The Five Knots

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I - NO BIGGER THAN A MAN'S HAND

Something like a shadow seemed to flicker across the dim hall and then the strange visitant was lost to view. But was it substantial, real and tangible, or only the creature of imagination? For at half-past four on a December afternoon before the lamps are lighted one might easily be deceived, especially in an old place like Maldon Grange, the residence of Samuel Flower, the prosperous ship-owner. Some such thought as this flashed through Beatrice Galloway's mind and she laughed at her own fears. Doubtless it was all imagination. Still, she could not divest herself of the impression that a man had flitted quietly past her and concealed himself behind the banks of palms and ferns in the conservatory.

"How silly I am!" she murmured. "Of course there can be nobody there. But I should like—"

A footman entered and flashed up the score or so of lights in the big electrolier and Beatrice Galloway's fears vanished. Under such a dazzling blaze it was impossible to believe that she had seen anybody gliding towards the conservatory. Other lights were flashing up elsewhere and all the treasures which Mr. Flower had gathered at Maldon Grange were exposed to the glance of envy or admiration. Apparently nothing was lacking to make the grand house absolutely perfect. Not that Samuel Flower cared for works of art and beauty, except in so far as they advertised his wealth and financial standing. Nothing in the mansion had been bought on his own responsibility or judgement. He had gone with open cheque-book to a famous decorative artist and given him carte blanche to adorn the house. The work had been a labour of love on the part of the artist, so

that, in the course of time, Maldon Grange had become a show-place and the subject of eulogistic notices in the local guide-books. Some there were who sneered at Samuel Flower, saying there was nothing that interested him except a ship, and that if this same ship were unseaworthy and likely to go to the bottom when heavily over-insured, then Flower admired this type of craft above all others. The reputation of the Flower Line was a bad one in the City and amongst seafaring men. People shook their heads when Flower's name was mentioned, but he was too big and too rich and too vindictive for folk to shout their suspicions on the housetops. For the rest of it Flower stuck grimly to his desk for five days in the week, spending the Saturday and Sunday at Maldon Grange, where his niece, Beatrice Galloway, kept house for him.

Beatrice loved the place. She had watched it grow from a bare, brown shell to a bewitching dream of artistic beauty. Perhaps in all the vast establishment she liked the conservatory best. It was a modest name to give the superb winter garden which led out of the great hall. The latter structure had been the idea of the artist, and under his designs a dome-like fabric had arisen, rich, with stained glass and marble and filled now with the choicest tropical flowers, the orchids alone being worth a fortune. From the far end a covered terrace communicated with the rose garden, which even at this time of year was so sheltered that a few delicate blooms yet remained. The orchids were Beatrice's special care and delight and for the most part she tended them herself. She had quite forgotten her transient alarm. Her mind was full of her flowers to the exclusion of everything else. She stood amongst a luxuriant tangle of blooms, red and gold and purple and white hanging in dainty sprays like clouds of brilliant moths.

By and by Beatrice threw herself down into a seat to contemplate the beauty of the scene. The air was warm and languid as befitted those gorgeous flowers, and she felt half

disposed to sleep as she lay in her comfortable chair. There would be plenty to do presently, for Flower was entertaining a large dinner party, and afterward, there was to be a reception of the leading people in the neighbourhood. Gradually the warmth of the place stole over her drowsy sense and for a few minutes she lost consciousness.

She awoke with a start and uneasy feeling of impending evil which she could not shake off. It was a sensation the like of which she had never experienced before, and wholly foreign to her healthy nature. But nothing was to be seen or heard. The atmosphere was saturated with fragrance and delicate blossoms fluttered in the lights like resplendent humming-birds. As she cast a glance around, her attention became riveted upon something so startling, so utterly unexpected, that her heart seemed to stand still. The door leading on to the terrace was locked, as she knew. It was a half-glass door, the upper part being formed of stained mosaics, leaded after the fashion of a cathedral window. And now one of the small panes over the latch had been forced in, and a hand, thrust through the opening, was fumbling for the catch.

The incident was sinister enough, but it did not end the mystery. The hand and the arm were bare, and Beatrice saw they were lean and lanky and brown, like the leg of a skinny fowl. From the long fingers with blackened nails depended a loop of string which the intruder was endeavouring to drop over the catch. Unnerved as Beatrice was, she did not lose her self-possession altogether. While she gazed in fascinated horror at that strange yellow claw, it flashed into her mind that the hand could not belong to a white man. Then, half unconsciously, she broke into a scream and the fingers were withdrawn. The string fell to the ground, where it lay unheeded.

Beatrice's cry for help rang out through the house, and a moment later hurried steps were heard coming towards the

conservatory. It was Samuel Flower himself who burst into the room demanding to know what was amiss. At the sight of his stalwart frame and the strong grim face Beatrice's fears abated.
"What is the matter?" he asked.
"The hand," Beatrice gasped. "A man's hand came through that hole in the glass door. He was trying to pass a loop of string over the latch. The light was falling fully on the door, and I saw the hand distinctly."
"Some rascally tramp, I suppose," Flower growled.
"I don't think so," Beatrice said. "I am sure the man, whoever he was, was not an Englishman. The hand might have been that of a Hindoo or Chinaman, for it was yellow and shrivelled like a monkey's paw."
Something like an oath crossed Flower's lips. His set face altered swiftly. Though alarmed and terrified, Beatrice did not fail to note the look of what was almost fear in the eyes of her uncle.
"What is the matter?" she asked. "Have I said or done anything wrong?"
But Flower was waiting to hear no more. He dashed across the floor and threw the door open. Beatrice could hear his footsteps as he raced down the terrace. Then she seemed to hear voices in angry altercation, and presently there was a sound of breaking glass and the fall of a heavy body. It required all Beatrice's courage to enable her to go to the rescue, but she did not hesitate. She ran swiftly down the corridor, when, to her profound relief, she saw Flower coming back.
"Did you see him?" she exclaimed.
"I saw nothing," Flower panted. He spoke jerkily, as if he had just been undergoing a physical struggle. "I am certain no one was there. I slipped on the pavement, and crashed into one of those glass screens of yours. I think I have cut my hand badly. Look!"
As coolly as if nothing had happened Flower held up his

right hand from which the blood was dripping freely. It was a nasty gash, as Beatrice could tell at a glance.
"I am so sorry." she murmured. "Uncle, this must be attended to at once. There is danger in such a cut. I will send one of the servants into Oldborough."
"Perhaps it will be as well," Flower muttered. "I shall have to get this thing seen to before our friends turn up. Tell them to fetch the first doctor they can find."
Without another word Beatrice hurried away, leaving Flower alone. He crossed to the outer door and locked it. Then he threw himself down on the seat which Beatrice had occupied a few minutes before, and the same grey pallor, the same queer dilation of his keen grey eyes which Beatrice had noticed, returned. His strong lips twitched and he shook with something that was not wholly physical pain.
"Pshaw!" he muttered. "I am losing my nerve. There are foreign tramps as well as English in this country."

II - A LITTLE BIT OF STRING

Wilfrid Mercer's modest establishment was situated in High- street, Oldborough. A shining brass plate on the front door proclaimed him physician and surgeon, but as yet he had done little more than publish his name in the town. It had been rather a venture to settle in a conservative old place like Oldborough, where, by dint of struggling and scraping, he had managed to buy a small practice. By the time this was done and his house furnished, he would have been hard put to it to lay his hands on fifty pounds. As so frequently happens, the value of the practice had been exaggerated: the man he had succeeded has not been particularly popular, and some of the older patients took the opportunity of going elsewhere.

It was not a pleasant prospect, as Mercer admitted, as he sat in his consulting-room that wintry afternoon. He began to be sorry that he had given up his occupation of ship's doctor. The work was hard and occasionally dangerous, but the pay had been regular and the chance of seeing the world alluring. But for his mother, who had come to keep house for him, perhaps Wilfrid Mercer would not have abandoned the sea. However, they had few friends and Mrs. Mercer was growing old and the change appeared to be prudent. Up to the present Wilfrid had kept most of his troubles to himself, and his mother little knew how desperately near the wind he was sailing in money matters. Unfortunately he had been obliged to borrow, and before long one of his repayments would be falling due. Sorely against his will he had gone to the money-lender, and he knew that he could expect no quarter if he failed to meet his obligations.

While he sat gazing idly into the growing darkness, watching the thin traffic trickle by, he heard the sound of a

motor horn and a moment later a big Mercedes car stopped before his door. There was an imperative ring at the bell, which Wilfrid answered in person.
"I believe you are Dr. Mercer," the driver said. "If so, I shall be glad if you will come at once to Maldon Grange. My master has met with an accident, and if you cannot come immediately I must find somebody else."
"I believe I can manage it," Wilfrid said with assumed indifference. He was wondering who the man's master was and where Maldon Grange must be. A stranger in the neighbourhood, there were many large houses of which he knew nothing. It would be well, however, to keep his ignorance to himself. "If you'll wait a moment I'll put a few things into my bag."
Few words were spoken as the car dashed along the road till the lodge gates at Maldon Grange were passed and the car pulled up in front of the house. A footman came to the door and relieved Wilfrid of his bag. He speedily found himself in a morning room where he waited till Beatrice Galloway came in. She advanced with a smile.
"It is very good of you to come so promptly," she said. "I did not quite catch your name."
"Surely you have not forgotten me?" Wilfrid said.
"Wilfrid—Dr. Mercer—" Beatrice exclaimed. "Fancy seeing you here. When we last met in London six months ago I thought you were going abroad. I have heard several times from our friend, Mrs. Hope, and as she never mentioned your name, I concluded you were out of England. And all this time you have been practising in Oldborough."
"Well, not quite that," Wilfrid smiled. "I have only been in Oldborough about a month or so. I had to settle down for my mother's sake. To meet you here is a great surprise. Are you staying in the house?"
"Didn't you know?" Beatrice asked. "Well perhaps you could not. You see, when I was staying with Mrs. Hope my uncle

was abroad, and I don't think his name was ever mentioned. I suppose you have heard of Samuel Flower?"

Wilfrid started slightly. There were few men who knew more of Flower and his methods than the young doctor. He had been surgeon on board the notorious Guelder Rose on which there had been a mutiny resulting in the death of one of the ship's officers. The Guelder Rose was one of the Flower Line, and ugly stories were still whispered of the cause of that mutiny, and why Samuel Flower had never brought the ringleaders to justice. Wilfrid could have confirmed those stories and more. He could have told of men driven desperate by cruelty and want of food. He could have told of the part that he himself had played in the outbreak, and how he had brought himself within reach of the law. At one time he had been prepared to see the thing through. He had been eager to stand in the witness-box and tell his story. But by chance or design most of the malcontent crew had deserted at foreign ports, and had Samuel Flower chosen to be vindictive, Mercer might have found himself in a serious position. And now, here he was, under the roof of this designing scoundrel, and before him was the one girl in all the world whom he cared for, and she was nearly related to the man whom he most hated and feared and despised.

All these things flashed through his mind in a moment. He would have to go through with it now. He would have to meet Samuel Flower face to face and trust to luck. It was lucky he had never met the man whom he regarded as the author of his greatest misfortunes, and no doubt a busy man like Flower would have already forgotten the name of Mercer. It was a comfort, too, that Beatrice Galloway knew nothing of the antecedents of her uncle. Else she would not have been under his roof.

"It is all very strange," he murmured. "You can understand how taken aback I was when I met you just now."

"Not disappointed, I hope," Beatrice smiled.

"I don't think there is any occasion to ask that question," Wilfrid said meaningly. "But I must confess that I am disappointed in a sense. You see, I did not know you were the probable heiress of a rich man like Mr. Flower. I thought you were poor like myself, and I hoped that in time —well, I think you know what my hopes were."

It was a bold, almost audacious, thing to say in the circumstances, and Wilfrid trembled at his own temerity. But, saving a slight flush on the girl's checks, she showed no sign of disapproval or anger. There was something in her eyes which was not displeasing to Wilfrid.

"I am afraid we are wasting time," she said. "My uncle has had a fall and cut his hand badly with some glass. He is resting in the conservatory, and I had better take you to him."

Mercer followed obediently. Samuel Flower looked up with a curt nod, as Beatrice proceeded to explain. Apparently the name of Mercer conveyed nothing to him, for he held out his hand in his prompt, business-like fashion and demanded whether anything was seriously wrong.

"This comes of listening to a woman," Flower muttered. "My niece got it into her head that a tramp was trying to break into the house, and in searching for him I slipped and came to grief. Of course I found nobody, as I might have known at first."

"But, uncle," Beatrice protested. "I saw the man's hand through the glass. You can see for yourself where the pane has been removed, and there, lying on the floor, is the very piece of string he was using."

Beatrice pointed almost in triumph to the knotted string lying on the floor, but Flower shook his head impatiently and signified that the sooner Mercer went on with his treatment the better. As it happened, there was little the matter, and in a quarter of an hour the wounded hand was skilfully bandaged and showed only a few strips of plaster.

"You did that very neatly," Flower said in his ungracious way. "I suppose there are no tendons cut or anything of that kind? One hears of lockjaw following cut fingers. I suppose there's no risk of that?"

"For a strong man my uncle is terribly afraid of illness," Beatrice smiled. "I see he owes me a grudge for being the cause of his accident. And yet, indeed, I am certain that a man attempted to enter into the conservatory. Fortunately for me, I am in a position to prove it. You won't accuse me of imagining that there is a piece of string lying on the floor by the door. I will pick it up and convince you."

Beatrice raised the cord in her hand. It was about a foot in length, exceedingly fine and silky in texture, and containing at intervals five strangely complicated knots of most intricate pattern. With a smile of triumph on her face Beatrice handed the fragment to her uncle.

"There!" she cried. "See for yourself."

Flower made no reply. He held the string in his hand, gazing at it with eyes dark and dilated.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed. The words seemed to be literally torn from him. "Is it possible—"

III - THE REGISTERED LETTER

Beatrice and Wilfrid looked at Flower in astonishment. He did not seem to heed until his dull eyes met theirs and saw the question which neither dared to ask.

"A sharp, sudden pain," he gasped, "a pain in my head. I expect I have been working too hard. It has gone now. Perhaps it isn't worth taking any notice of. I am told that neuralgia sometimes is almost more than one can bear. So this is the piece of string the fellow was using, Beatrice? I am afraid I can't disbelieve you any longer. I am sure that there is no string like this in the house. In fact, I never saw anything like it before. What do you make of it, Dr. Mercer?"

Flower was speaking hurriedly. He had assumed an amiability foreign to his nature. He spoke like a man trying to undo a bad impression.

"It is curious, but I have seen something similar," Mercer said. "It was a piece of silken string of the same length, knotted exactly like this, and the incident happened in the Malay Archipelago. The ship on which I was doctor—"

"Oh, you've been a ship's doctor," Flower said swiftly.

Mercer bit his lip with vexation. The slip was an awkward one, but after that exclamation Flower showed no disposition to carry the query farther, and Wilfrid began to breathe more freely. He went on composedly enough.

"The ship was laid up for several weeks for repairs. Not caring to be idle I went up country on an exploring expedition, and very rough work it was. As you may be aware, the Malays are both treacherous and cruel, but so long as one treated them fairly, I had nothing to grumble about. I cured one or two of them from slight illnesses, and they were grateful. But there was one man there, his name does not matter, who was hated and feared by them all. I

fancy he was an orchid collector. Anyhow, he had a retinue of servants armed with modern weapons, and he led the natives a terrible life. I purposely avoided him because I did not like him or his methods. One day I had a note from a servant asking me to come and see him as he was at the point of death. When I reached the man's quarters I found that all his staff had deserted him, taking everything they could lay hands on. The man lay on his bed dead, and with the most horrible expression of pain on his face I have ever seen. I could find no cause of death, I could find no trace of illness even. And by what mysterious means he was destroyed I have not the slightest notion. All I know is this —round his forehead and the back of his head was a tightly-twisted piece of silken string with five knots in it, which might be the very counterpart of the fragment you hold in your hand."

"And that is all you have to tell us?" Flower asked. He had recovered himself, except that his eyes were strangely dilated. "It seems a pity to leave a story in that interesting stage. Is there no sequel?"

"As far as I know, none," Wilfrid admitted. "Still, it is rather startling that I should come upon an echo from the past like this. But I am wasting your time, Mr. Flower. If you would like me to come and see you to-morrow—"

But Flower did not seem to be listening. Apparently he was debating some problem in his mind.

"No," he said in his quick, sharp way. "I should like you to come again this evening. We have some friends coming in after dinner, and if you don't mind dropping in informally in the character of a doctor and guest I shall be greatly obliged. Besides, it may do you good."

Wilfrid was not blind to the material side of the suggestion, but did not accept the situation too readily. He would look in about half-past nine. He had said nothing as to meeting Beatrice before. Neither did she allude to the topic, for which he was grateful. Beatrice led the way to the door.

"I am not to be disturbed, mind," Flower called out. "I am going into the library for a couple of hours, and I want you to send James Cotter to me, Beatrice. I can see no one till dinnertime."

Flower strode away to the library, where he transacted most of his business when out of town, and a few minutes later there entered a small, smiling figure in black, humble of face, and with a quick, nervous habit of rubbing his hands one over another as if he were washing them. This was James Cotter, Flower's confidant and secretary, and the one man in the world who was supposed to know everything of the inner life of the wealthy ship-owner.

"Come in, Cotter. Sit down and lock the door."

"You have some bad news, sir," Cotter said gravely.

"Bad news! That is a mild way of putting it. Come, my friend, you and I have been through some strange adventures together, and I daresay they are as fresh in your memory as as they are in mine. Do you recollect what happened seven years ago in Borneo?"

Cotter groaned. "For Heaven's sake, don't speak about it, but thank God that business is past, and done with. We shall never hear any more of them."

Flower paced thoughtfully up and down the room.

"I thought so," he said. "I hoped so. It seemed to me that the precautions I had taken placed us absolutely outside the zone of danger. As the years have passed away, and you have grown more and more careless until one were inclined to laugh at your own fears, to wake up, as I did an hour ago, to the knowledge that the danger is not only threatening, but actually here—"

"Here!" Cotter cried, his voice rising almost to a scream. "You don't mean it, sir. You are joking. You are playing with your old servant. The mere thought of it brings my heart into my mouth and sets me trembling."

By way of reply Flower proceeded to explain the strange occurrence in the conservatory. When he had finished he

laid the piece of silken thread upon the table. Its effect upon Cotter was extraordinary. He tore frantically at his scanty grey hair. Then he laid his head upon the table and burst into a flood of senile tears.

"What is the good of going on like that?" Flower said irritably. "There is work to be done and no time to be lost. I know you are bold enough in the ordinary course of things, and can face danger when you see it. The peculiar horror of this thing is its absolute invisibility. But we shall have to grapple with it. We shall have to fight it out alone. But, first of all, there is something to be done which admits of no delay. I sent into Oldborough for a doctor, and who should turn up but that very man Mercer, who nearly succeeded in bringing a hornet's nest about our ears over that affair of the Guelder Rose? I should never have remembered the fellow if he had not foolishly let out that he was a ship's doctor, and naturally I kept my information to myself."

"You know what I want done. That man is poor and struggling. He has to be crushed. Find out all about him. Find out what he owes and where he owes it. Then you can come to me and I will tell you how to act. No half measures, mind. Mercer is to be driven out of the country and he is not to return."

Cotter grinned approvingly. This was a commission after his own heart. But from time to time his eyes wandered to that innocent-looking piece of string upon the table, and his face glistened with a greasy perspiration.

"And about that, sir?" he asked, with a shudder.

"That will have to keep for the moment. I want you to go to the post-office and fetch the letters. I am expecting something very important from our agents in Borneo, and you will probably find a registered letter from them. It relates to that matter of Chutney and Co. It will be written in a cypher which you understand as well as I do. You had better open it and read it, in case there may be urgent reasons for cabling a reply at once. As soon as this business

is done with and out of the way, Cotter, the better I shall be pleased. It is a bit dangerous even for us. Of course, we can trust Slater, who does everything himself and always uses the cypher, which I defy even Scotland Yard to unravel. Still, as I said before, the work is dangerous, and I will never take on a scheme like that again. You had better use one of the cars as far as the post-office to save time."

"I shall be glad to," Cotter muttered. "I should never dare to walk down to the village in the dark after seeing this infernal piece of string. The mere sight of it makes me shiver."

Cotter muttered himself out of the room and Flower was left to his own thoughts. He sat for half an hour or more till the door opened and Cotter staggered into the room. He held in a shaking hand an envelope marked with the blue lines which usually accompany registered letters.

"Look at it," he mumbled. "That came straight from Borneo, written by Slater himself, sealed with his own private seal, and every line of it in cypher. I should be prepared to swear that no one but Slater had touched it. And then when I come to open the envelope, what do I find inside? Why, this! This! This!"

With quivering fingers Cotter drew the letter from the envelope and unfolded the doubled-up page. From the middle of it dropped a smooth silken object which fell upon the table. It was another mysterious five-knotted string.

IV - IN THE WOOD

Master and man stared at each other blankly. Unmistakable fear was visible in the eyes of both. And yet those two standing there face to face were supposed not to know what fear meant. There was something ridiculous in the idea that an innocent looking piece of string should produce so remarkable an effect. It was long before either spoke. Flower paced up and down the room, his thin lips pressed together, his face lined with anxiety.

"I cannot understand it at all," he said at length. "I thought this danger was ended."

"But there it is," Cotter replied. "If these people were not so clever I should not mind. And the more you think of it, sir, the worse it becomes. Fancy that message finding its way into Slater's letter. The thing seems almost impossible; like one of those weird conjuring tricks we used to see in India. And Slater is a cautious man who runs no risks. He wrote that letter in his own hand. He posted it himself you may be sure. And from the time that it dropped into the letter-box to the time it reached my hand, nobody but the postal officials touched it. Yet there it is, sir, there it is staring us in the face, more deadly and more dangerous than a weapon in the hands of a lunatic. Still, we have got our warning, and I dare say, we shall have time—"

"But shall we?" Flower said impatiently. "Don't be too sure. You have forgotten what I told you about Miss Galloway and the mysterious hand that was trying to force a way into the conservatory. She doesn't know the significance of that attempt, and there is no reason why she should. But, we know, Cotter. We know only too well that the danger is not only coming, but that it is here. Unless I am mistaken it threatens us from more quarters than one. But it is folly to discuss this matter when there is so much to be done. I

have friends coming to dinner, curse it, and more are expected later in the evening. I must leave this matter to you and you must do the best you can. Prowl about the place, Cotter. Keep your eyes open. Pry into dark corners. See that all the windows are closed. Perhaps you might also explain something of this to the keeper, and ask him to chain one or two dogs up near the house. They may be useful."

Cotter acquiesced, but it was evident from the expression of his face that he did not feel in the least impressed by his employer's suggestions. This dark, intangible danger was not to be warded off by commonplace precautions. For some time after Cotter had gone Flower sat at his table thinking deeply. The longer he pondered the matter, the more inexplicable it became. Beatrice's discovery was grave enough, but this business of the registered letter was a thousand times worse. Nobody appreciated daring, audacity and courage more than Flower. He knew what a strong asset they were in success in life; indeed, they had made him what he was. But this cleverness and audacity were far beyond his own. He took up the silken string and twisted it nervously in his fingers.

"What is it?" he murmured. "How is the thing done? And why do they send on this warning? What a horrible business it all is! To be hale and hearty one minute and be found dead the next, and not a single doctor in the world able to say how the end is brought about! And when you tackle those fellows there is no safety. Why shouldn't they bribe some dissolute scamp of an Englishman to do the same thing after showing him the way. There are dozens of men in the city of London who would put an end to me with pleasure, if they could only do so with impunity."

Flower rose wearily and left the library. He was tired of his own thoughts and for once had a longing for human society. As he went along the corridor leading to the hall, one of the maids passed him with a white face and every sign of fear

and distress. With a feeling of irritation he stopped the girl and inquired what was the matter.
"What has come to the place?" he muttered. "And what have you been crying about? Aren't you Miss Galloway's' maid?"
"Yes, sir," the girl murmured. "It is nothing, sir. As I was coming from the wood at the back of the house, on my way home from the village, I had a fright. I told Miss Galloway about it and she told me not to be silly. I dare say if I had looked closer, I should have found that—"
The girl's voice trailed off incoherently and Flower suffered her to go away. It was not for him to trouble himself over the fears and fancies of his servants, and at any other time he would have shown no curiosity. But in the light of recent events even a little thing like this had its significance. At any rate, he would ask Beatrice about it.
Beatrice was in the drawing-room putting the finishing touches to the flowers. It would soon be dinner-time.
"I have just met your maid," Flower said. "What on earth is the matter with the girl? She looks as if she has seen a ghost. I hope to goodness the servants haven't been talking and making a lot of mischief about this story that a former lord of Maldon Grange walks the corridors at nights. If there is one form of superstition I detest more than another, it is that."
"You would hardly call Annette a superstitious girl," Beatrice replied. "As a rule she is most matter of fact. But she came in just now with the strangest tale. She had been to the village to get something for me, and as she was rather late she came home through the pine wood. She declares that in the middle of the wood she saw two huge monkeys sitting on the grass gesticulating to one another. When I pointed out to her the absurdity of this idea, she was not vexed with me, but stuck to her statement that two great apes were there and that she saw them quite distinctly. Directly she showed herself they vanished, as if

the ground had opened and swallowed them up. She doesn't know how she managed to reach home, but when she got back she was in great distress. Of course it is possible Annette may be right in a way. I saw in a local paper the other day that there is a circus at Castlebridge, which has taken one of the large halls for the winter. The account that I read stated that one or two animals had escaped from the show and had caused a good deal of uneasiness in the neighbourhood. As Castlebridge is one about twenty miles from here, perhaps Annette was right."

Flower muttered something in reply. At first he was more disturbed than Beatrice was aware, but her news about the circus seemed plausible and seemed to satisfy him.

"It is very odd," Beatrice went on, "that we should have these alarming incidents simultaneously. For the last year or two we have led the most humdrum existence, and now we get two startling events in one day. Can there be any connection between them?"

"No, of course not," Flower said roughly. "Tell the maid to keep her information to herself. We don't want to start a rumour that our woods are full of wild animals, or the servants will leave in a body. I'll write to the police to-morrow. If these animals are roaming about they must be captured without delay."

Flower made his way upstairs to his room to dress for dinner. Usually he had little inclination for social distractions, for his one aim in life was to make money. To pile up riches and get the better of other people was both his profession and his relaxation. Still, there were times when he liked to display his wealth and make his power felt, and Beatrice had a free hand so far as local society was concerned. But for once Flower was glad to know he would have something this evening to divert his painful thoughts into another channel. Try as he would he could not dismiss Black Care from his mind. It was with him