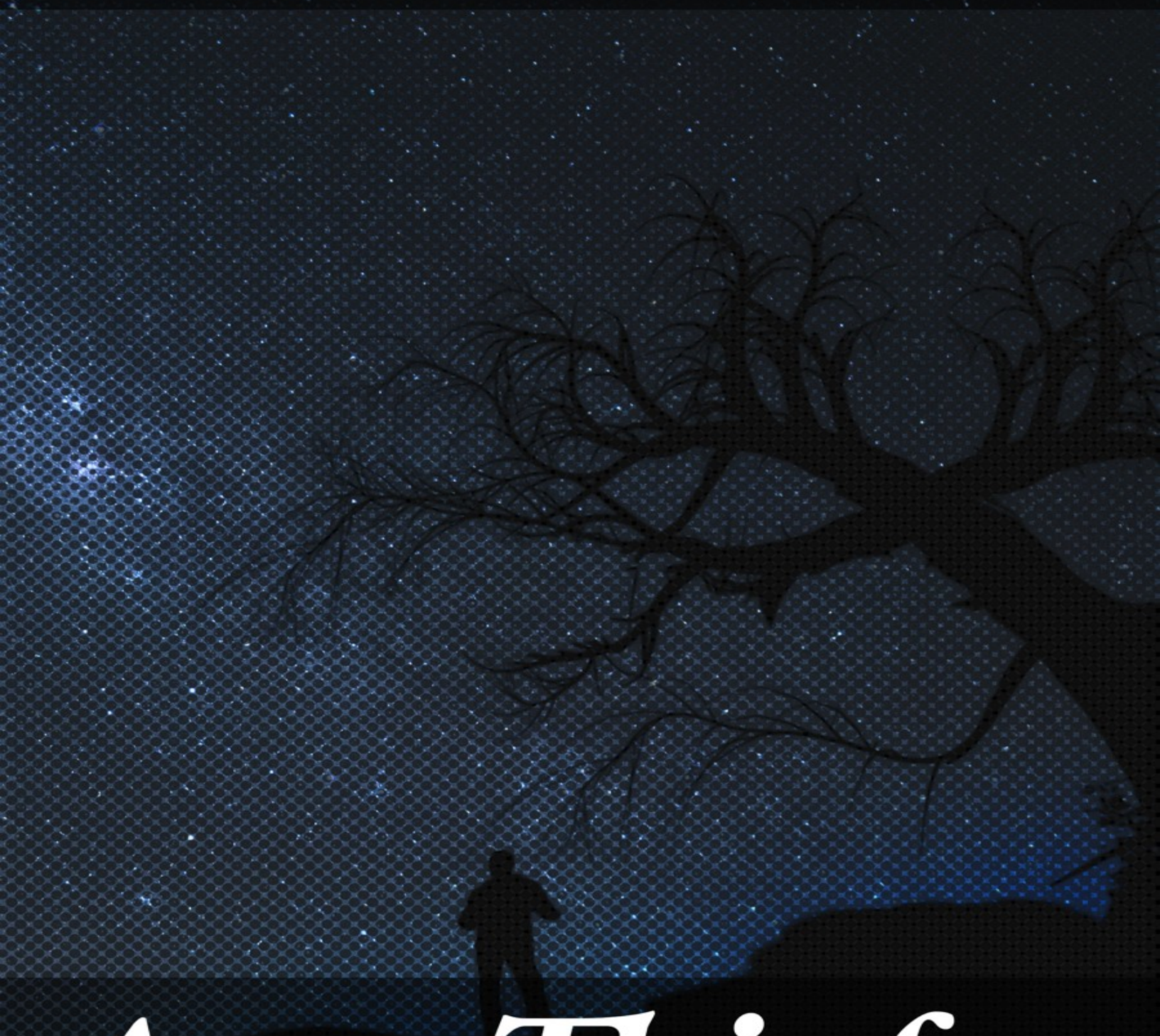
R. Austin Freeman



As a Thief in the Night

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I. — THE INVALID

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LOOKING back on events by the light of experience I perceive clearly that the thunder-cloud which burst on me and on those who were dear to me had not gathered unseen. It is true that it had rolled up swiftly; that the premonitory mutterings, now so distinct but then so faint and insignificant, gave but a brief warning. But that was of little consequence, since whatever warnings there were passed unheeded, as warnings commonly do, being susceptible of interpretation only by means of the subsequent events which they foreshadowed.

The opening scene of the tragedy—if I had but realized it—was the arrival of the Reverend Amos Monkhouse from his far-away Yorkshire parish at the house of his brother Harold. I happened to be there at the time; and though it was not my concern, since Harold had a secretary, I received the clergyman when he was announced. We knew one another well enough by name though we had never met, and it was with some interest and curiosity that I looked at the keen-faced, sturdy, energetic-looking parson and contrasted him with his physically frail and rather characterless brother. He looked at me, too, curiously and with a certain appearance of surprise, which did not diminish when I told him who I was.

"Ha!" said he, "yes, Mr Mayfield. I am glad to have the opportunity of making your acquaintance. I have heard a good deal about you from Harold and Barbara. Now I can fit

you with a visible personality. By the way, the maid tells me that Barbara is not at home."

"No, she is away on her travels in Kent."

"In Kent!" he repeated, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, on one of her political expeditions; organizing some sort of women's emancipation movement. I dare say you have heard about it."

He nodded a little impatiently. "Yes. Then I assume that Harold is not so ill as I had supposed?"

I was inclined to be evasive; for, to be quite candid, I had thought more than once that Barbara might properly have given a little less attention to her political hobbies and a little more to her sick husband. So I replied cautiously:

"I really don't quite know what his condition is. You see, when a man has chronically bad health, one rather loses count. Harold has his ups and downs, but he always looks pretty poorly. Just now, I should say he is rather below his average."

"Ha! Well, perhaps I had better go up and have a look at him. The maid has told him that I am here. I wonder if you would be so kind as to show me the way to his room. I have not been in this house before."

I conducted him up to the door of the bedroom and then returned to the library to wait for him and hear what he thought of the invalid. And now that the question had been raised, I was not without a certain uneasiness. What I had said was true enough. When a man is always ailing one gets to take his ill-health for granted and to assume that it will go on without any significant change. One repeats the old saying of "the creaking gate" and perhaps makes unduly

light of habitual illness. Might it be that Harold was being a little neglected? He had certainly looked bad enough when I had called on him that morning. Was it possible that he was really seriously ill? Perhaps in actual danger?

I had just asked myself this question when the door was opened abruptly and the clergyman strode into the room. Something in his expression—a mingling, as it seemed, of anger and alarm—rather startled me; nevertheless I asked him calmly enough how he found his brother. He stared at me, almost menacingly, for a second or two; then slowly and with harsh emphasis he replied: "I am shocked at the change in him. I am horrified. Why, good God, Sir! the man is dying!"

"I think that can hardly be," I objected. "The doctor saw him this morning and did not hint at anything of the sort. He thought he was not very well but he made no suggestion as to there being any danger."

"How long has the doctor been attending him?"

"For something like twenty years, I believe; so by this time he ought to understand the patient's—"

"Tut-tut," the parson interrupted, impatiently, "what did you say yourself but a few minutes ago? One loses count of the chronic invalid. He exhausts our attention until, at last, we fail to observe the obvious. What is wanted is a fresh eye. Can you give me the doctor's address? Because, if you can, I will call on him and arrange a consultation. I told Harold that I wanted a second opinion and he made no objection; in fact he seemed rather relieved. If we get a really first-class physician, we may save him yet."

"I think you are taking an unduly gloomy view of Harold's condition," said I. "At any rate, I hope so. But I entirely agree with you as to the advisability of having further advice. I know where Dr Dimsdale lives so if you like I will walk round with you."

He accepted my offer gladly and we set forth at once, walking briskly along the streets, each of us wrapped in thought and neither speaking for some time. Presently I ventured to remark:

"Strictly, I suppose, we ought to have consulted Barbara before seeking another opinion."

"I don't see why," he replied. "Harold is a responsible person and has given his free consent. If Barbara is so little concerned about him as to go away from home—and for such a trumpery reason, too—I don't see that we need consider her. Still, as a matter of common civility, I might as well send her a line. What is her present address?"

"Do you know," I said, shamefacedly, "I am afraid I can't tell you exactly where she is at the moment. Her permanent address, when she is away on these expeditions, is the head-quarters of the Women's Friendship League at Maidstone."

He stopped for a moment and glowered at me with an expression of sheer amazement. "Do you mean to tell me," he exclaimed, "that she has gone away, leaving her husband in this condition, and that she is not even within reach of a telegram?"

"I have no doubt that a telegram or letter would be forwarded to her."

He emitted an angry snort and then demanded: "How long has she been away?"

"About a fortnight," I admitted, reluctantly.

"A fortnight!" he repeated in angry astonishment. "And all that time beyond reach of communication! Why the man might have been dead and buried and she none the wiser!"

"He was much better when she went away," I said, anxious to make the best of what I felt to be a rather bad case. "In fact, he seemed to be getting on quite nicely. It is only during the last few days that he has got this set-back. Of course, Barbara is kept informed as to his condition. Madeline sends her a letter every few days."

"But, my dear Mr Mayfield," he expostulated, "just consider the state of affairs in this amazing household. I came to see my brother, expecting—from the brief letter that I had from him—to find him seriously ill. And I do find him seriously ill; dangerously ill, I should say. And what sort of care is being taken of him? His wife is away from home, amusing herself with her platform fooleries, and has left no practicable address. His secretary, or whatever you call him, Wallingford, is not at home. Madeline is, of course, occupied in her work at the school. Actually, the only person in the house besides the servants is yourself—a friend of the family but not a member of the household at all. You must admit that it is a most astonishing and scandalous state of affairs."

I was saved from the necessity of answering this rather awkward question by our arrival at Dr Dimsdale's house; and, as it fortunately happened that the doctor was at home

and disengaged, we were shown almost at once into his consulting room.

I knew Dr Dimsdale quite well and rather liked him, though I was not deeply impressed by his abilities. However, his professional skill was really no concern of mine, and his social qualities were unexceptionable. In appearance and manner he had always seemed to me the very type of a high-class general practitioner, and so he impressed me once more as we were ushered into his sanctum. He shook hands with me genially, and as I introduced the Reverend Amos looked at him with a politely questioning expression. But the clergyman lost no time in making clear the purpose of his visit; in fact he came to the point with almost brutal abruptness.

"I have just seen my brother for the first time for several months and I am profoundly shocked at his appearance. I expected to find him ill, but I did not understand that he was so ill as I find him."

"No," Dr Dimsdale agreed, gravely, "I suppose not. You have caught him at a rather unfortunate time. He is certainly not so well today."

"Well!" exclaimed Amos. "To me he has the look of a dying man. May I ask what, exactly, is the matter with him?"

The doctor heaved a patient sigh and put his fingertips together.

"The word 'exactly'," he replied, with a faint smile, "makes your question a little difficult to answer. There are so many things the matter with him. For the last twenty years, on and off, I have attended him, and during the whole of that time his health has been unsatisfactory—most

unsatisfactory. His digestion has always been defective, his circulation feeble, he has had functional trouble with his heart, and throughout the winter months, more or less continuous respiratory troubles—nasal and pulmonary catarrh and sometimes rather severe bronchitis."

The Reverend Amos nodded impatiently. "Quite so, quite so. But, to come from the past to the present, what is the matter with him now?"

"That," the doctor replied suavely, "is what I was coming to. I mentioned the antecedents to account for the consequents. The complaints from which your brother has suffered in the past have been what are called functional complaints. But functional disease—if there really is such a thing—must, in the end, if it goes on long enough, develop into organic disease. Its effects are cumulative. Each slight illness leaves the bodily organs a little less fit."

"Yes?"

"Well, that is, I fear, what is happening in your brother's case. The functional illnesses of the past are tending to take on an organic character."

"Ha!" snorted the Reverend Amos. "But what is his actual condition now? To put it bluntly, supposing he were to die tonight, what would you write on die death certificate?"

"Dear me!" said the doctor. "That is putting it very bluntly. I hope the occasion will not arise."

"Still, I suppose you don't regard his death as an impossible contingency?"

"Oh, by no means. Chronic illness confers no immortality, as I have just been pointing out."

"Then, supposing his death to occur, what would you state to be the cause?"

Dr Dimsdale's habitual suavity showed a trace of diminution as he replied: "You are asking a very unusual and hardly admissible question, Mr Monkhouse. However, I may say that if your brother were to die tonight he would die from some definite cause, which would be duly set forth in the certificate. As he is suffering from chronic gastritis, chronic bronchial catarrh, functional disorder of the heart and several other morbid conditions, these would be added as contributory causes. But may I ask what is the object of these very pointed questions?"

"My object," replied Amos, "was to ascertain whether the circumstances justified a consultation. It seems to me that they do. I am extremely disturbed about my brother. Would you have any objection to meeting a consultant?"

"But not in the least. On the contrary, I should be very glad to talk over this rather indefinite case with an experienced physician who would come to it with a fresh eye. Of course, the patient's consent would be necessary."

"He has consented, and he agreed to the consultant whom I proposed—Sir Robert Detling—if you concurred."

"I do certainly. I could suggest no better man. Shall I arrange with him or will you?"

"Perhaps I had better," the parson replied, "as I know him fairly well. We were of the same year at Cambridge. I shall go straight on to him now and will let you know at once what arrangement he proposes."

"Excellent," said the doctor, rising with all his suavity restored. "I shall keep tomorrow as free as I can until I hear

from you, and I hope he will be able to manage it so soon. I shall be glad to hear what he thinks of our patient, and I trust that the consultation may be helpful in the way of treatment."

He shook our hands heartily and conducted us to the street door, whence he launched us safely into the street.

"That is a very suave gentleman," Amos remarked as we turned away. "Quite reasonable, too; but you see for yourself that he has no real knowledge of the case. He couldn't give the illness an intelligible name."

"It seemed to me that he gave it a good many names, and it may well be that it is no more than he seems to think; a sort of collective illness, the resultant of the various complaints that he mentioned. However, we shall know more when Sir Robert has seen him; and meanwhile, I wouldn't worry too much about the apparent neglect. Your brother, unlike most chronic invalids, doesn't hanker for attention. He has all he wants and he likes to be left alone with his books. Shall you see him again today?"

"Assuredly. As soon as I have arranged matters with Detling I shall let Dr Dimsdale know what we have settled and I shall then go back and spend the evening with my brother. Perhaps I shall see you tomorrow?"

"No. I have to run down to Bury St Edmunds tomorrow morning and I shall probably be there three or four days. But I should very much like to hear what happens at the consultation. Could you send me a few lines? I shall be staying at the Angel."

"I will certainly," he replied, halting and raising his umbrella to signal an approaching omnibus. "Just a short

note to let you know what Sir Robert has to tell us of poor Harold's condition."

He waved his hand, and stepping off the kerb, hopped on to the foot-board of the omnibus as it slowed own, and vanished into the interior. I stood for a few moments watching the receding vehicle, half inclined to go back and take another look at the sick man; but reflecting that his brother would be presently returning, I abandoned the idea and made my way instead to the Underground Railway station and there took a ticket for the Temple.

There is something markedly infectious in states of mind. Hitherto I had given comparatively little attention to Harold Monkhouse. He was a more or less chronic invalid, suffering now from one complaint and now from another, and evidently a source of no particular anxiety either to his friends or to his doctor. He was always pallid and sickly-looking, and if, on this particular morning, he had seemed to look more haggard and ghastly than usual, I had merely noted that he was "not so well today."

But the appearance on the scene of the Reverend Amos had put a rather different complexion on the affair. His visit to his brother had resulted in a severe shock, which he had passed on to me; and I had to admit that our interview with Dr Dimsdale had not been reassuring. For the fact which had emerged from it was that the doctor could not give the disease a name.

It was very disquieting. Supposing it should turn out that Harold was suffering from some grave, even some mortal disease, which ought to have been detected and dealt with months ago. How should we all feel? How, in particular,

would Barbara feel about the easygoing way in which the illness had been allowed to drift on? It was an uncomfortable thought; and though Harold Monkhouse was really no concern of mine, excepting that he was Barbara's husband, it continued to haunt me as I sat in the rumbling train and as I walked up from the Temple station to my chambers in Fig Tree Court.

II. — BARBARA MONKHOUSE COMES HOME

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IN the intervals of my business at Bury St Edmunds I gave more than a passing thought to the man who was lying sick in the house in the quiet square at Kensington. It was not that I had any very deep feeling for him as a friend, though I liked him well enough. But the idea had got into my mind that he had perhaps been treated with something less than ordinary solicitude; that his illness had been allowed to drift on when possibly some effective measures might have been taken for his relief. And as it had never occurred to me to make any suggestions on the matter or to interest myself particularly in his condition, I was now inclined to regard myself as a party to the neglect, if there had really been any culpable failure of attention. I therefore awaited with some anxiety the letter which Amos had promised to send.

It was not until the morning of my third day at Bury that it arrived; and when I had opened and read it I found myself even less reassured than I had expected.

"Dear Mayfield," it ran. "The consultation took place this afternoon and the result is, in my opinion, highly unsatisfactory. Sir Robert is, at present, unable to say definitely what is the matter with Harold. He states that he finds the case extremely obscure and reserves his opinion until the blood-films and other specimens which he took, have been examined and reported on by an expert pathologist. But on one point he is perfectly clear. He regards Harold's condition as extremely grave—even critical

—and he advised me to send a telegram to Barbara insisting on her immediate return home. Which I have done; and only hope it may reach her in the course of the day.

"That is all I have to tell you and I think you will agree that it is not an encouraging report. Medical science must be in a very backward state if two qualified practitioners—one of them an eminent physician—cannot between them muster enough professional knowledge to say what is the matter with a desperately sick man. However, I hope that we shall have a diagnosis by the time you come back.

"Yours sincerely,

"AMOS MONKHOUSE."

I could not but agree, in the main, that my clerical friend's rather gloomy view was justified, though I thought that he was a trifle unfair to the doctors, especially to Sir Robert. Probably a less scientific practitioner, who would have given the condition some sort of name, would have been more satisfying to the parson. Meanwhile, I allowed myself to build on "the blood-films and other specimens" hopes of a definite discovery which might point the way to some effective treatment.

I despatched my business by the following evening and returned to London by the night train, arriving at my chambers shortly before midnight. With some eagerness I emptied the letter-cage in the hope of finding a note from Amos or Barbara; but there was none, although there were one or two letters from solicitors which required to be dealt with at once. I read these through and considered their contents while I was undressing, deciding to get up early and reply to them so that I might have the forenoon free;

and this resolution I carried out so effectively that by ten o'clock in the morning I had breakfasted, answered and posted the letters, and was on my way westward in an Inner Circle train.

It was but a few minutes' walk from South Kensington Station to Hilborough Square and I covered the short distance more quickly than usual. Turning into the square, I walked along the pavement on the garden side, according to my habit, until I was nearly opposite the house. Then I turned to cross the road and as I did so, looked up at the house. And at the first glance I stopped short and stared in dismay: for the blinds were lowered in all the windows. For a couple of seconds I stood and gazed at this ominous spectacle; then I hurried across the road and, instinctively avoiding the knocker, gave a gentle pull at the bell.

The door was opened by the housemaid, who looked at me somewhat strangely but admitted me without a word and shut the door softly behind me. I glanced at her set face and asked in a low voice: "Why are all the blinds down, Mabel?"

"Didn't you know, Sir?" she replied, almost in a whisper. "It's the master—Mr Monkhouse. He passed away in the night. I found him dead when I went in this morning to draw up the blinds and give him his early tea."

I gazed at the girl in consternation, and after a pause she continued:

"It gave me an awful turn. Sir, for I didn't see, at first, what had happened. He was lying just as he usually did, and looked as if he had gone to sleep, reading. He had a book in his hand, resting on the counterpane, and I could see that

his candle-lamp had burned itself right out. I put his tea on the bedside table and spoke to him, and when he didn't answer I spoke again a little louder. And then I noticed that he was perfectly still and looked even paler and more yellow than usual and I began to feel nervous about him. So I touched his hand: and it was as cold as stone and as stiff as a wooden hand. Then I felt sure he must be dead and I ran away and told Miss Norris."

"Miss Norris!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Sir. Mrs Monkhouse only got home about an hour ago. She was fearfully upset when she found she was too late. Miss Norris is with her now, but I expect she'll be awfully glad you've come. She was asking where you were. Shall I tell her you are here?"

"If you please, Mabel," I replied; and as the girl retired up the stairs with a stealthy, funereal tread, I backed into the open doorway of the dining room (avoiding the library, in case Wallingford should be there) where I remained until Mabel returned with a message asking me to go up.

I think I have seldom felt more uncomfortable than I did as I walked slowly and softly up the stairs. The worst had happened—at least, so I thought—and we all stood condemned; but Barbara most of all. I tried to prepare some comforting, condolent phrases, but could think of nothing but the unexplainable, inexcusable fact that Barbara had, of her own choice and for her own purposes, gone away leaving a sick husband and had come back to find him dead.

As I entered the pleasant little boudoir—now gloomy enough, with its lowered blinds—the two women rose from the settee on which they had been sitting together, and

Barbara came forward to meet me, holding out both her hands.

"Rupert!" she exclaimed, "how good of you! But it is like you to be here just when we have need of you." She took both my hands and continued, looking rather wildly into my face: "Isn't it an awful thing? Poor, poor Harold! So patient and uncomplaining! And I so neglectful, so callous! I shall never, never forgive myself. I have been a selfish, egotistical brute."

"We are all to blame," I said, since I could not honestly dispute her self-accusations; "and Dr Dimsdale not the least. Harold has been the victim of his own patience. Does Amos know?"

"Yes," answered Madeline, "I sent him a telegram at half-past eight. I should have sent you one, too, but I didn't know that you had come back."

There followed a slightly awkward silence during which I reflected with some discomfort on the impending arrival of the dead man's brother, which might occur at any moment. It promised to be a somewhat unpleasant incident, for Amos alone had gauged the gravity of his brother's condition, and he was an outspoken man. I only hoped that he would not be too outspoken.

The almost embarrassing silence was broken by Barbara, who asked me in a low voice: "Will you go and see him, Rupert?" and added: "You know the way and I expect you would rather go alone."

I said "yes" as I judged that she did not wish to come with me, and, walking out of the room, took my way along the corridor to the well-remembered door, at which I halted

for a moment, with an unreasonable impulse to knock, and then entered. A solemn dimness pervaded the room, with its lowered blinds, and an unusual silence seemed to brood over it. But everything was clearly visible in the faint, diffused light—the furniture, the pictures on the walls, the bookshelves and the ghostly shape upon the bed, half-revealed through the sheet which had been laid over it.

Softly, I drew back the sheet, and the vague shape became a man; or rather, as it seemed, a waxen effigy, with something in its aspect at once strange and familiar. The features were those of Harold Monkhouse, but yet the face was not quite the face that I had known. So it has always seemed to me with the dead. They have their own distinctive character which belongs to no living man—the physiognomy of death; impassive, expressionless, immovable; fixed for ever, or at least, until the changes of the tomb shall obliterate even its semblance of humanity.

I stepped back a pace and looked thoughtfully at the dead man who had slipped so quietly out of the land of the living. There he lay, stretched out in an easy, restful posture, just as I had often seen him; the eyes half-closed and one long, thin arm lying on the counterpane, the waxen hand lightly grasping the open volume; looking—save for the stony immobility—as he might if he had fallen asleep over his book. It was not surprising that the housemaid had been deceived, for the surroundings all tended to support the illusion. The bedside table with its pathetic little provisions for a sick man's needs: the hooded candle-lamp, drawn to the table-edge and turned to light the book; the little decanter of brandy, the unused tumbler, the water-

bottle, the watch, still ticking in its upright case, the candle-box, two or three spare volumes and the hand-bell for night use; all spoke of illness and repose with never a hint of death.

There was nothing by which I could judge when he had died. I touched his arm and found it rigid as an iron bar. So Mabel had found it some hours earlier, whence I inferred that death had occurred not much past midnight. But the doctors would be able to form a better opinion, if it should seem necessary to form any opinion at all. More to the point than the exact time of death was the exact cause. I recalled the blunt question that Amos had put to Dr Dimsdale and the almost indignant tone in which the latter had put it aside. That was less than a week ago; and now that question had to be answered in unequivocal terms. I found myself wondering what the politic and plausible Dimsdale would put on the death certificate and whether he would seek Sir Robert Detling's collaboration in the execution of that document.

I was about to replace the sheet when my ear caught the footsteps of some one approaching on tip-toe along the corridor. The next moment the door opened softly and Amos stole into the room. He passed me with a silent greeting and drew near the bed, beside which he halted with his hand laid on the dead hand and his eyes fixed gloomily on the yellowish-white, impassive face. He spoke no word, nor did I presume to disturb this solemn meeting and farewell, but silently slipped out into the corridor where I waited for him to come out.

Two or three minutes passed, during which I heard him, once or twice, moving softly about the room and judged that he was examining the surroundings amidst which his brother had passed the last few weeks of his life. Presently he came out, closing the door noiselessly behind him, and joined me opposite the window. I looked a little nervously into the stern, grief-stricken face, and as he did not speak, I said, lamely enough: "This is a grievous and terrible thing, Mr Monkhouse."

He shook his head gravely. "Grievous indeed; and the more so if one suspects, as I do, that it need not have happened. However, he is gone and recriminations will not bring him back."

"No," I agreed, profoundly relieved and a little surprised at his tone; "whatever we may feel or think, reproaches and bitter words will bring no remedy. Have you seen Barbara?"

"No; and I think I won't—this morning. In a day or two, I hope I shall be able to meet and speak to her as a Christian man should. Today I am not sure of myself. You will let me know what arrangements are made about the funeral?"

I promised that I would, and walked with him to the head of the stairs, and when I had watched him descend and heard the street door close, I went back to Barbara's little sitting-room.

I found her alone, and, when I entered she was standing before a miniature that hung on the wall. She looked round as I entered and I saw that she still looked rather dazed and strange. Her eyes were red, as if she had been weeping, but they were now tearless, and she seemed calmer than when I had first seen her. I went to her side, and for a few moments

we stood silently regarding the smiling, girlish face that looked out at us from the miniature. It was that of Barbara's step-sister, a very sweet, loveable girl, little more than a child, who had died some four years previously, and who, I had sometimes thought, was the only human creature for whom Barbara had felt a really deep affection. The miniature had been painted from a photograph after her death and a narrow plait of her gorgeous, red-gold hair had been carried round inside the frame.

"Poor little Stella!" Barbara murmured, "I have been asking myself if I neglected her, too. I often left her for days at a time."

"You mustn't be morbid, Barbara," I said. "The poor child was very well looked after and as happy as she could be made. And nobody could have done any more for her. Rapid consumption is beyond the resources of medical science at present."

"Yes, unfortunately." She was silent for a while. Then she said: "I wonder if anything could have been done for Harold. Do you think it possible that he might have been saved?"

"I know of no reason for thinking so, and now that he is gone I see no use in raising the question."

She drew closer to me and slipped her hand into mine.

"You will be with us as much as you can, Rupert, won't you? We always look to you in trouble or difficulty, and you have never failed us. Even now you don't condemn me, whatever you may think."

"No, I blame myself for not being more alert, though it was really Dimsdale who misled us all. Has Madeline gone to the school?"

"Yes. She had to give a lecture or demonstration, but I hope she will manage to get a day or two off duty. I don't want to be left alone with poor Tony. It sounds unkind to say so, for no one could be more devoted to me than he is. But he is so terribly high-strung. Just now, he is in an almost hysterical state. I suppose you haven't seen him this morning?"

"No. I came straight up to you." I had, in fact, kept out of his way, for, to speak the truth, I did not much care for Anthony Wallingford. He was of a type that I dislike rather intensely; nervous, high-strung, emotional and in an incessant state of purposeless bustle. I did not like his appearance, his manners or his dress. I resented the abject fawning way in which he followed Barbara about, and I disapproved of his position in this house; which was nominally that of secretary to Barbara's husband, but actually that of tame cat and generally useless hanger-on. I think I was on the point of making some disparaging comments on him, but at that moment there came a gentle tap at the door and the subject of my thoughts entered.

I was rather sorry that Barbara was still holding my hand. Of course, the circumstances were very exceptional, but I have an Englishman's dislike of emotional demonstrations in the presence of third parties. Nevertheless, Wallingford's behaviour filled me with amazed resentment. He stopped short with a face black as thunder, and, after a brief, insolent stare, muttered that he was afraid he was "intruding" and walked out of the room, closing the door sharply after him.

Barbara flushed (and I daresay I did, too), but made no outward sign of annoyance. "You see what I mean," she said. "The poor fellow is quite unstrung. He is an added anxiety instead of a help."

"I see that plainly enough," I replied, "but I don't see why he is unstrung, or why an unstrung man should behave like an ill-mannered child. At any rate, he will have to pull himself together. There is a good deal to be done and he will have to do some of it. I may assume, I suppose, that it will be his duty to carry out the instructions of the executors?"

"I suppose so. But you know more about such things than I do."

"Then I had better go down and explain the position to him and set him to work. Presently I must call on Mr Brodribb, the other executor, and let him know what has happened. But meanwhile there are certain things which have to be done at once. You understand?"

"Yes, indeed. You mean arrangements for the funeral. How horrible it sounds. I can't realize it yet. It is all so shocking and so sudden and unlooked-for. It seems like some dreadful dream."

"Well, Barbara," I said gently, "you shan't, be troubled more than is unavoidable. I will see to all the domestic affairs and leave the legal business to Brodribb. But I shall want Wallingford's help, and I think I had better go down and see him now."

"Very well, Rupert," she replied with a sigh. "I shall lean on you now as I always have done in times of trouble and difficulty, and you must try to imagine how grateful I am since I can find no words to tell you."

She pressed my hand and released me, and I took my way down to the library with a strong distaste for my mission.

That distaste was not lessened when I opened the door and was met by a reek of cigarette smoke. Wallingford was sitting huddled up in an easy chair, but as I entered, he sprang to his feet and stood facing me with a sort of hostile apprehensiveness. The man was certainly unstrung; in fact he was on wires. His pale, haggard face twitched, his hands trembled visibly and his limbs were in constant, fidgety movement. But, to me, there seemed to be no mystery about his condition. The deep yellow stains on his fingers, the reek in the air and a pile of cigarette-ends in an ash-bowl were enough to account for a good deal of nervous derangement, even if there were nothing more—no drugs or drink.

I opened the business quietly, explaining what had to be done and what help I should require from him. At first he showed a tendency to dispute my authority and treat me as an outsider, but I soon made the position and powers of an executor clear to him. When I had brought him to heel I gave him a set of written instructions the following-out of which would keep him fairly busy for the rest of the day; and having set the dismal preparations going, I went forth from the house of mourning and took my way to New Square, Lincoln's Inn, where were the offices of Mr Brodribb, the family solicitor and my co-executor.

III. — A SHOCK FOR THE MOURNERS

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IT was on the day of the funeral that the faint, unheeded mutterings of the approaching storm began to swell into audible and threatening rumblings, though, even then, the ominous signs failed to deliver their full significance.

How well do I recall the scene in the darkened dining room where we sat in our sable raiment, "ready to wenden on our pilgrimage" to the place of everlasting rest and eternal farewell. There were but four of us, for Amos Monkhouse had not yet arrived, though it was within a few minutes of the appointed time to start; quite a small party; for the deceased had but few relatives, and no outsiders had been bidden.

We were all rather silent. Intimate as we were, there was no need to make conversation. Each, no doubt, was busy with his or her own thoughts, and as I recall my own they seem to have been rather trivial and not very suitable to the occasion. Now and again I stole a look at Barbara and thought what a fine, handsome woman she was, and dimly wondered why, in all the years that I had known her, I had never fallen in love with her. Yet so it was. I had always admired her; we had been intimate friends, with a certain amount of quiet affection, but nothing more—at any rate on my part. Of her I was not so sure. There had been a time, some years before, when I had had an uneasy feeling that she looked to me for something more than friendship. But she was always a reticent girl; very self-reliant and self-

contained. I never knew a woman better able to keep her own counsel or control her emotions.

She was now quite herself again, quiet, dignified, rather reserved and even a little inscrutable. Seated between Wallingford and Madeline, she seemed unconscious of either and quite undisturbed by the secretary's incessant nervous fidgeting and by his ill-concealed efforts to bring himself to her notice.

From Barbara my glance turned to the woman who sat by her side noting with dull interest the contrast between the two; a contrast as marked in their bearing as in their appearance. For whereas Barbara was a rather big woman, dark in colouring, quiet and resolute in manner, Madeline Norris was somewhat small and slight, almost delicately fair, rather shy and retiring, but yet with a suggestion of mental alertness under the diffident manner. If Barbara gave an impression of quiet strength, Madeline's pretty, refined face was rather expressive of subtle intelligence. But what chiefly impressed me at this moment was the curious inversion of their attitudes towards the existing circumstances; for whereas Barbara, the person mainly affected, maintained a quiet, untroubled demeanour, Madeline appeared to be overcome by the sudden catastrophe. Looking at her set, white face and the dismay in her wide, grey eyes, and comparing her with the woman at her side, a stranger would at once have assumed the bereavement to be hers.

My observations were interrupted by Wallingford once more dragging out his watch.

"What on earth can have happened to Mr Amos?" he exclaimed "We are due to start in three minutes. If he isn't here by then we shall have to start without him. It is perfectly scandalous! Positively indecent! But there, it's just like a parson."

"My experience of parsons," said I, "is that they are, as a rule, scrupulously punctual. But certainly, Mr Amos is unpardonably late. It will be very awkward if he doesn't arrive in time. Ah, there he is," I added as the bell rang and a muffled knock at the street door was heard.

At the sound, Wallingford sprang up as if the bell had actuated a hidden spring in the chair, and darted over to the window, from which he peered out through the chink beside the blind.

"It isn't Amos," he reported. "It's a stranger, and a fool at that, I should say, if he can't see that all the blinds are down."

We all listened intently. We heard the housemaid's hurried footsteps, though she ran on tip-toe; the door opened softly, and then, after an interval, we heard some one ushered along the hall to the drawing room. A few moments later, Mabel entered with an obviously scandalized air.

"A gentleman wishes to speak to you, Ma'am," she announced.

"But, Mabel," said Barbara, "did you tell him what is happening in this house?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I explained exactly how things were and told him that he must call tomorrow. But he said that his business was urgent and that he must see you at once."

"Very well," said Barbara. "I will go and see what he wants. But it is very extraordinary."

She rose, and nearly colliding with Wallingford, who had rushed to open the door—which was, in fact, wide open—walked out quickly, closing the door after her. After a short interval—during which Wallingford paced the room excitedly, peered out of the window, sat down, got up again and looked at his watch—she came back, and, standing in the doorway, looked at me.

"Would you come here for a minute, Rupert," she said, quietly.

I rose at once and walked back with her to the drawing room, on entering which I became aware of a large man, standing monumentally on the hearth-rug and inspecting the interior of his hat. He looked to me like a plainclothes policeman, and my surmise was verified by a printed card which he presented and which bore the inscription "Sergeant J Burton."

"I am acting as coroner's officer," he explained in reply to my interrogatory glance, "and I have come to notify you that the funeral will have to be postponed as the coroner has decided to hold an inquest; I have seen the undertakers and explained matters to them."

"Do you know what reason there is for an inquest?" I asked. "The cause of death was certified in the regular way."

"I know nothing beyond my instructions, which were to notify Mrs Monkhouse that the funeral is put off and to serve the summonses for the witnesses. I may as well do that now."