably concealed his car in some lane. Then he returned and hid near the summer-house. He was taking no risk up to date; if he was found there was no reason why he shouldn't be in his own grounds. And everything came off. He murdered Power, and drove quietly over to Barminster, where he lunched."

"But why. this cold-blooded murder of a man he apparently liked?" I asked.

"The usual reason," he answered. "Once or twice after dinner last night I caught the look in his eyes as they rested on the girl. He was in love with her himself, which can account for many things. Why he took up Power at all I can't tell you—possibly at the beginning he had some idea of choking off Daynton by making him jealous. Then he may have feared that instead of doing that the artist's attentions to the girl might have the opposite result and bring Daynton and the girl closer together. Or perhaps he may have become jealous of Power himself. Anyway, he saw his opportunity of getting rid of both of them. And but for the astounding piece of luck of my finding that steam-roller where it was, he'd have gone darned near doing it. Being a