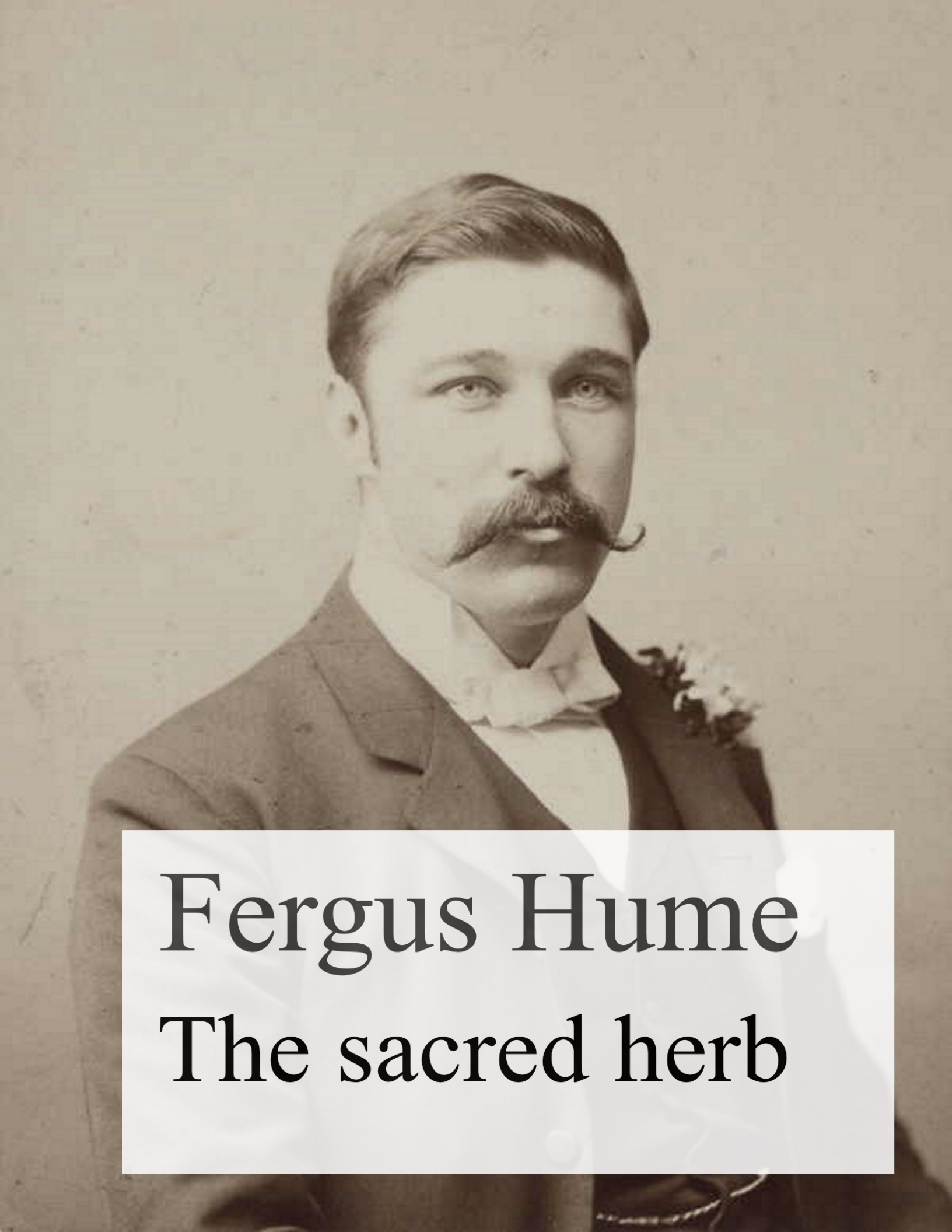

Fergus Hume

The sacred herb

The Sacred Herb

The Sacred Herb

THE LATEST SENSATION

Lord Prelice felt desperately bored. Like Xeres, he longed for some new pleasure, yet knew not where to look for one. This was the result of being surfeited with the sweets of extraordinary good fortune. Born to a title, endowed with passable good looks, gifted with abilities above the average, and possessed of admirable health, he should have been the happiest of men; the more especially as his income ran well into five figures, and he had the whole wide world to play with. Certainly he had played with it and with life, up to his present age of thirty-five years. Perhaps this was the reason of his acute boredom. If all work and no play makes Jack dull; all play and no work must necessarily make him *blase*.

Therefore, in spite of the excellent breakfast spread before him on this bright summer morning, when London was looking at its best, the young man was ungratefully wondering what he could do to render life endurable. He ate from habit and not because he enjoyed his food; he read the morning papers, since it was necessary to be abreast of the times, for conversational purposes, although very little was new therein and still less was true. By the time he arrived at the marmalade stage of the meal he was again considering the possibilities of the next four and twenty hours. In this discontented frame of mind he was discovered by his aunt.

Lady Sophia Haken bustled into the pleasant room exasperatingly cheerful, and very pleased with life in general and with herself in particular. She was an elderly woman of a somewhat masculine type who lived a simple out-of-door existence, and who proclaimed loudly that it was necessary for humanity to return to the Stone Age for true enjoyment.

Having been riding in the Row for the last two hours, she entered in her habit, filled with the egotism of the early riser. As a near relative, she could not do less than scold Prelice for lingering over a late breakfast, and told him,—also as a near relative—that she scolded him for his good. She had done so very often before without result, and, but that she loved to lay down the law, would have long since given over the attempt to improve her nephew. Nevertheless, anxious to achieve the impossible, she attacked him with pristine vigor, as though aware for the first time of his bad habits.

"Nine o'clock and still at breakfast," said Lady Sophia significantly, and slapped her skirts with a whip which she would have dearly liked to lay across her lazy nephew's broad shoulders.

Prelice looked indolently at the clock, then at the table, and finally at his fuming aunt. "I cannot deny it," he said, with a yawn.

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked, much disgusted.

Prelice heaved a sigh. It was necessary to say something, if only to stem the coming tide of verbose speech. "How well you are looking."

"Because I have been up since six o'clock."

"How unwise; you will probably sleep all the afternoon."

Lady Sophia snapped, tartly: "I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Oh, very well," he assented, "you will do nothing of the sort. Anything for a quiet life, even agreement with the improbable."

His aunt grasped her whip dangerously. "How exasperating you are!"

"I was just thinking the same about you," confessed Prelice, good-humouredly; "it is so disagreeable for a late riser to be reminded of the time." And having folded his napkin, he lighted a cigarette.

"How long is this going on?" demanded Lady Sophia fiercely. His imperturbability made her long to shake him thoroughly.

"How long is what going on?" asked Prelice provokingly.

"This idle, idiotic, insane, sensual, foolish, wicked, dilatory existence!"

"Seven adjectives," murmured the young man, opening his eyes. "Waste, waste—oh, what waste!"

"How long is this going on?" inquired his relative again, and whipped her skirts—instead of Prelice's back—with renewed vigour.

He was forced to answer. "As long as I do, no doubt. What else is to be done, I should like to know?"

"You shall know. Serve your country."

"What! And be abused in the penny press? No, thank you."

"You can surely help your brother-man."

"Surely—only to learn how much ingratitude exists in the world."

Lady Sophia stamped, bit her lip, and looked like a ruffled cockatoo in a bad temper. She wanted to quarrel, and it annoyed her that Prelice would not meet her half way, by supplying a reason. She had to invent the quarrel, and bring about the quarrel, and carry on the quarrel, and finish the quarrel without assistance. "Marry!" was the one word which suggested itself, and she hoped that it would be like a red rag to a bull.

"Oh, Jerusalem!" Prelice shook his closely cropped fair head. "I would much rather serve brother-man than marry sister-woman. You offer me a choice of unoriginal evils."

"You never will face the truth," declared Lady Sophia irrelevantly; and forthwith—according to an old-established custom—she proceeded to recount the family history—that is, she picked out the worst traits of Prelice's ancestors and debited them to his account. He smoked through two cigarettes, and nodded at intervals, not very much interested, since he had heard the same oration at least a dozen times. Lady Sophia having worked her way from the reign of Elizabeth down to that of Edward VII., ended with a lurid, penny-sensational picture of what would befall her listener in the near future, unless he worked like a nigger.

"Such a bad illustration," interposed Prelice placidly; "niggers don't work. As I have just returned from the West Indies, I ought to know." Lady Sophia snorted down the interruption, and seeing that he was still unimpressed, tried to goad him into industry by mentioning several of his school-fellows who had attained to comparative fame and fortune, while Prelice—as she scathingly put it—had been grovelling in the mud. "Even young Shepworth," ended Lady Sophia, somewhat out of breath, "and *he* was never clever—even *he* is Counsel for the Defence this very day in an important murder case."

"I'm deuced sorry for his client," murmured Prelice indolently.

"Why should you be?" demanded his aunt aggressively.

"You said that he wasn't clever."

"He must be." Lady Sophia contradicted herself with feminine calmness. "If he wasn't he certainly would not be talking this very day at the New Bailey.

Go and hear him, Prelice, and be ashamed that a fool—yes, a superlative fool—should succeed where you fail."

"What *do* you mean?" inquired her nephew, with great curiosity. "First you say that Ned isn't clever——"

"Ned! Ned. I never mentioned Ned. Who is Ned?"

"Shepworth. Edward Shepworth—Ned for short. We were great chums at Eton, you know. But you say that he isn't clever, then you insist that he is, and wind up by calling him a fool."

"You know quite well what I mean," said Lady Sophia with dignity.

"I really don't," confessed her nephew artlessly, "you describe such a complex character. However, as I have nothing to do to-day——"

"And never have anything to do—idler."

"I shall go to the New Bailey, and listen to Ned hanging his client!"

"So brilliant a barrister as Mr. Shepworth will certainly get her off," said Lady Sophia decisively.

Prelice passed over this new contradiction. "It's a woman?"

"Yes. Mona Chent. You know her."

"I'm sure I don't. The criminal classes don't attract me."

"She is not a criminal, but a lady," said his aunt, as though the two things were incompatible; "and you *do* know her. Mona Chent, the niece of old Sir Oliver Lanwin."

Prelice reflected with bent brows. "I never heard the name before, I assure you, Aunt Sophia," he said at length. "Remember that I have been travelling round the world for the last seven years and know very little of the latest London sensation."

"You ought to stay at home, and make yourself acquainted with people, Prelice."

"Including this murderess?"

"She is not a murderess," cried Lady Sophia energetically. "I always did think that she was a sweet girl, and if she did kill her uncle, it was no more than he deserved. I never liked him."

"Therefore he ought to be murdered," said Prelice, rising and stretching himself before the empty grate. "So Sir Oliver was the victim. I have heard of him. He used to send Ned shells and barbaric things from the South Seas. And now Ned is repaying him by defending his murderess."

"I tell you Mona did not murder the man. I know her. I have received her. Would I receive a murderess?"

"It might be a draw to some of your parties," said Prelice politely, and with a recollection of several dull entertainments. "But I cannot quite gather from your clear explanation if she is guilty or not."

"Half London thinks that she is, and half asserts her innocence."

"What does Shepworth think?"

"He naturally believes her to be innocent."

"Because he defends her?"

"Because she is his future wife."

Prelice looked startled. "Oh, Jerusalem! And if he proves her innocence he'll marry her, I suppose."

"As she is her uncle's heiress, and Mr. Shepworth is poor, I presume he will. Ten thousand a year is not to be despised."

"But a wife with such a past," protested the young man. "Ugh! Did Miss Chent murder her uncle to get the money?"

"She didn't murder him at all. Look at the facts of the case——"

"I shall be delighted to, if you will place them before me."

"You ought to know all about them," said Lady Sophia, rising impatiently; "everyone has been talking about the case for the last month;—ever since Mona Chent was arrested, in fact."

"Ah, but you see I have only just arrived in London. I shall go to my club and get posted up in the latest scandal."

"The latest sensation," corrected his aunt. "Go to the New Bailey instead, and hear Mr. Shepworth place the case before the judge and jury. His eloquence will make you sorry for your lazy, useless life; he will be a K.C.," cried Lady Sophia, becoming prophetic, "and Attorney-General and Lord Chancellor, and——"

"King of Timbuctoo, no doubt. Loud cheers."

Lady Sophia looked indignantly at the scoffer, who beamed on her benignly with laughing blue eyes. "You *have* deteriorated since you left the Army."

"No doubt, the standard of morality in the Army being so high."

"Oh!" His aunt stamped, and flung open the door with a tragic air. "I have done with you. Your flippancy is disgusting. I repeat, Prelice, I have done with you." And she departed hastily, lest a reply from the scoffer should spoil her impressive exit.

Prelice laughed, knowing that Lady Sophia would never be done with him while she had a tongue to wag. Also he believed that she was truly fond of him, and knew that she had only too much reason to accuse him of wasting his life. He resolved to mend his ways, more as an experiment in self-denial than because he wanted to, and cast about for a model person to imitate. After Lady Sophia's conversation the name of Edward Shepworth naturally suggested itself, so Prelice arrayed himself in purple and fine linen, and ordered round his motor car. Within two hours he was driving out of Half-Moon Street, and was soon dodging the traffic of Piccadilly.

It was so delightful, manipulating the machine in the sunshine, and acting as a chauffeur so appealed to him that he was minded to turn the Mercedes in the direction of Richmond. But the hints about the murder being an unusual one kept him to his earlier determination; also a copy of *The Daily Mirror* assured him that the accused girl was exceedingly pretty; finally, he had always been friendly with the Counsel for the Defence, and thought that he would renew the tie of old school-days. These things brought his smart Mercedes to the bran-new portals of the Criminal Court, and when he had handed over the steering-wheel to his chauffeur he sought out the arena, wherein Shepworth was fighting for the life of his promised wife.

Naturally the first person at whom the young man looked was the prisoner in the dock, and he mentally confessed that *The Daily Mirror* photograph had not done her justice. It could scarcely do so in mere black and white, as Miss Chent needed vivid tints to convey her peculiar charm. She was one

of those rare blondes who embody sunshine in hair and eyes: a dragon-fly of humanity, all radiance and glow. Since she was on trial for her life, Prelice quite expected to see a white-faced, terrified creature, worn out with shame and suffering. But Miss Chent might have been in an opera-box, for all the emotion she displayed. Prelice had more experience of women than was good for him, but he never beheld so perfectly dressed, or so perfectly serene a girl. It would be absurd to say that so level-headed a young man fell in love with this attractive criminal at first sight; but he certainly felt drawn to her. She looked like a captive angel, and without knowing the rights or wrongs of the case, Prelice mentally pronounced her to be entirely innocent. Her calmness, if not her beauty, acquitted her, as his susceptible heart decided, for no woman with an unclean conscience could have faced judge and jury with such manifest confidence. Prelice thought of Joan of Arc on trial for sorcery; of Mary Stuart before a prejudiced tribunal; of Marie Antoinette; and of the Vestal, who proved her innocence by drawing Tiber water in a sieve. He might also have recalled the Marquise de Brinvilliers, likewise calm, beautiful, and—guilty. But he did not.

The Court was filled with more or less fashionable people, who came to make a Roman holiday of Sir Oliver Lanwin's violent death, and Miss Chent's position. Doubtless she had been well known in Society, and those who had been her friends were here to watch her in the new role of an accused criminal. Prelice was disgusted at the heartless conduct of some ladies, who whispered and tittered, and used opera-glasses to stare at the unfortunate girl. He internally commended his aunt for having had the good taste to remain absent, and then turned his eyes on the array of barristers to search for Ned Shepworth.

If the prisoner was serene in the consciousness of innocence, her counsel certainly was less composed. A strong will and the second nature of

custom kept Shepworth sufficiently self-controlled to deceive those who had but a passing acquaintance with his personality. But Prelice, who had known the young barrister for years, noted that his usually ruddy complexion was whiter than usual, and that his eyes seemed to be sunken in his head by reason of the dark shadows beneath them. Shepworth was a slim, handsome man, brown-haired and brown-eyed, with a clean-shaven face and a resolute mouth. In his wig and gown he looked a very presentable son of Themis, if somewhat less composed than the traditionally unemotional lawyer should be. He was seated at the long table with two older men, who apparently were his coadjutors; and near the defence trio the Counsel for the Prosecution—appointed by the Public Prosecutor on behalf of the Crown—was chatting amiably with his colleague, a keen-faced young barrister. Behind sat many other lawyers wigged and gowned, who were taking the deepest interest in the proceedings. For the moment the Court was so still that the rustling of the briefs, as the barristers turned their pages, could be plainly heard.

"Are those two fellows assisting Mr. Shepworth in the defence?" Prelice whispered to a legal-looking bystander at his elbow.

"No," replied the man in a low voice; "the big fellow is Cudworth, K.C., and the other is young Arkers, who acts as Junior Counsel, Shepworth is not defending, as he was in the house when the crime was committed, and will be called as a witness."

So Lady Sophia was inaccurate as usual, and Prelice felt somewhat disappointed that he would not have an opportunity of hearing his old school-chum orating. However, he had little time to think, for at this moment the Prosecuting Counsel got on his legs to open the case. Prelice felt that the curtain had risen on a tragedy. He wondered what would be the scene when the curtain fell.

THE TRIAL

The Counsel, in a clear and deliberate voice, opened his speech with an unvarnished statement of the case; and a very remarkable story he unfolded. Prelice, as an experienced traveller, had always believed in the impossible; but it seemed to him that he had returned to prosaic England to hear a veritable fairy-tale. There was something extremely fantastic about the way in which the crime was said to have been committed. As set forth by the speaker, the event happened in this wise.

Sir Oliver Lanwin, the last male heir of an ancient Kentish family, whose seat was situated near Hythe, had found himself, some forty years previous to the trial, a pauper with a newly inherited title. Seeing no chance in England of rehabilitating his fortunes, he had taken what little money he possessed to New Zealand, leaving his only sister well provided for, as the wife of an army officer named Chent. After making some money in various ways at Hokitika, Sir Oliver had purchased a fruit schooner to trade amongst the South Sea Islands. Being successful, he had bought other ships, and for more than thirty years he had been a kind of Polynesian merchant-prince, owing to his wealth and enterprise and keen business capacity. He had never married, because of an early disappointment, and ten years before, he had returned to England with a capital representing ten thousand a year. With this he had retired to his ancestral seat, near Hythe, and there proposed to end his days in comfort, after the fashion of Sinbad, the famous sailor of the Arabian Nights. He brought with him an old shell-back mariner, Steve Agstone by name, who was an important witness for the prosecution. Unfortunately, said the

Counsel, the man had disappeared, immediately before the inquest, after hinting to the housekeeper, Mrs. Blexey, that he had actually witnessed the committal of the crime, for which the prisoner was being tried. In spite of all efforts made by the police, this witness could not be discovered, and it was impossible to say why he had disappeared. But Counsel hoped to produce other witnesses, who would prove beyond all shadow of a doubt that the prisoner was guilty.

After proceeding thus far, Counsel sipped a glass of water, hitched his gown more comfortably on to his shoulders, and continued his speech amidst the breathless silence of the listeners.

Being a bachelor, Sir Oliver felt somewhat lonely, since he was of a sociable disposition. For a few months he kept open house, but as his nature proved to be exacting and imperious, he did not get on well with his neighbours. Finally, he proclaimed that they were all idiots, and closing his doors, he became more or less of a recluse. It was then that Sir Oliver's widowed sister, Mrs. Chent, died suddenly, leaving her daughter Mona—the prisoner—to the care of her uncle. Sir Oliver became extremely fond of the young lady, who was of a lively and amiable disposition. Indeed, his attachment was so great that he made a will in her favour, by which she was to inherit ten thousand a year and the family-seat.

"And here," proceeded Counsel impressively, "I may mention a circumstance which, in the light of after events, has some bearing on the case. Mr. Oliver, while bathing at Samoa, had his leg taken off, from the knee, by a shark. He thus was unable to indulge in field sports, in games, or indeed in any kind of out-of-door life. He therefore took to reading, and of a somewhat unusual kind. Jacob Bohme, Paracelsus, and Eliphas Levi were his favourite authors, from which it can be judged that the dead man took a deep interest in psychic questions.

"He also consulted palmists, fortune-tellers, astrologers, and crystal-gazers, frequently asking them down to Lanwin Grange. In fact, at the very time when the crime was committed, Madame Marie Eppingrave, a well-known Bond Street interpreter of the future, was staying in the house. She will be called as a witness. But you can see, gentlemen of the jury, that the late baronet was an exceedingly superstitious man, although clear-headed in business and perfectly capable of managing his affairs."

It was at this point that Shepworth caught sight of Prelice, and he nodded in a friendly manner. Then he scribbled a note, and sent it by an usher to the young man. It proved to be a request that Prelice would wait for him at the door when the Court adjourned for luncheon. Prelice slipped the missive into his pocket, and nodded a reply. Shepworth seemed to be pleased with this prompt acceptance, and immediately resumed his attitude of attention, while Counsel continued to boom out facts with the drone of a bumble-bee.

As the narrative proceeded it appeared that, a few months before his death, Sir Oliver had received a South Sea visitor in the person of a young sailor called Captain Felix Jadby, whose father he had known at Tahiti. The baronet was extremely intimate with the visitor, and practically gave him the run of the house. Captain Jadby came and went at will, and Sir Oliver talked to him a great deal in connection with matters dealing with Polynesian trade. This was not to be wondered at, since the baronet, having been a trader himself, it was pleasant for him to converse with one who knew about such things.

Unfortunately, Captain Jadby fell in love with the prisoner, and wished to marry her. She refused to become his wife, on the plea that she loved Mr. Edward Shepworth, and was engaged to him. Sir Oliver was annoyed at the engagement, as he desired the marriage with Captain Jadby to take

place. On the day of his death he quarrelled seriously with the prisoner, and, according to Madame Marie Eppingrave's evidence—since she was present during the quarrel—Sir Oliver stated that if the prisoner did not marry Captain Jadby he would disinherit her. Prisoner still refused, and retired to her room, saying that she would not reappear until Captain Jadby was out of the house. For the sake of peace Jadby went up to London that same day, with the intention of returning by the ten o'clock train. Then, if prisoner still remained obdurate, he intended to say good-bye to his host, and leave for the Colonies within the week.

"And now, gentlemen of the jury," continued Counsel, with another hitch of his gown, "we come to the most important part of the story. Previous to going to London, Captain Jadby had a wordy quarrel with Mr. Shepworth, and from words the quarrel came to blows. Mr. Shepworth's foot slipped and he slightly sprained his ankle, so that he was not able to leave Lanwin Grange, as he desired. His position was an unpleasant one, since Sir Oliver was not well disposed towards him on account of the engagement which existed with the prisoner. As Captain Jadby had left the Grange, Mr. Shepworth wished to go also, and would have gone, but that his sprained ankle prevented his removal, and he therefore remained in his room. Now, gentlemen, you can see the position of the several people connected with this matter at the time when the crime was committed. Captain Jadby was in London, intending to return at ten o'clock; Mr. Shepworth was in his room with a sprained ankle which prevented his leaving it; the prisoner was also in her room, and even though Captain Jadby had departed, for the time being, she declined to come down to dinner. Madame Marie Eppingrave and Sir Oliver dined alone, and then the baronet retired to his library, where until nine o'clock—according to Madame Marie's evidence—he chatted with her on occult subjects. Also, as Madame Marie will state, Sir Oliver expressed himself strongly on the subject of the prisoner's refusal of Jadby.

"As Sir Oliver was in the habit of retiring early to bed on account of his health, his factotum, Steve Agstone, entered the library at nine o'clock to bolt and bar the windows. There were no shutters; and this please remember, gentlemen, as it is an important point. The servants had already retired, and after making the library safe, Steve Agstone left the room with the intention of waiting up for Captain Jadby, who was expected back by the ten o'clock train, and who intended to walk to the Grange. Madame Marie lingered for a few minutes to say good-night, and then retired to her bedroom. She declares that it was five minutes after nine o'clock that she left the library. Sir Oliver—so she says—was seated at the table near the window reading and smoking.

"Here, gentlemen," pursued Counsel, taking up a plan, "is a drawing of the library." He passed it by an usher to the foreman of the jury. "You will see that there is only one door to the library, which leads out into the hall, and which is opposite to the fireplace. The inner walls of the room, on three sides, are covered with books, but the fourth wall—the outer wall, gentlemen—has in it three tall French windows, which lead on to a terrace over a lawn. The lawn extends for some distance, ending in flower-beds, these in their turn being encircled by shrubs, and farther back by the park trees. When Madame Marie left the room Sir Oliver was seated at his writing-table, marked 'X,' immediately before the middle window. As the night was chilly there was a fire burning in the grate. You understand, gentlemen? Good. Now we come to the discovery of the crime."

Counsel then went on to state that Captain Jadby returned, according to his promise, at ten o'clock—that is, his train arrived at the station, which was about half-a-mile from the Grange. He walked to Sir Oliver's house, as he had no luggage to carry, and the night was fine if somewhat cold. On emerging from the avenue on to the lawn he saw that there was a light in the library; and it was here that Counsel again drew the jury's attention to

the fact that the windows had no shutters. Captain Jadby therefore thought that, as Sir Oliver had not retired to bed, he would knock at one of the windows, and enter the house that way, so as to avoid rousing the other inmates by ringing the bell. He advanced to the lighted windows, and looked through the middle one, which was veiled, as were the others, with curtains of Indian beadwork. To his surprise, he saw that Sir Oliver, seated at his desk, was lying forward on the writing-table. "I am precise to a fault here, gentlemen," said Counsel jocularly, "but it is absolutely to be even pedantic, so that you will understand.

"Sir Oliver," he continued, "was lying with his face on his outstretched hands, and in an armchair near the fireplace sat the prisoner, in a white dressing-gown with her hands on her lap. Captain Jadby could not see very distinctly, owing to the beadwork curtains, but he saw sufficient to guess that something was wrong, especially as his knocking produced no effect either on Sir Oliver or on the prisoner. He unconsciously pushed at the middle window, and, to his surprise, discovered that it was not locked. He therefore entered, and what he saw made him ring the bell at once, to summon the household.

"And what did he see, gentlemen of the jury? he saw that Sir Oliver was dead. He had been stabbed to the heart, under the left shoulder-blade, apparently while seated at his desk. The body had naturally fallen forward. The prisoner, seated in the armchair with her hands on her lap, was in an unconscious state, but her hands and the white dressing-gown were stained with blood—with the blood, gentlemen," said Counsel impressively, "of her uncle. Before anyone could enter the room she revived, and on seeing the body of her uncle, displayed great terror and horror. Steve Agstone, who had been waiting up for Captain Jadby, was the first person to enter, and on discovering the dead body of his master—to whom he was sincerely attached—he at once rushed out of the house for a

doctor. By this time the servants were aroused by the noise, and with them came Madame Marie Eppingrave. Even Mr. Shepworth, lame as he was, managed to crawl down the stairs, so loud had been the clamour which had awakened him.

"And what did the prisoner say to all this? Gentlemen, she told a most ridiculous story to account for her presence in the library. According to her statement, which the inspector from Hythe took down in the presence of witnesses, prisoner said that she could not sleep on account of her quarrel with her uncle. She came down the stairs at a quarter to ten o'clock, and entered the library, with the intention of making friends with her uncle. When she entered—so she declares—the room was filled with pungent white smoke, through which she could dimly see Sir Oliver seated at the writing-table. The smoke made her senses reel, but by holding her handkerchief to her mouth she managed to stagger to the middle window. She had just managed to unfasten the catch when she fell unconscious. The next thing she remembers—according to her preposterous story—is the presence of Captain Jadby. She declares that she did not know when Sir Oliver was stabbed, and when she entered the library did not know why it should be filled with smoke. When Captain Jadby entered—as he will tell you—there was no smoke, and the fire had burned down to red cinders."

Again Counsel had to drink a sip of water, as he had been talking for some time, and there was a low murmur of conversation heard before he again began to speak. The story, which he alleged that Miss Chent had told, seemed ridiculous; and even Prelice, prejudiced as he was in her favour, thought that the defence was absurd. But Miss Chent never moved a muscle; she did not even change colour. Quiet, and without a word, she sat in the dock, waiting patiently for her innocence to be made manifest. And yet, as everyone thought, her tale was too ridiculous for words.

"And finally, gentlemen," said Counsel, taking up his brief, "I would draw your attention to the medical evidence. The doctor called in stated that Sir Oliver was murdered about ten o'clock—mark that, gentlemen—about the very time that the prisoner confesses she was in the library in a state of unconsciousness. Captain Jadby did not arrive until thirty minutes after ten, as he did not walk very quickly. And again, gentlemen, no weapon was found wherewith the wound—a wide, clean wound—could have been inflicted. But an Indian dagger with a jade handle, used by Sir Oliver as a paper-knife, is missing. With that I verily believe the deceased was stabbed. And remember, gentlemen, that the window was unfastened; and if we are to believe this foolish tale of a pungent smoke, prisoner unfastened it when she entered and immediately before she fainted. Gentlemen, she *did* faint, but not then. No! Can you not guess what took place? The prisoner came down the stairs to see her uncle; perhaps, as she declares, to make it up with him, since we may as well give her the benefit of the doubt. But in place of reconciliation, the quarrel grows more bitter. Impulsive and furious, the prisoner snatches the paper-knife—a dangerous weapon remember, gentlemen—and while Sir Oliver turns again to his book, stabs him in the back. She then opens the window, and buried the paper-knife, all bloody, in the garden. On re-entering, the sight of the dead body shows her what a terrible crime she has committed. Instead of refastening the window she staggers forward, with the intention of regaining her bedroom, and of playing the part of an innocent woman. But her nerves, which maintained her strength and consciousness so far, fail at the critical moment. She manages to reach the armchair, and falls into it unconscious, some time after ten o'clock. There she lies, with blood-stained hands and dress, until Captain Jadby arrives, when she recovers her senses to tell a wild and improbable story. Sir Oliver, as the medical evidence proves, was alive when she entered the library at a quarter to ten. He is dead, and his blood is smearing the prisoner's

dressing-gown at half-past ten, when Captain Jadby arrives. And all that time prisoner says that she was unconscious. Quite so. She was, up to the moment of Captain Jadby's arrival, and from the moment, when she staggered into the room, after burying the knife in the garden. And now, gentlemen——" Here Counsel went on to state that in spite of all efforts the knife could not be found. He also detailed more explicitly the medical evidence, and gave the name of the witness whom he proposed to call, and ended with a damning indictment of the reasons which had led the prisoner to commit the crime. Amongst these was the fact that by Sir Oliver's death prisoner would inherit ten thousand a year at once, and would thus have been enabled to marry Edward Shepworth.

When his speech was finished Counsel sat down, wiping his brow, and a hum of conversation rose in the crowded Court. Mona's eyes wandered here and there, and rested finally on the pitying face of Lord Prelice. For a moment she remained calm, and then flushed deeply, the first sign of emotion she had given. A moment later and she was led away in charge of a warder, while the Court adjourned for luncheon.

THE PAPER-CUTTER

"I am delighted to see you, Dorry," said Shepworth, addressing Prelice by his Eton nickname, when the young man had been called "Dormouse," shortened as above, on account of his lethargic habits. "I want you very badly. Come and grub somewhere, and we can talk."

Prelice responded very cordially, as the two had been very close friends at the old school, and submitted to be led round the corner to a small hidden restaurant much affected by the gentlemen of the long robe. Here, when they were snugly ensconced in a corner, Shepworth ordered food for his friend, but contented himself with a cigarette, and a cup of strong coffee. "I can't eat a morsel," he protested when Prelice advised a meal. "I am too much bothered over this case. How the deuce did you come to the Court, Dorry?"

Prelice, who possessed a hearty appetite, tackled a plate of cold beef, and answered between mouthfuls. "My aunt Sophia bully-ragged me this morning as an idler, and advised me to hear you spouting. She wanted to make me ashamed of myself."

"And are you?" asked Shepworth aimlessly.

"Rats!" said his lordship inelegantly; "but I'm sorry, old man. This is a sinfully hard business for you. Why didn't you write me that you were engaged?"

"I didn't know where to find you, Dorry. Lady Sophia, whom I met once or twice, told me that you were scampering round the world. I *have* wanted

you, Prelice, these last few months. Yes, and before that."

"Before the murder, do you mean?"

"Yes! I have never had a chum since I left school. Lots of friends, no doubt, good men all, but a chum," he laid his hand on Prelice's shoulder with a burst of emotion. "Oh, Dorry, what a mercy you are here, and that I have some safe person in whom to confide. I should have had to tell someone in the long run."

"Tell someone what?" asked Prelice soberly.

"About that poor girl."

"Miss Chent?"

"Yes! It is an awful position for her, and for me. No! Don't look at me like that, Dorry. I swear that I'm not thinking of myself. I'd give my right hand to save Mona."

"She is innocent, of course?" asked Prelice, pushing away his plate.

"Yes! I am certain that she is innocent, although——" He hesitated for a moment, then flung away his cigarette, leaned his arms on the marble-topped table, and looked earnestly at his friend. "You heard Belmain's speech?"

Prelice nodded. "You mean the prosecuting Counsel."

"Yes! He was fair enough in the beginning and in the middle, but he had no right to rub it into the jury about the knife and about Mona's guilt being so certain. That part should have been left to the time when he addressed the jury, and after the evidence on both sides had been heard."

"I thought it was rather prejudging the prisoner myself, Ned."

Shepworth shuddered. "Don't call Mona a prisoner," he expostulated. "Every time that infernal Belmain alluded to her so, I felt sick."

"It is rough on you undoubtedly," murmured Prelice; and not wanting any more food, for Shepworth's agitation had spoilt his appetite, he turned to the waiter and ordered coffee. Shepworth passed along his cigarette case. "Very rough on you, Ned."

"Oh, don't talk about me," rejoined the barrister, restlessly; "think of Mona, a young girl, gently born and bred, being accused of murder and being put into prison. It's horrible."

"She seemed to me to be the calmest person in Court."

"Because she knows that she is innocent. She's a religious girl too, and firmly believes that God will prove her innocence."

"Well, He will," said Prelice quietly. "I'm not a saint myself, but I know that God looks after us all."

"Yet innocent people have been hanged before now, Dorry!"

Prelice did not answer immediately. Lighting his cigarette, he meanwhile looked very straight at his friend. "You don't seem to have a good defence," he remarked suddenly.

"Yes and no," replied Shepworth, fidgeting. "Not only is there a very good reason why she should love her uncle, but a better one that she should wish him to have remained alive."

"What do you mean?"

"That will, you know, Dorry; the will made by Sir Oliver in favour of Mona?" Prelice nodded. "It has been destroyed," went on Shepworth; "bits of it were found in the grate. There was a fire burning in the library on that night, if you remember Belmain's speech. Well, the will had been torn up and thrown into the fire. A few bits fell under the grate, and these prove beyond all doubt that it is the will which Sir Oliver made in favour of Mona. Now, if guilty, why should she destroy a document which gave her ten thousand a year?"

"But I say," remarked Prelice thoughtfully, "towards the end of his speech Belmain distinctly stated that Miss Chent had killed her uncle so as to get the money. If he knows of the burning of the will——"

"Oh, the other side admit that a will was burnt, but deny that it was the one made in Mona's favour. They will try and prove that Sir Oliver was drawing up another will disinheriting her because she would stick to me, and that she burnt this will after killing the old man. We fight hard on that point, Dorry."

"Has the will in favour of Miss Chent been found?"

"No. The lawyers have not got it, as Sir Oliver kept it himself. It can't be found, and, of course, we say—that is, our side, Cudworth, Arkers, and myself—that the will was burnt."

"Presuming it is, who inherits?"

"Captain Jadby."

"What—the South Sea chap?"

Shepworth nodded. "It seems that Sir Oliver was a great friend of his father's at Tahiti, and made a will out there in favour of young Jadby. He

brought it home with him, I believe. Of course, the will in Mona's favour invalidated the first document, so unless the second will had been destroyed, the first would not hold good."

"Which points to the fact," said Prelice quickly, "that Jadby had a reason to murder Sir Oliver."

"I say," Shepworth glanced around in alarm, "don't talk so loud. There isn't a shadow of evidence to connect Jadby with the crime. He was in London on that day, and only returned by the ten train. However, he claims the property, but until this trial is ended nothing will be done about that."

"Humph!" said Prelice reflectively. "I expect it was on account of the earlier will that Sir Oliver wished Miss Chent to marry Jadby."

Shepworth nodded. "He thought to kill two birds with one stone; to let them both have the money, and, so to speak, blend the two wills into one. Jadby loves Mona too, but she hates him."

"And, moreover, is engaged to you," mused Prelice, tipping the ash off his cigarette. "It's a queer case."

"Much queerer than you think, Dorry."

"Now what do you mean by that?" asked Prelice.

Shepworth glanced round again, and cautiously brought his lips to his friend's left ear. "I swear that Mona is innocent. She is a good, kind, religious girl, who would not hurt a fly, much less Sir Oliver, whom she loved in spite of that ridiculous quarrel. All the same——"

"Well, well, go on!" said Prelice impatiently.

"That knife," breathed Shepworth nervously.

"The jade-handled paper-cutter. Well?"

"She had it in her hand."

"When? Where?" Prelice could not grasp the true significance of this very serious statement.

"In the library, when she was unconscious in the chair."

"How on earth do you know, Ned?"

Shepworth looked round again, and wiped his face. "See here," he whispered. "I was in bed with that sprained ankle, as Belmain said. In our row I gave Jadby the worst of it, including a black eye, although he fought like a cat with nine lives. But I tripped, and hurt my foot, as Belmain said in his speech. It was swollen and painful, but not so much but what I could have got away to town."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because Mona asked me to stop and support her. She expected further trouble with her uncle. I lay awake, trying to bear the pain as best I could, for my ankle got worse when I lay down. About a quarter to ten I heard Mona pass my door and go down the stairs."

"How did you know that it was Miss Chent?"

"I would know her footstep amongst a hundred; and she admitted afterwards that she had gone down to the library at that hour. I wondered where she was going, but lay quiet, listening for her return. At length, some fifteen minutes or so after ten o'clock, I could bear the suspense no