THE SECRET PASSAGE

Fergus Hume

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CHAPTER I

THE COTTAGE

"What IS your name?"
"Susan Grant, Miss Loach."
"Call me ma'am. I am Miss Loach only to my equals. Your age?"
"Twenty-five, ma'am."
"Do you know your work as parlor-maid thoroughly?"
"Yes, ma'am. I was two years in one place and six months in another, ma'am. Here are my characters from both places, ma'am."
As the girl spoke she laid two papers before the sharp old lady who questioned her. But Miss Loach did not look at them immediately. She examined the applicant with such close attention that a faint color tinted the girl's cheeks and she dropped her eyes. But, in her turn, by stealthy glances, Susan Grant tactfully managed to acquaint herself with the looks of her possible mistress. The thoughts of each woman ran as follows:
Miss Loach to herself. "Humph! Plain-looking, sallow skin, rather fine eyes and a slack mouth. Not badly dressed for a servant, and displays some taste. She might turn my old dresses at a pinch. Sad expression, as though she had something on her mind. Honest-looking, but I think a trifle inquisitive, seeing how she examined the room and is stealing glances at me. Talks sufficiently, but in a low voice. Fairly intelligent, but not too much so. Might be secretive. Humph!"
The thoughts of Susan Grant. "Handsome old lady, probably nearly sixty. Funny dress for ten o'clock in the morning. She must be rich, to wear purple silk and old lace and lovely rings at this hour. A hard mouth, thin nose, very

white hair and very black eyebrows. Got a temper I should say, and is likely to prove an exacting mistress. But I want a quiet home, and the salary is good. I'll try it, if she'll take me."
Had either mistress or maid known of each other's thoughts, a conclusion to do business might not have been arrived at. As it was, Miss Loach, after a few more questions, appeared satisfied. All the time she kept a pair of very black eyes piercingly fixed on the girl's face, as though she would read her very soul. But Susan had nothing to conceal, so far as Miss Loach could gather, so in the end she resolved to engage her.
"I think you'll do," she said nodding, and poking up the fire, with a shiver, although the month was June. "The situation is a quiet one. I hope you have no followers."
"No, ma'am," said Susan and flushed crimson.
"Ha!" thought Miss Loach, "she has been in love—jilted probably. All the better, as she won't bring any young men about my quiet house."
"Will you not read my characters, ma'am?"
Miss Loach pushed the two papers towards the applicant.
"I judge for myself," said she calmly. "Most characters I read are full of lies. Your looks are enough for me. Where were you last?"
"With a Spanish lady, ma'am!"
"A Spanish lady!" Miss Loach dropped the poker she was holding, with a clatter, and frowned so deeply that her black eyebrows met over her high nose. "And her name?"
"Senora Gredos, ma'am!"
The eyes of the old maid glittered, and she made a clutch at her breast as though the reply had taken away her breath.
"Why did you leave?" she asked, regaining her composure.
Susan looked uncomfortable. "I thought the house was too gay, ma'am."
"What do you mean by that? Can any house be too gay for a girl of your years?"

"I have been well brought up, ma'am," said Susan quietly; "and my religious principles are dear to me. Although she is an invalid, ma'am, Senora Gredos was very gay. Many people came to her house and played cards, even on Sunday," added Susan under her breath. But low as she spoke, Miss Loach heard.

"I have whist parties here frequently," she said drily; "nearly every evening four friends of mine call to play. Have you any objection to enter my service on that account?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. I don't mind a game of cards. I play 'Patience' myself when alone. I mean gambling—there was a lot of money lost and won at Senora Gredos' house!"

"Yet she is an invalid I think you said?"

"Yes, ma'am. She was a dancer, I believe, and fell in some way, so as to break her leg or hurt her back. She has been lying on a couch for two years unable to move. Yet she has herself wheeled into the drawing-room and watches the gentlemen play cards. She plays herself sometimes!"

Miss Loach again directed one of her piercing looks at the pale face of the girl. "You are too inquisitive and too talkative," she said suddenly, "therefore you won't suit me. Good-day."

Susan was quite taken aback. "Oh, ma'am, I hope I've said nothing wrong. I only answered your questions."

"You evidently take note of everything you see, and talk about it."

"No, ma'am," said the girl earnestly. "I really hold my tongue."

"When it suits you," retorted Miss Loach. "Hold it now and let me think!"

While Miss Loach, staring frowningly into the fire, debated inwardly as to the advisability of engaging the girl, Susan looked timidly round the room. Curiously enough, it was placed in the basement of the cottage, and was therefore below the level of the garden. Two fairly large windows looked on to the area, which had been roofed with glass

and turned into a conservatory. Here appeared scarlet geraniums and other bright-hued flowers, interspersed with ferns and delicate grasses. Owing to the position of the room and the presence of the glass roof, only a subdued light filtered into the place, but, as the day was brilliant with sunshine, the apartment was fairly well illuminated. Still, on a cloudy day, Susan could imagine how dull it would be. In winter time the room must be perfectly dark. It was luxuriously furnished, in red and gold. The carpet and curtains were of bright scarlet, threaded with gold. The furniture, strangely enough, was of white polished wood upholstered in crimson satin fringed with gold. There were many pictures in large gilded frames and many mirrors similarly encircled with gilded wood. The grate, fender and fire-irons were of polished brass, and round the walls were numerous electric lamps with yellow shades. The whole room represented a bizarre appearance, flamboyant and rather tropical in looks. Apparently Miss Loach was fond of vivid colors. There was no piano, nor were there books or papers, and the only evidence as to how Miss Loach passed her time revealed itself in a work-basket and a pack of cards. Yet, at her age, Susan thought that needlework would be rather trying, even though she wore no glasses and her eyes seemed bright and keen. She was an odd old lady and appeared to be rich. "I'll engage you," said Miss Loach abruptly; "get your box and be here before five o'clock this afternoon. I am expecting some friends at eight o'clock. You must be ready to admit them. Now go!"

"But, ma'am, I—"

"In this house," interrupted Miss Loach imperiously, "no one speaks to me, unless spoken to by me. You understand!"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Susan timidly, and obeyed the finger which pointed to the door. Miss Loach listened to the girl's footsteps on the stairs, and sat down when she heard the front door close. But she was up again almost in a moment

and pacing the room. Apparently the conversation with Susan Grant afforded her food for reflection. And not very palatable food either, judging from her expression.
The newly-engaged servant returned that same afternoon to the suburban station, which tapped the district of Rexton. A trunk, a bandbox and a bag formed her humble belongings, and she arranged with a porter that these should be wheeled in a barrow to Rose Cottage, as Miss Loach's abode was primly called. Having come to terms, Susan left the station and set out to walk to the place. Apart from the fact that she saved a cab fare, she wished to obtain some idea of her surroundings, and therefore did not hurry herself.
It was a bright June day with a warm green earth basking under a blue and cloudless sky. But even the sunshine could not render Rexton beautiful. It stretched out on all sides from the station new and raw. The roads were finished, with asphalt footpaths and stone curbing, the lamp-posts had apparently only been lately erected, and lines of white fences divided the roads from gardens yet in their infancy. Fronting these were damp-looking red brick villas, belonging to small clerks and petty tradesmen. Down one street was a row of shops filled with the necessaries of civilization; and round the corner, an aggressively new church of yellow brick with a tin roof and a wooden steeple stood in the middle of an untilled space. At the end of one street a glimpse could be caught of the waste country beyond, not yet claimed by the ferry-builder. A railway embankment bulked against the horizon, and closed the view in an unsightly manner. Rexton was as ugly as it was new.
Losing her way, Susan came to the ragged fringe of country environing the new suburb, and paused there, to take in her surroundings. Across the fields to the left she saw an unfinished mansion, large and stately, rising amidst a forest of pines. This was girdled by a high brick wall which looked

older than the suburb itself. Remembering that she had seen this house behind the cottage of Miss Loach, the girl used it as a landmark, and turning down a side street managed to find the top of a crooked lane at the bottom of which Rose Cottage was situated. This lane showed by its very crookedness that it belonged to the ancient civilization of the district. Here were no paths, no lamps, no aggressively new fences and raw brick houses. Susan, stepping down the slight incline, passed into quite an old world, smacking of the Georgian times, leisurely and quaint. On either side of the lane, old-fashioned cottages, with whitewash walls and thatched roofs, stood amidst gardens filled with unclipped greenery and homely flowers. Quickset hedges, ragged and untrimmed, divided these from the roadway, and to add to the rural look one garden possessed straw bee-hives. Here and there rose ancient elm-trees and grass grew in the roadway. It was a blind lane and terminated in a hedge, which bordered a field of corn. To the left was a narrow path running between hedges past the cottages and into the country.

Miss Loach's house was a mixture of old and new. Formerly it had been an unpretentious cottage like the others, but she had added a new wing of red brick built in the most approved style of the jerry-builder, and looking like the villas in the more modern parts of Rexton. The crabbed age and the uncultured youth of the old and new portions, planted together cheek by jowl, appeared like ill-coupled clogs and quite out of harmony. The thatched and tiled roofs did not seem meet neighbors, and the whitewash walls of the old-world cottage looked dingy beside the glaring redness of the new villa. The front door in the new part was reached by a flight of dazzling white steps. From this, a veranda ran across the front of the cottage, its rustic posts supporting rose-trees and ivy. On the cottage side appeared an old garden, but the new wing was surrounded by lawns and decorated with carpet bedding. A gravel walk

divided the old from the new, and intersected the garden. At the back, Susan noted again the high brick wall surrounding the half-completed mansion. Above this rose tall trees, and the wall itself was overgrown with ivy. It apparently was old and concealed an unfinished palace of the sleeping beauty, so ragged and wild appeared the growth which peeped over the guardian wall.

With a quickness of perception unusual in her class, Susan took all this in, then rang the bell. There was no back door, so far as she could see, and she thought it best to enter as she had done in the morning. But the large fat woman who opened the door gave her to understand that she had taken a liberty.

"Of course this morning and before engaging, you were a lady," said the cook, hustling the girl into the hall, "but now being the housemaid, Miss Loach won't be pleased at your touching the front bell."

"I did not see any other entrance," protested Susan.

"Ah," said the cook, leading the way down a few steps into the thatched cottage, which, it appeared was the servants' quarters, "you looked down the area as is natural-like. But there ain't none, it being a conservitery!"

"Why does Miss Loach live in the basement?" asked Susan, on being shown into a comfortable room which answered the purpose of a servants' hall.

The cook resented this question. "Ah!" said she with a snort, "and why does a miller wear a white 'at, Miss Grant, that being your name I take it. Don't you ask no questions but if you must know, Miss Loach have weak eyes and don't like glare. She lives like a rabbit in a burrow, and though the rooms on the ground floor are sich as the King might in'abit, she don't come up often save to eat. She lives in the basement room where you saw her, Miss Grant, and she sleeps in the room orf. When she eats, the dining-room above is at her service. An' I don't see why she shouldn't," snorted the cook.

"I don't mean any—"
"No offence being given none is taken," interrupted cook, who seemed fond of hearing her own wheezy voice. "Emily Pill's my name, and I ain't ashamed of it, me having been cook to Miss Loach for years an' years and years. But if you had wished to behave like a servant, as you are," added she with emphasis, "why didn't you run round by the veranda and so get to the back where the kitchen is. But you're one of the new class of servants, Miss Grant, 'aughty and upsetting."
"I know my place," said Susan, taking off her hat.
"And I know mine," said Emily Pill, "me being cook and consequently the mistress of this servants' 'all. An' I'm an old-fashioned servant myself, plain in my 'abits and dress." This with a disparaging look at the rather smart costume of the newly-arrived housemaid. "I don't 'old with cockes feathers and fal-de-dals on 'umble folk myself, not but what I could afford 'em if I liked, being of saving 'abits and a receiver of good wages. But I'm a friendly pusson and not 'ard on a good-lookin' gal, not that you are what I call 'andsome."
Susan seated beside the table, looked weary and forlorn, and the good-natured heart of the cook was touched, especially when Susan requested her to refrain from the stiff name of Miss Grant.
"You an' me will be good friends, I've no doubt," said Emily, "an' you can call me Mrs. Pill, that being the name of my late 'usband, who died of gin in excess. The other servants is housemaid and page, though to be sure he's more of a man-of-all-work, being forty if he's a day, and likewise coachman, when he drives out Miss Loach in her donkey carriage. Thomas is his name, my love." The cook was rapidly becoming more and more friendly, "and the housemaid is called Geraldine, for which 'eaven forgives her parents, she bein' spotty and un'ealthy and by no means a Bow-Bell's 'eroine, which 'er name makes you

think of. But there's a dear, I'm talking brilliant, when you're dying for a cup of tea, and need to get your box unpacked, by which I mean that I sees the porter with the barrer."

The newly-arrived parlor-maid was pleased by this friendly if ungrammatical reception, and thought she would like the cook in spite of her somewhat tiresome tongue. For the next hour she was unpacking her box and arranging a pleasant little room at the back. She shared this with the spotty Geraldine, who seemed to be a good-natured girl. Apparently Miss Loach looked after her servants and made them comfortable. Thomas proved to be amiable if somewhat stupid, and welcomed Susan to tea affably but with sheepish looks. As the servants seemed pleasant, the house comfortable, and as the salary was excellent, Susan concluded that she had—as the saying is—fallen on her feet.

The quartette had tea in the servants' hall, and there was plenty of well-cooked if plain victuals. Miss Loach dined at half-past six and Susan assumed her dress and cap. She laid the table in a handsome dining-room, equally as garish in color as the apartment below. The table appointments were elegant, and Mrs. Pill served a nice little meal to which Miss Loach did full justice. She wore the same purple dress, but with the addition of more jewellery. Her sharp eyes followed Susan about the room as she waited, and at the end of the dinner she made her first observation.

"You know your work I see," she said. "I hope you will be happy here!"

"I think I will, ma'am," said Susan, with a faint sigh.

"You have had trouble?" asked Miss Loach quickly.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"You must tell me about it to-morrow," said the old lady rising. "I like to gain the confidence of my servants. Now bring my coffee to the room below. At eight, three people will arrive—a lady and two gentlemen. You will show them

into the sitting-room and put out the card-table. Then you can go to the kitchen and wait till I ring. Be sure you don't come till I do ring," and Miss Loach emphasized this last order with a flash of her brilliant eyes.

Susan took the coffee to the sitting-room in the basement and then cleared the table. Shortly before eight o'clock there was a ring at the front door. She opened it to a tall lady, with gray hair, who leaned on an ebony cane. With her were two men, one a rather rough foolish-looking fellow, and the other tall, dark, and well-dressed in an evening suit. A carriage was just driving away from the gate. As the tall lady entered, a breath of strong perfume saluted Susan's nostrils. The girl started and peered into the visitor's face. When she returned to the kitchen her own was as white as chalk.

CHAPTER II

THE CRIME

The kitchen was rather spacious, and as neat and clean as the busy hands of Mrs. Pill could make it. An excellent range polished to excess occupied one end of the room; a dresser with blue and white china adorned the other. On the outside wall copper pots and pans, glittering redly in the firelight, were ranged in a shining row. Opposite this wall, a door led into the interior of the house, and in it was the outer entrance. A large deal table stood in the center of the room, and at this with their chairs drawn up, Geraldine and the cook worked. The former was trimming a picture-hat of the cheapest and most flamboyant style, and the latter darned a coarse white stocking intended for her own use. By the fire sat Thomas, fair-haired and stupid in looks, who read tit-bits from the Daily Mail for the delectation of Mrs. Pill and Geraldine.

"Gracious 'eavens, Susan," cried the cook, when Susan returned, after admitting the visitors, "whatever's come to you?"

"I've had a turn," said Susan faintly, sitting by the fire and rubbing her white cheeks.

At once Mrs. Pill was alive with curiosity. She questioned the new parlor-maid closely, but was unable to extract information. Susan simply said that she had a weak heart, and set down her wan appearance to the heat. "An' on that accounts you sits by the fire," said Mrs. Pill scathingly. "You're one of the secret ones you are. Well, it ain't no business of mine, thank 'eaven, me being above board in everythink. I 'spose the usual lot arrived, Susan?"

"Two gentlemen and a lady," replied Susan, glad to see that the cooks thoughts were turning in another direction.

"Gentlemen!" snorted Mrs. Pill, "that Clancy one ain't. Why the missus should hobnob with sich as he, I don't know nohow."
"Ah, but the other's a real masher," chimed in Geraldine, looking up from her millinery; "such black eyes, that go through you like a gimlet, and such a lovely moustache. He dresses elegant too."
"Being Miss Loach's lawyer, he have a right to dress well," said Mrs. Pill, rubbing her nose with the stocking, "and Mr. Clancy, I thinks, is someone Mr. Jarvey Hale's helpin', he being good and kind."
Here Geraldine gave unexpected information.
"He's a client of Mr. Hale's," she said indistinctly, with her mouth full of pins, "and has come in for a lot of money. Mr. Hale's introducing him into good society, to make a gent of him."
"Silk purses can't be made out of sows' ears," growled the cook, "an' who told you all this Geraldine?"
"Miss Loach herself, at different times."
Susan thought it was strange that a lady should gossip to this extent with her housemaid, but she did not take much interest in the conversation, being occupied with her own sad thoughts. But the next remark of Geraldine made her start. "Mr. Clancy's father was a carpenter," said the girl.
"My father was a carpenter," remarked Susan, sadly.
"Ah," cried Mrs. Pill with alacrity, "now you're speaking sense. Ain't he alive?"
"No. He was poisoned!"
The three servants, having the love of horrors peculiar to the lower classes, looked up with interest. "Lor!" said Thomas, speaking for the first time and in a thick voice, "who poisoned him?"
"No one knows. He died five years ago, and left mother with me and four little brothers to bring up. They're all doing well now, though, and I help mother, as they do. They didn't want me to go out to service, you know," added

Susan, warming on finding sympathetic listeners. "I could have stopped at home with mother in Stepney, but I did not want to be idle, and took a situation with a widow lady at Hampstead. I stopped there a year. Then she died and I went as parlor-maid to a Senora Gredos. I was only there six months," and she sighed.
"Why did you leave?" asked Geraldine.
Susan grew red. "I wished for a change," she said curtly.
But the housemaid did not believe her. She was a sharp girl and her feelings were not refined. "It's just like these men —"
"I said nothing about men," interrupted Susan, sharply.
"Well, then, a man. You've been in love, Susan, and—"
"No. I am not in love," and Susan colored more than ever.
"Why, it's as plain as cook that you are, now," tittered Geraldine.
"Hold your noise and leave the gal be," said Mrs. Pill, offended by the allusion to her looks, "if she's in love she ain't married, and no more she ought to be; if she'd had a husband like mine, who drank every day in the week and lived on my earnings. He's dead now, an' I gave 'im a 'andsome tombstone with the text: 'Go thou and do likewise' on it, being a short remark, lead letterin' being expensive. Ah well, as I allays say, 'Flesh is grass with us all.'"
While the cook maundered on Thomas sat with his dull eyes fixed on the flushed face of Susan. "What about the poisoning?" he demanded.
"It was this way," said Susan. "Father was working at some house in these parts—"
"What! Down here?"
"Yes, at Rexton, which was then just rising into notice as a place for gentlefolks. He had just finished with a house when he came home one day with his wages. He was taken ill and died. The doctor said he had taken poison, and he

died of it. Arsenic it was," explained Susan to her horrified audience.
"But why did he poison himself?" asked Geraldine.
"I don't know: no one knew. He was gettin' good wages, and said he would make us all rich."
"Ah," chimed in Thomas suddenly, "in what way, Susan?"
"He had a scheme to make our fortunes. What it was, I don't know. But he said he would soon be worth plenty of money. Mother thought someone must have poisoned him, but she could not find out. As we had a lot of trouble then, it was thought father had killed himself to escape it, but I know better. If he had lived, we should have been rich. He was on an extra job down here," she ended.
"What was the extra job?" asked Thomas curiously.
Susan shook her head. "Mother never found out. She went to the house he worked on, which is near the station. They said father always went away for three hours every afternoon by an arrangement with the foreman. Where he went, no one knew. He came straight from this extra job home and died of poison. Mother thought," added Susan, looking round cautiously, "that someone must have had a wish to get rid of father, he knowing too much."
"Too much of what, my gal?" asked Mrs. Pill, with open mouth.
"Ah! That's what I'd like to find out," said Susan garrulously, "but nothing was ever known, and father was buried as a suicide. Then mother, having me and my four brothers, married again, and I took the name of her new husband."
"Then your name ain't really Grant?" asked Geraldine.
"No! It's Maxwell, father being Scotch and a clever workman. Susan Maxwell is my name, but after the suicide —if it was one—mother felt the disgrace so, that she made us all call ourselves Grant. So Susan Grant I am, and my brothers of the old family are Grant also."
"What do you mean by the old family?"

"Mother has three children by her second husband, and that's the new family," explained Susan, "but we are all Grants, though me and my four brothers are really Maxwells. But there," she said, looking round quietly and rather pleased at the interest with which she was regarded, "I've told you a lot. Tell me something!"

Mrs. Pill was unwilling to leave the fascinating subject of suicide, but her desire to talk got the better of her, and she launched into a long account of her married life. It seemed she had buried the late Mr. Pill ten years before, and since that time had been with Miss Loach as cook. She had saved money and could leave service at once, if she so chose. "But I should never be happy out of my kitchen, my love," said Mrs. Pill, biting a piece of darning-cotton, "so here I stay till missus goes under."

"And she won't do that for a long time," said Thomas. "Missus is strong. A good, kind, healthy lady."

Geraldine followed with an account of herself, which related chiefly to her good looks and many lovers, and the tyranny of mistresses. "I will say, however, that after being here a year, I have nothing to complain of."

"I should think not," grunted Thomas. "I've been twenty years with Miss Loach, and a good 'un she is. I entered her service when I was fifteen, and she could have married an earl—Lord Caranby wanted to marry her—but she wouldn't."

"Lor," said Mrs. Pill, "and ain't that his lordship's nephew who comes here at times?"

"Mr. Mallow? Yes! That's him. He's fond of the old lady."

"And fond of her niece, too," giggled Geraldine; "not but what Miss Saxon is rather sweet."

"Rather sweet," growled the cook, "why, she's a lovely gal, sich as you'll never be, in spite of your fine name. An' her brother, Mr. Basil, is near as 'andsome as she."

"He ain't got the go about him Miss Juliet have," said Thomas.

"A lot you know," was the cook's retort. "Why Mr. Basil quarrelled with missus a week ago and gave her proper, and missus ain't no easy person to fight with, as I knows. Mr. Basil left the house and ain't been near since."
"He's a fool, then," said Thomas. "Missus won't leave him a penny."
"She'll leave it to Miss Juliet Saxon, which is just the same. I never did see brother and sister so fond of one another as those two. I believe she'd put the 'air of 'er head—and lovely 'air it is, too—under his blessed feet to show him she loves him."
"She'd do the same by Mr. Mallow," said Geraldine, tittering.
Here Susan interrupted. "Who is the old lady who comes here?"
"Oh, she's Mrs. Herne," said the cook. "A cross, 'aughty old thing, who fights always. She's been coming here with Mr. Jarvey Hale and Mr. Clancy for the last three years. They play whist every evening and go away regular about ten. Missus let's 'em out themselves or else rings for me. Why, there's the bell now," and Mrs. Pill rose.
"No! I go," said Susan, rising also. "Miss Loach told me to come when she rang."
Mrs. Pill nodded and resumed her seat and her darning. "Lor bless you, my love, I ain't jealous," she said. "My legs ain't as young as they was. 'Urry, my dear, missus is a bad 'un to be kept waitin'."
Thus urged, Susan hastened to the front part of the house and down the stairs. The door of the sitting-room was open. She knocked and entered, to find Mr. Clancy, who looked rougher and more foolish than ever, standing by the table. Miss Loach, with a pack of cards on her lap, was talking, and Susan heard the concluding sentence as she entered the room.
"You're a fool, Clancy," said Miss Loach, emphatically. "You know Mrs. Herne doesn't like to be contradicted. You've

sent her away in a fine rage, and she's taken Hale with her. Quite spoilt our game of—ah, here's Susan. Off with you, Clancy. I wish to be alone."

The man would have spoken, but Miss Loach silenced him with a sharp gesture and pointed to the door. In silence he went upstairs with Susan, and in silence left the house. It was a fine night, and Susan stopped for a moment at the door to drink in the fresh air. She heard the heavy footsteps of a policeman draw near and he passed the house, to disappear into the path on the opposite side of the road. When Susan returned to the kitchen she found supper ready. Soon the servants were seated at the table and talking brightly.

"Who does that house at the back belong to?" asked Susan.

"To Lord Caranby," said Thomas, although not directly addressed. "It's unfinished."

"Yes and shut up. Lord Caranby was in love with a lady and built that house for her. Before it was ready the lady died and Lord Caranby left the house as it was and built a high wall round it. He then went travelling and has been travelling ever since. He never married either, and his nephew, Mr. Cuthbert Mallow, is heir to the title."

"I thought you said Lord Caranby loved Miss Loach?"

"No, I didn't. I said she could have married him had she played her cards properly. But she didn't, and Lord Caranby went away. The lady who died was a friend of missus, and they were always together. I think missus and she were jealous of Lord Caranby, both loving him. But Miss Saul—that was the other lady—died, and Lord Caranby left the house as it stands, to go away."

"He won't allow anyone to set a foot in the house or grounds," said Mrs. Pill, "there ain't no gate in the wall—"

"No gate," echoed Susan astonished.

"Not a single 'ole as you could get a cat through. Round and round the place that fifteen-feet wall is built, and the park, as they calls it, is running as wild as a cow. Not a soul

has set foot in that place for the last fifteen years. But I expect when Mr. Mallow comes in for the title he'll pull it down and build 'ouses. I'm sure he ought to: it's a shame seeing land wasted like that."
"Where is Lord Caranby now?"
"He lives in London and never comes near this place," said Thomas.
"Is Miss Loach friendly with him now?" "No, she ain't. He treated her badly. She'd have been a better Lady Caranby than Miss Saul"—here Thomas started and raised a finger. "Eh! wasn't that the front door closing?"
All listened, but no sound could be heard. "Perhaps missus has gone to walk in the garding," said cook, "she do that at times."
"Did you show 'ern out?" asked Thomas, looking at Susan.
"Only Mr. Clancy," she answered, "the others had gone before. I heard what Miss Loach was saying. Mr. Clancy had quarrelled with Mrs. Herne and she had gone away with Mr. Hale. Then Miss Loach gave it to him hot and sent him away. She's all alone."
"I must have been mistaken about the door then," said he.
"Not at all," chimed in Mrs. Pill. "Missus is walking as she do do in the garding, singing and adornin' self with flowers."
After this poetic flight of fancy on the part of the cook, the supper ended. Thomas smoked a pipe and the housemaid cleared away. Mrs. Pill occupied her time in putting her few straggling locks in curl-papers.
While Susan was assisting Geraldine, the bell rang. All started. "I thought missus had gone to bed," cried the cook, getting up hurriedly. "She'll be in a fine rage if she finds us up. Go to bed, Geraldine, and you, Thomas. Susan, answer the bell. She don't like us not to be gettin' our beauty sleep. Bless me it's eleving."
The clock had just struck as Susan left the kitchen, and the three servants were bustling about so as to get to bed

before their sharp-eyed old mistress found them. Susan went down the stairs. The door of the sitting-room was closed. She knocked but no voice told her to enter. Wondering if the bell had been rung by mistake, Susan knocked again, and again received no answer. She had a mind to retreat rather than face the anger of Miss Loach. But remembering that the bell had rung, she opened the door, determined to explain. Miss Loach was seated in her usual chair, but leaning back with a ghastly face. The glare of the electric lamp fixed in the ceiling, shone full on her white countenance, and also on something else. The bosom of her purple gown was disarranged, and the lace which adorned it was stained with blood. Startled by her looks Susan hurried forward and gazed searchingly into the face. There was no sign of recognition in the wide, staring eyes. Susan, quivering with dread, touched Miss Loach's shoulder. Her touch upset the body and it rolled on the floor. The woman was dead. With a shriek Susan recoiled and fell on her knees. Her cry speedily brought the other servants.

"Look!" cried Susan pointing, "she is dead—murdered!"

Geraldine and Mrs. Pill shrieked with horror. Thomas preserved his stolid look of composure.

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS DEATH

To be the husband of a celebrated woman is not an unmixed blessing. Mr. Peter Octagon found it to be so, when he married Mrs. Saxon, the widow of an eminent Q.C. She was a fine Junoesque tragic woman, who modelled herself on the portraits of the late Mrs. Siddons. Peter, on the contrary, was a small, meek, light-haired, short-sighted man, who had never done anything in his unromantic life, save accumulate a fortune as a law-stationer. For many years he lived in single blessedness, but when he retired with an assured income of three thousand a year, he thought he would marry. He had no relatives, having been brought up in a Foundling Hospital, and consequently, found life rather lonely in his fine Kensington house. He really did not care about living in such a mansion, and had purchased the property as a speculation, intending to sell it at a profit. But having fallen in with Mrs. Saxon, then a hard-up widow, she not only induced him to marry her, but, when married, she insisted that the house should be retained, so that she could dispense hospitality to a literary circle.

Mrs. Octagon was very literary. She had published several novels under the nom-de-plume of "Rowena." She had produced a volume of poems; she had written a play which had been produced at a matinee; and finally her pamphlets on political questions stamped her, in the opinion of her immediate circle, as a William Pitt in petticoats. She looked upon herself as the George Eliot of the twentieth century, and dated events from the time of her first success. "That happened before I became famous," she would say. "No, it was after I took the public by storm." And her immediate circle, who appreciated her cakes and ale, would agree

with everything she said. The Kensington house was called "The Shrine of the Muses!" and this title was stamped on her envelopes and writing-paper, to the bewilderment of illiterate postmen. It sounded like the name of a public-house to them.

Peter was quite lost in the blaze of his wife's literary glory. He was a plain, homely, small man, as meek as a rabbit, fond of his garden and fireside, and nervous in society. Had he not committed the fatal mistake of wedding Mrs. Saxon, he would have taken a cottage in the country and cultivated flowers. As it was, he dwelt in town and was ordered to escort Mrs. Octagon when she chose to "blaze," as she put it, in her friends' houses. Also there was a reception every Friday when literary London gathered round "Rowena," and lamented the decline of Art. These people had never done anything to speak of, none of them were famous in any wide sense, but they talked of art with a big "A," though what they meant was not clear even to themselves. So far as could be ascertained Art, with a big "A," was concerned with something which did not sell, save to a select circle. Mrs. Octagon's circle would have shuddered collectively and individually at the idea of writing anything interesting, likely to be enjoyed by the toilers of modern days. Whatever pictures, songs, books or plays were written by anyone who did not belong to "The Circle," these were considered "pretty, but not Tart!" Anything successful was pronounced "Vulgar!" To be artistic in Mrs. Octagon's sense, a work had to possess obscurity, it had to be printed on the finest paper with selected type, and it had to be sold at a prohibitive price. In this way "Rowena" had produced her works, and her name was not known beyond her small coterie. All the same, she intimated that her renown was world-wide and that her fame would be commensurate with the existence of the Anglo-Saxon race. Mrs. Lee Hunter in the Pickwick Papers, also labored under the same delusion.

With Peter lived Mrs. Saxon's children by the eminent Q.C. Basil, who was twenty-five, and Juliet age twenty-two. They were both handsome and clever, but Juliet was the more sensible of the two. She detested the sham enthusiasm of The Circle, and appreciated Peter more than her mother did. Basil had been spoilt by his mother, who considered him a genius, and had produced a book of weak verse. Juliet was fond of her brother, but she saw his faults and tried to correct them. She wished to make him more of a man and less of an artistic fraud, for the young man really did possess talents. But the hothouse atmosphere of "The Shrine of the Muses!" would have ruined anyone possessed of genius, unless he had a strong enough nature to withstand the sickly adulation and false judgments of those who came there. Basil was not strong. He was pleasant, idle, rather vain, and a little inclined to be dissipated. Mrs. Octagon did not know that Basil was fond of dissipation. She thought him a model young Oxford man, and hoped he would one day be Laureate of England.

Afternoon tea was just ended, and several of Mrs. Octagon's friends had departed. Basil and Mr. Octagon were out, but the latter entered with a paper in his hand shortly after the last visitor took her leave. Mrs. Octagon, in a ruby-colored velvet, looking majestic and self-satisfied, was enthroned—the word is not too strong—in an arm-chair, and Juliet was seated opposite to her turning over the leaves of a new novel produced by one of The Circle. It was beautifully printed and bound, and beautifully written in "precious" English, but its perusal did not seem to afford her any satisfaction. Her attention wandered, and every now and then she looked at the door as though expecting someone to enter. Mrs. Octagon disapproved of Juliet's pale cheeks and want of attention to her own fascinating conversation, so, when alone, she took the opportunity to correct her.

"My child," said Mrs. Octagon, who always spoke in a tragic manner, and in a kind of blank-verse way, "to me it seems your cheeks are somewhat pale."
"I had no sleep last night," said Juliet, throwing down the book.
"Your thoughts concerned themselves with Cuthbert's face, no doubt, my love," said her mother fondly.
"No, I was not thinking of him. I was worried about—about—my new dress," she finished, after vainly casting about for some more sensible reason.
"How foolish children are. You trouble about your dress when you should have been thinking of the man who loves you."
"Does Cuthbert love me?" asked Juliet, flushing.
"As Romeo loved your namesake, sweetest child. And a very good match it is too," added Mrs. Octagon, relapsing into prose. "He is Lord Caranby's heir, and will have a title and a fortune some day. But I would not force you to wed against your will, my dear."
"I love Cuthbert and Cuthbert loves me," said Juliet quickly, "we quite understand one another. I wonder why he did not come to-day."
"Ah," said her mother playfully, "I saw that your thoughts were otherwhere. Your eyes wandered constantly to the door. He may come late. By the way, where is my dearest son?"
"Basil? He went out this morning. I believe he intended to call on Aunt Selina."
Mrs. Octagon lost a trifle of her suave manner, and became decidedly more human. "Then I wish he would not call there," she said sharply. "Selina Loach is my own sister, but I do not approve of her."
"She is a poor, lonely dear, mother."
"Poor, my child, she is not, as I have every reason to believe she is well endowed with this world's goods. Lonely she may be, but that is her own fault. Had she behaved as she

should have done, Lady Caranby would have been her proud title. As to dear," Mrs. Octagon shrugged her fine shoulders, "she is not a woman to win or retain love. Look at the company she keeps. Mr. Hale, her lawyer, is not a nice man. I have espied something evil in his eye. That Clancy creature is said to be rich. He needs to be, if only to compensate for his rough way. They visit her constantly."

"You have forgotten Mrs. Herne," said Juliet, rising, and beginning to pace the room restlessly and watch out of the window.

"I have never met Mrs. Herne. And, indeed, you know, that for private reasons I have never visited Selina at that ridiculous house of hers. When were you there last, Juliet, my child?"

The girl started and appeared embarrassed. "Oh, a week ago," she said hurriedly, then added restlessly, "I wonder why Basil does not come back. He has been away all day."

"Do you know why he has called on your aunt, my dear?"

"No," said Juliet, in a hesitating manner, and turned again to look out of the window. Then she added, as though to escape further questioning, "I have seen Mrs. Herne only once, but she seemed to me a very nice, clever old woman."

"Clever," said Mrs. Octagon, raising her eyebrows, which were as strongly marked as those of her sister, "no. She does not belong to The Circle."

"A person can be clever without that," said Juliet impatiently.

"No. All the clever people in London come here, Juliet. If Mrs. Herne had been brilliant, she would have found her way to our Shrine."

Juliet shrugged her shoulders and curled her pretty lip. She did not appreciate her privileges in that house. In fact, a word distinctly resembling "Bother!" escaped from her mouth. However, she went on talking of Mrs. Herne, as though to keep her mother from questioning her further.

"There is a mystery about Mrs. Herne," she said, coming to the fire; "for I asked Aunt Selina who she was, and she could not tell me."
"That is so like Selina," rejoined Mrs. Octagon tartly, "receiving a person of whom she knows nothing."
"Oh, she does know a little. Mrs. Herne is the widow of a Spanish merchant, and she struck me as being foreign herself. Aunt Selina has known her for three years, and she has come almost every week to play whist at Rose Cottage. I believe she lives at Hampstead!"
"It seems to me, Juliet, that your aunt told you a great deal about this person. Why did you ask?"
Juliet stared into the fire. "There is something so strange about Mrs. Herne," she murmured. "In spite of her gray hair she looks quite young. She does not walk as an old woman. She confessed to being over fifty. To be sure, I saw her only once."
Mrs. Octagon grew rather cross. "I am over fifty, and I'm sure I don't look old, you undutiful child. When the soul is young, what matters the house of clay. But, as I was saying," she added hastily, not choosing to talk of her age, which was a tender point with her, "Selina Loach likes low company. I know nothing of Mrs. Herne, but what you say of her does not sound refined."
"Oh, she is quite a lady."
"And as to Mr. Clancy and Mr. Jarvey Hale," added Mrs. Octagon, taking no notice, "I mistrust them. That Hale man looked as though he would do a deed of darkness on the slightest provocation."
So tragic was her mother's manner, that Juliet turned even paler than she was. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked quickly.
"I mean murder, if I must use so vulgar and melodramatic a word."
"But I don't understand—"