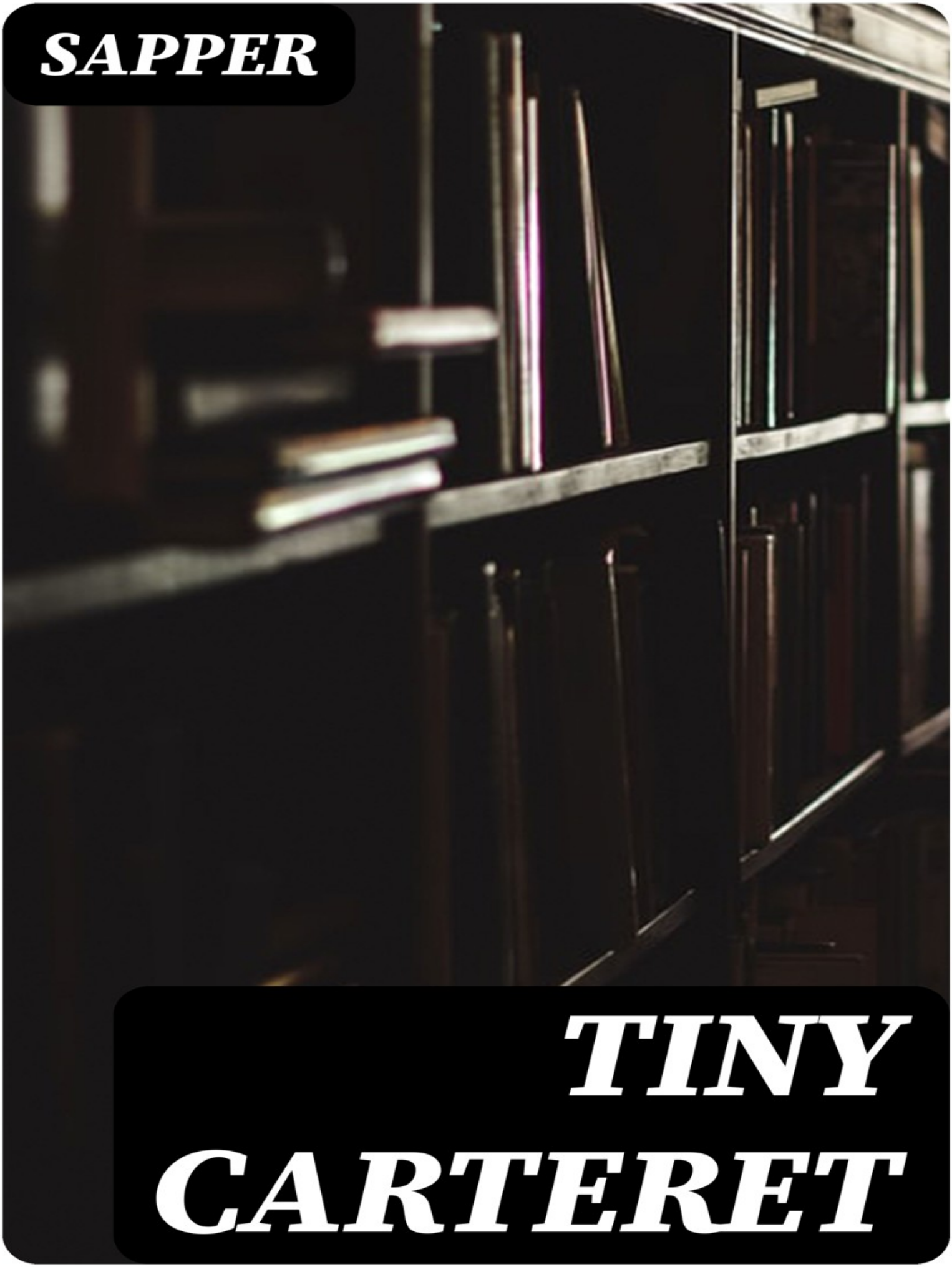
SAPPER
TINY
CARTERET

Sapper

Tiny Carteret

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I

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TINY CARTERET stretched out a hand like a leg of mutton and picked up the marmalade. On the sideboard what remained of the kidneys and bacon still sizzled cheerfully on the hot plate: by his side a cup of dimensions suitable for a baby's bath gave forth the fragrant smell of coffee. In short, Tiny Carteret, half-way through his breakfast.

The window was wide open, and from the distance came the ceaseless roar of the traffic in Piccadilly. In the street just below, a gentleman of powerful but unmelodious voice was proclaiming the merits of his strawberries: whilst from the half-way mark came the ghastly sound of a cornet solo. In short, a service flat in Curzon Street.

The marmalade stage with Tiny was always the letter-opening stage, and as usual, he ran through the pile in front of him before beginning to read any of them. A couple of obvious bills: three more in feminine hands which proclaimed invitations of sorts with the utmost certainty—and then one over which he paused. The writing was a man's: moreover, it was one which he knew well although it was many months since he had seen it. Neat: decisive: strong—it gave the character of the writer with absolute accuracy.

"Ronald, by Jove!" muttered Tiny to himself. "And a Swiss postmark. Now what the dickens is the old lad doing there?"

He slit open the envelope, propped the letter against the coffee-pot, and began to read.

MY DEAR TINY [it ran]—

I know that at this time of year Ranelagh and Lords form your happy hunting-grounds, as a general rule by day, whilst at night you are in the habit of treading on unfortunate women's feet in divers ballrooms. Nevertheless, should you care to strike out on a new line, I think I can promise you quite a bit of fun out here. At least when I say here, this will be our starting-point. Where the trail may lead to, Allah alone knows. Seriously, Tiny, I have need of you. There is not going to be any poodle faking about it: in fact, the proposition is going to be an extremely tough one. So don't let's start under false pretences. There is going to be the devil of a lot of danger in it, and I want someone with a steady nerve, who can use a revolver if necessary, who has a bit of weight behind his fists and knows how to use 'em.

If the sound of this appeals to you send me a wire at once, and I will await your arrival here.

Yours ever, RONALD STANDISH.

P.S.—A good train leaves the Gare de Lyons at 9.10 p.m. Gives you plenty of time for dinner in Paris.

Tiny pulled out his case and thoughtfully lit a cigarette. A faint twinkle in his eyes showed that he appreciated the full significance of the postscript: Ronald Standish knew what his answer would be as well as he did himself. Even as the trout rises to the may-fly, so do the Tiny Carterets of this world rise to bait such as was contained in the body of the letter. And just because he knew he was going to swallow it whole, he played with it mentally for quite a time. He even went through the farcical performance of consulting his engagement book. For the next month he had not got a free evening—a thing he had been fully aware of long before he

opened the book. In addition, such trifles as Ascot and Wimbledon loomed large during the daylight hours. In fact, he reflected, as he uncoiled his large bulk from the chair, the number of lies he would have to tell in the near future would probably fuse the telephone.

And at this period it might be well to give some slight description of him. The nickname Tiny was of course an obvious one to give a man who had been capped fifteen times for England playing in the scrum. But though he was extraordinarily bigly made, he was at the same time marvellously agile, as men who played him at squash found to their cost. He could run a much lighter man off his feet, without turning a hair himself. The last half of the war had found him in the Coldstream: then, bored with peace-time soldiering he had sent in his papers and taken to sport of every description, which, fortunately for him, the possession of five thousand a year enabled him to do with some ease.

That he was extremely popular with both men and women was not to be wondered at: he was so completely free from side of any sort. In fact, many a net had been spread in the sight of the wary old bird by girls who would have had no objection to becoming Mrs. Tiny. But so far beyond flirting outrageously with all and sundry he had refused to be caught, and now at the age of thirty he was still as far from settling down as ever.

Once again he glanced at Standish's letter. It had been sent from the Grand Hotel at Territet, a spot which he recalled as being on the Lake of Geneva. And once again he asked himself the same question—what on earth was Ronald Standish doing there of all places? Territet was

associated in his mind with tourists and pretty little white steamers on the lake. Also years ago he had played in a tennis tournament there. But Ronald was a different matter altogether.

It had been said of Standish that only the Almighty and he himself knew what his job was, and that it was doubtful which of the two it would be the more difficult to find out from. If asked point blank he would stare at the speaker with a pair of innocent blue eyes and remark vaguely—"Damned if I know, old boy." For months on end he would remain in London leading the ordinary life of a man of means, then suddenly he would disappear at a moment's notice, only to reappear just as unexpectedly. And any inquiries as to where he had been would probably elucidate the illuminating answer that he had just been pottering round. But it was to be noticed that after these periodical disappearances his morning walk for a few days generally led towards that part of Whitehall where Secretaries of State live and move and have their being. It might also be noticed —if there was anyone there to see—that when Ronald Standish sent in his name he was not kept waiting.

Even with Tiny Carteret he had never been communicative, though they were members of the same clubs and the closest of friends. The farthest he had ever gone was to murmur vaguely something about intelligence. And it was significant that at the time of the Arcos raid the first question he had asked *before* opening the paper which contained the news, was the number of men who had been rounded up. Significant also that on two occasions after he had returned from these strange trips of his he had been

absent from London for a day, once at Windsor and the other time at Sandringham.

At the moment he had been away for about a month. He had disappeared in his usual unexpected manner, leaving a Free Forester team one man short as a result. Which in itself was sufficient to show that the matter was important, for cricket was a mania with him. And yet Territet of all places! Tiny Carteret scratched his head and rang the bell.

"I'm leaving London, Murdoch," he said, when his valet appeared. "I'm going to Switzerland."

"Switzerland, sir?" The man looked at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. "At this time of year?"

"Even so, Murdoch," answered Tiny with a grin. "But I shan't want you."

"Very good, sir. And when will you be leaving?"

At that moment the telephone bell rang.

"See who it is, Murdoch. And then find out if I'm in."

The valet picked up the receiver, and Tiny heard a man's voice coming over the wire.

"Yes, sir. This is Mr. Carteret's flat. I will see if he is in."

He covered the mouthpiece with his hand and turned to his master.

"A Colonel Gillson, sir, wishes to speak to you."

"Gillson," muttered Tiny. "Who the devil is Gillson?"

He took the receiver from Murdoch.

"Hullo! Carteret speaking."

"Good morning." The voice was deep and pleasant. "I am Gillson. Speaking from the Home Office. Would you be good enough to come round and see me this morning any time before noon? The matter is somewhat urgent."

Tiny's face expressed his bewilderment.

"Sure you've got the right bloke?" he said. "The Home Office is a bit out of my line."

The man at the other end laughed.

"Quite sure," he answered. "You needn't be alarmed. Ask for Room 73."

"All right," said Tiny. "I'll be round about half-past eleven."

"Now what the dickens does Colonel Gillson of the Home Office want with me, Murdoch?" he remarked thoughtfully, as he hung up the receiver. "And where is the Home Office, anyway?"

"A taxi-driver might know that, sir," said Murdoch helpfully. "But to go back, sir, for the moment: when will you be leaving?"

Tiny lit a cigarette, and blew out a great cloud of smoke.

"To-morrow," he said at length. "That will leave me to-day to tell the necessary lies in, and get my reservations."

"How long shall I pack for, sir?" inquired his man.

Tiny gave a short laugh.

"Ask me another," he said. "I'm darned if I know, Murdoch. Give me enough to last a fortnight anyway. And one other thing." He turned at the door. "Get that Colt revolver of mine oiled and cleaned, and pack it in the centre of my kit."

He went down the stairs chuckling gently at the look of scandalized horror on his valet's face. Revolvers! Switzerland in the middle of the London season! Such things were simply not done, as Murdoch explained a little later to his wife.

"Hindecent, I calls it: positively hindecent. Why we were dining out every night."

But Tiny Carteret, supremely unconscious of the regal pronoun, was strolling happily along Clarges Street. The morning was perfect: London looked her best, but no twinge of regret assailed him at leaving. There were many more mornings in the future when London would look her best, but a hunt with Ronald Standish was not a thing a man could hope for twice. And as he turned into Piccadilly he found himself trying to puzzle out what the game was going to be.

The Lake of Geneva! Could it be something to do with the League of Nations? And Bolshevism? He rather hoped not. Unwashed international Jews, plentifully covered with hair and masquerading as Russians, failed to arouse his enthusiasm.

"Hullo! Tiny. If you want to kiss me, do you mind doing it somewhere else."

He came out of his reverie to find himself towering above a delightful vision in blue.

"Vera, my angel," he said, "I eat dirt. For the moment my brain was immersed in the realms of higher philosophy."

"You mean you were wondering if it was too early for a drink at your club," she answered. "Anyway don't forget next week-end."

"Ah! next week-end. Now that's a bad affair—next week-end. For to-morrow, most ravishing of your sex, I leave for Switzerland."

"You do what?" she cried, staring at him.

"Leave for Switzerland," he grinned. "I am going to pick beautiful mountain flowers—roses, and tulips and edelweisses and all that sort of thing."

"Tiny! You must be mad! What about our party?"

"I know, my pet. My heart is as water when I think of it. But it is the doctor's orders. He says I require building up."

"There's a girl in it," she said accusingly.

"Thumbs crossed—there isn't. You are the only woman in my life. Good God! my dear—it is a quarter past eleven. I must hop it. Think of me, Vera, in the days to come—alone with chamois—yodelling from height to height in my endeavours to please the intelligent little fellows. Would you like me to yodel now?"

"For Heaven's sake don't. And I think you are a perfect beast."

Tiny took out his handkerchief and began to sob loudly.

"Jilted!" he boomed in a loud voice, to the intense delight of a crowd of people waiting close by for a motor-bus. "Jilted by a woman for whom I have given up my honour, my fortune, even my morning beer."

"You unspeakable ass," she cried, striving vainly not to laugh. "Go away at once. And I hope you get mountain sickness, and die in an avalanche."

He resumed his interrupted walk feeling rather guilty. He knew that the girl he had just left had engineered the week-end party simply and solely on his account, and he had gone and let her down. Now it would be to her even as gall and wormwood, and she really was a darling.

"In fact, young fellow," he ruminated, "you must go easier with the little pretties in future. It's a shame to raise

false hopes in their sweet young hearts. And one of these days you'll get it in the neck yourself."

He hailed a passing taxi and told the man to drive to the Home Office. Vera Lethington was forgotten: the immediate and interesting problem was, What did Colonel Gillson want with him? Presumably it must be something to do with Ronald Standish, since he could think of no other possible reason for the summons.

He asked for Room 73, and on giving his name was at once shown up. Seated at the desk was a hatchet-faced man with an enormous nose, who rose as he entered. He was very tall, and his eyes, keen and steady, seemed to take in every detail of his visitor at a glance.

"Mornin', Carteret," he said, and the words were short and clipped. "Take a pew. I suppose you know why I rang you up."

"Well, since I haven't been copped in a nightclub raid, Colonel, I can hazard a pretty shrewd guess," answered Tiny with a grin.

The other man smiled faintly.

"That's a matter for Scotland Yard. Incidentally you were having a pretty good time at the Fifty-Nine last Tuesday."

Tiny gazed at him in amazement.

"How the devil do you know? You weren't there, were you?"

"I was not," laughed Gillson. "Nature has endowed me with a nasal organ which renders me somewhat conspicuous. So I do not frequent clubs of that sort."

"Then how did you know?" persisted Tiny.

"Had you been stopping in London," said the other quietly, "now that I know you are a friend of Standish, I should have given you a word of warning about that club."

"You assume I am not stopping on then," said Tiny.

"Naturally," answered Gillson. "A man with fifteen caps would hardly be likely to."

"Oh! that's rot, Colonel. But you still haven't told me how you knew I was there."

"I've got a list, my dear boy, of every single soul who was in that club that night. Your waiter gave it to me."

"Well, I wish the damned fellow had concentrated more on his waiting and less on making a list. He slopped soup all over my trousers."

"Seeing it was the first time he had waited I don't suppose he was too bad," said the other quietly. "A bad spot that, Carteret: a festering sore. I don't mean because they sell liquor out of hours: that by comparison is nothing. But it is the centre..." He paused and lit a cigarette. "Well, I wouldn't be surprised if in the course of the next few weeks you didn't find yourself back there again—shall we say professionally."

"This is all deuced intriguing, Colonel," said Tiny. "Can't you be a bit more explicit?"

"All in good time, my dear fellow. Let us first get down to the immediate future. I assume you are leaving to-morrow."

"Quite right," answered Tiny. "Provided I can get reservations."

Colonel Gillson opened a drawer in his desk.

"I've got them all here," he said calmly. "And your ticket as well."

"The devil you have," spluttered Tiny, half inclined to be annoyed. "And supposing I hadn't been going to-morrow."

The older man looked at him steadily for a moment or two.

"Then I should have made a very bad mistake in my judgment of human nature," he said quietly. "A mistake which would have disappointed me greatly."

"Thank you, sir," answered Tiny, all his irritation gone. "That's a very decent thing to say."

"Now then," said the other, "we'll get down to brass tacks. You will go by the 10.45 train from Victoria: your seat is booked in Pullman S.2. Take the Golden Arrow to Paris: then go to Philippe's Restaurant in the Rue Danou. You know it?"

"Can't say I do, Colonel."

"You will find it one of the most delightful restaurants in Paris. The *homard à la maison* is one of the wonders of the world. It is a small place, but travelling as you are by the Golden Arrow you will almost certainly be the first arrival, so that you will have no trouble over getting a table."

"If there is, I'll mention your name."

"Under no circumstances will you do anything of the sort, Carteret," said the other quietly. "Under no circumstances are you to mention to a soul that you have seen me to-day. Do you remember that French notice in the war—'Mefiez vous. Taisez vous. Les oreilles de l'ennemi vous écoutent.'"

He smiled a little at the look of astonishment on Tiny's face.

"My dear fellow," he continued, "don't think I'm being melodramatic. But in our trade the first rule, the second

rule, and the last rule are all the same. Never say a word more than is necessary. And to mention my name there would not only be unnecessary, but might be suicidal. You don't suppose, do you, that I am giving you these detailed instructions merely to ensure that you have a good dinner?"

"Well—no," laughed Tiny. "I don't. But you must remember, Colonel, that this sort of work is a new one on me. Anyway what is going to happen when I've got down to the *homard à la maison*?"

"A message will be given to you either verbally or in writing: which I do not know, and exactly when I do not know. If in writing commit it to memory, and destroy the paper."

"Who will give me this message?" asked Tiny.

"A man," said the other. "Don't ask me to tell you what he will look like, for I haven't the faintest idea. Have you got it clear so far?"

"Perfectly," said Tiny.

"When you've had your dinner you will go to the Gare de Lyons in time to catch the 9.10 train for Switzerland. I have reserved you a berth in a sleeper, and it is more than probable, Carteret, that when you come to inspect that reservation and all that goes with it you will consign me to the nethermost depths of the pit."

"What do you mean, Colonel?" said the bewildered Tiny.

"You will find out in due course," answered the other with a grin. "But there is one thing, young fellow, and don't you forget it." The grin had departed. "Under no circumstances whatever are you to alter your bunk—not even if the rest of the coach is empty."

"Right you are, sir. I can't profess to understand what it is all about at the moment, but I know an order when I hear one. I sleep"—he glanced at the paper in his hand—"in Number 8 bunk. Hullo! the ticket is only as far as Lausanne."

"That is where you get out," said Gillson. "A room has been already taken for you at the Ouchy Palace Hotel. Go there, and then Standish will take over the ordering of your young life."

He rose, to show that the interview was over.

"But, dash it all, Colonel," pleaded Tiny, "can't you give me some idea as to what the game is?"

Gillson shook his head.

"You will find out all that it is good for you to know, at the time when it is good for you to know it. Believe me, my dear fellow, this reticence doesn't imply any lack of confidence on my part. But there are certain occasions when real genuine ignorance is worth untold gold. Standish is playing the hand at the moment, and you are a very important card. It must be left to him to decide when he is going to play you, and how he is going to play you. But if it is any comfort I can tell you one thing. I'd give a year's screw if some divine act of Providence would blast away a lump of my cursed nose. For with that landmark gone I could have faked my face sufficiently to go in your place."

"That sounds all right, anyway," laughed Tiny. "Any message for Ronald?"

And as he asked the question the telephone rang on the desk.

"Wait a moment," said the Colonel. "Hullo!"

Tiny watched him idly as he stood there with the receiver to his ear. The lean hatchet face seemed frozen into a mask, so expressionless was it: only the eyes were glowingly alive. At last the voice from the other end ceased, and Gillson spoke.

"Can you come up at once, Dexter? You can. Good."

He replaced the instrument, and then stood motionless for more than a minute staring out of the window.

"Any message for Ronald," he said at length. "Yes, Carteret; there will be. You can tell him that Jebson has been murdered in the same way as the others. Wait a little. Dexter is coming, and we'll hear all about it. Incidentally, you know Dexter. You'd better dun him for another pair of trousers."

"You mean he was the waiter at the Fifty-Nine?"

But the other appeared not to have heard. With his hands in his pockets he was pacing up and down the office, his head thrust forward, his chin sunk on his chest, whilst Tiny leaned against the desk smoking. He did not speak again: he was busy with his own thoughts. So there was murder in the business, was there?... And more than one at that. And almost as if it was an echo of what was passing through his mind Colonel Gillson suddenly ceased his restless pacing and spoke.

"Don't be under any delusions, young Carteret. We're up against the big stuff this time with a vengeance."

He swung round as a knock sounded on the door.

"Come," he called, and a man entered whom Tiny recognized at once as the waiter.

"Morning, Dexter," said Gillson. "Bad affair this. You know Mr. Carteret, I think. He tells me you spoilt his trousers for him."

The new-comer grinned at Tiny.

"Sorry about it, Mr. Carteret. If only you'd stuck to kippers it would have been all right." He grew serious again and turned to Gillson. "You're right, sir: it is a bad affair. Am I to..." He glanced hesitatingly at Tiny.

"Carry on, Dexter. Mr. Carteret is now one of us."

"Well, sir, Jebson as you know was our permanency at the Fifty-Nine. He's been there now for over three months, and up to yesterday he was convinced that not a soul suspected he was not a genuine waiter. I saw him myself at lunchtime and he told me so. He's been waiting on two of the private rooms upstairs, and for over a fortnight nothing of any importance has taken place. Just the usual young fool, with the usual woman. But last night he told me he was expecting something of interest. That little swine Giuseppi who owns the place had been running in and out of one of his two rooms the whole morning, cursing and swearing and saying that this was wrong and that was wrong—a thing he never did for his ordinary *clientèle*. And then Jebson, happening to pass Giuseppi's office, heard him on the telephone ordering masses of orchids. Mauve orchids," he added meaningly.

Once again he paused and glanced at Tiny, as if doubtful whether to proceed.

"Mr. Carteret understands, Dexter, that any name he may hear mentioned in this office is as inviolate as if it was in confession," said Gillson quietly.

"Very good, sir," continued Dexter. "He at once appreciated the possible significance: the flowers had been mauve orchids the time before."

"Mauve orchids," said Tiny slowly. "Mauve orchids! Good Lord! it's impossible."

"What is impossible?" asked Gillson quietly.

"Nothing, sir, nothing. It was only a wild idea that flashed through my mind. Just a strange coincidence."

"The longer you are in this job, my boy, the more will you realize that nothing is impossible," said Gillson. "Well, Dexter: was it she?"

"That's the devil of it, sir—we don't know. Jebson did—but Jebson is dead. We don't know if it was Lady Mary."

Gillson's eyes were fixed on Tiny—a faintly quizzical look in them.

"Nothing is impossible, Carteret," he repeated quietly. "So that was the idea that had flashed through your mind."

"No: no, Colonel—nothing of the sort. Heavens! Nothing would induce Mary Ridgeway to go to a private room at the Fifty-Nine."

"And yet she was there six weeks ago alone with a man," said Gillson.

"Damn it, Colonel," said Tiny angrily, "this is going beyond a joke. Mary is a great personal friend of mine."

"Do you really imagine, Carteret," said the older man coldly, "that I should take the trouble to make a statement of that sort about any woman, whether she was a friend of yours or whether she wasn't, unless I knew it to be true? Well, Dexter?"

"That's all, sir. That's the sickening part of it. Jebson, poor devil, has been done in."

Tiny took a step forward.

"Look here, sir," he said to Gillson, "I apologize for my last remark. But you *cannot* mean to tell me that even if Lady Mary was there you hold her in any way responsible for this man Jebson's death?"

"Most certainly not," answered Gillson at once. "Such an idea never crossed my brain for a second. The person who is responsible for Jebson's death, is the man with whom Lady Mary—if it was she—was having supper. And he is the man we want, or perhaps I should say—one of the many men we want."

Tiny sank into a chair, his brain whirling. The whole thing was too preposterous. And yet—was it? Statements made in this quiet office seemed to carry with them a definite conviction which shook him. And Gillson had quietly said in the most matter-of-fact voice that six weeks ago she *had* been to the Fifty-Nine alone with a man. If so—what about last night?

He had been dancing with her at a house in Berkeley Square, and it had struck him more than once during the evening that she had seemed unusually *distraite*—so much so, in fact, that he had pulled her leg about it. And then at half-past eleven she had pleaded a headache and left. Nothing much to go on so far, it was true: but it was the matter of the mauve orchids that worried him, and that—he cursed himself now for not having kept a better guard on his tongue—had made him say what he did. Mary adored

mauve orchids: all her friends knew it: half the world knew it on the evidence of Aunt Tabitha in *Society Snippets*.

And yet the whole thing seemed too preposterous. She was undoubtedly an unconventional girl, but there were certain things at which she would draw a very fast line. And it seemed to Tiny that dining in a private room at a place like the Fifty-Nine alone with a man was most emphatically one of them. Unless she had to: unless she had no alternative. He lit a cigarette thoughtfully, and then conscious that Gillson was eyeing him shrewdly he pulled himself together. His sudden remark could easily be attributed to the matter of mauve orchids: for the moment at any rate he saw no necessity to mention what he knew of her movements the previous night. Dexter was speaking, and Tiny forced himself to listen.

"Just the same way, sir—the same in every detail. He was an unmarried man and he lodged in a back road off Hammersmith Broadway. The woman who keeps the house heard him come in about two o'clock—she is sure about that because she happened to be awake at the time and the clock in her room struck the hour. Then she dozed off only to be woken up about an hour later by a choking sort of cry. Half shout—half moan is how she described it to me. Then there came the sound of a heavy fall in the room above her—the room which belonged to Jebson. Thinking he might be ill she put on her dressing-gown and ran upstairs. Then apparently she threw a faint at what she saw.

"I really don't blame her, sir," went on Dexter. "I saw the poor devil this morning and he was a pretty ghastly sight. He was in his pyjamas, half in and half out of bed. One hand

was thrown up as if to ward something off, and his face was contorted hideously. Just like the others. Teeth bared: and only the whites of his eyes showing."

"Was the light on or off when the woman went in?" asked Gillson.

"On, sir. He was evidently just getting into bed."

"And the window?"

"Wide open."

"Would it be possible, without great difficulty, for someone outside to get in through the window?

"Quite impossible, sir, unless a ladder was used. But the room looks out at the back of the building. And about three yards away there is a sort of outhouse place. Nothing would be easier than for an agile man to scramble up on the roof of the outhouse, from where he could see straight into Jebson's room."

"Quite." Gillson nodded thoughtfully. "And where was it this time?"

"In the chest."

"Where was what?" cried Tiny.

"This is the fourth affair of this sort that has taken place," said Gillson. "In each case the appearance of the victims has been the same—distorted features, teeth set in a rigid snarl, only the whites of the eyes showing. And in each case somewhere or other on the body there has been a small scratch. But on no occasion has the thing with which the scratch was made been found. You found nothing, did you, Dexter, this time?"

"Not a thing, sir, though I went over the room with a fine tooth- comb."

"But have you no explanation, Colonel?" asked Tiny.

"I certainly have an explanation as far as it goes. Unfortunately that isn't very far. That these four men were murdered I have no doubt, and they were murdered in precisely the same way. They were killed by the introduction into their system of some form of unknown poison, probably of the snake venom variety. It was injected through the scratch, and the ghastly expression on their faces was due to the agony of the muscular contortion as they died. But how was it injected? How was the scratch made?"

"Blow-pipe and poisoned dart," suggested Tiny.

"You can blow a dart out of a pipe, Carteret," said the other, "but I have yet to hear of a person who can suck it back again. If it had been done that way we should have found the darts."

"That's true," agreed Tiny. "I suppose it couldn't have been done by actually introducing a snake into the room."

"Impossible, Mr. Carteret," said Dexter. "At least—almost impossible. I wouldn't say that anything was quite impossible in this case. But there are a number of difficulties over such a solution. How was it got into the room: how was it got away again? Besides, so far as I know there is no known brand of snake whose bite causes practically instantaneous death. Well, you aren't going to tell me that if Jebson found that he had been bitten by a snake he was going to do nothing about it until he died twenty minutes or so later."

"Surely," said Tiny, "the same objection applies to whatever it was that did it. You can't have a hole made in your chest without knowing it."

"Precisely," remarked Gillson. "To my mind that is the essence of the entire thing. And it is such an amazing feature of all the cases that there can be only one solution. Consider the facts. Four trained officers—each of them scratched by something: each of them taking some period of time—how long we do not know—to die, and yet not one of them doing anything during that period, either to call for help or even to write a message on a piece of paper. It is incredible: it is preposterous unless we assume one of two things. Either the poison is to all intents and purposes instantaneous, or they attached no importance to the initial puncture."

Dexter nodded his head thoughtfully.

"I get your meaning, sir. Though it doesn't seem to make things any easier," he added ruefully. "By what possible method could the scratch be made to seem accidental, and yet not be accidental?"

"When you have solved that, Dexter, you have solved the problem. But of one thing I am certain. None of those poor devils connected the pain they were suffering—pain which must have increased to agony at the end—with the thing that pricked them. If they had—with their training, their sense of duty—they would have left some record of it."

"Mightn't it be possible," put in Tiny, "that they did leave some message? And then, once they were dead, the murderer, who could then afford to take his time, destroyed it. From what you say, Dexter, the old lady fainted. Isn't it feasible that the murderer, who was concealed in the room the whole time, took the chance and calmly hopped it?"

"Doesn't get over my initial difficulty, Carteret," said Gillson. "What about that period of time between the puncture and death? Do you mean to tell me that Jebson was going to allow some strange man in his bedroom to stab him in the chest, and not raise Cain?"

"It's the devil," said Dexter. "Because whether it seemed an accident or whether it didn't, they had to make certain of doing it last night. I'm sure of that, though of course we've got no proof."

Tiny lit a cigarette.

"What should make you so sure of that?" he asked quietly.

"I believe he found out something whilst he was waiting," said the other. "And then perhaps he gave himself away—who knows? At any rate they did him in before he could make his report."

"Well, really, my dear fellow," remarked Tiny, "if you'll forgive my saying so, it seems a piece of the wildest guesswork. Why you should assume that there is any connection between this poor devil's death in Hammersmith, and a party in a private room at the Fifty-Nine is beyond my diminutive brain. And you, Colonel, went so far as to say that the man giving the party actually did it."

"Not so, Carteret: I said he was responsible for it. Which is rather different."

"A matter of words, sir. But I cannot forget either—going back a bit in the discussion—that the name of a great personal friend of mine was mentioned as possibly having been in that room. Well, put it how you will—though I quite

realize that what is said inside these four walls is sacred—it's a pretty serious matter. Following it to its logical conclusion, Colonel, it boils down to this. That whoever the lady was who was present, she took part in some conversation with the others who were present which resulted in the murder of the man who was waiting on them. Am I right?"

Colonel Gillson took a couple of turns up and down the room: then he swung round and faced Tiny.

"I see that I shall have to alter my decision, Carteret." He glanced at his watch. "Come and have lunch with me at the Rag, and I'll put you wise."

CHAPTER II

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"NOW you'll understand, Carteret, that what I'm going to tell you is for your ears and your ears alone."

The two men were seated in a corner of the smoking-room with coffee and brandy on the table in front of them.

"Fire ahead, Colonel. I don't mind confessing that I'm deuced curious. And you have my promise that I shan't say a word to a soul."

"I'll make it as short as possible," began Gillson. "And you had better realize right away from the start that a great deal of what I am going to say is in the nature of conjecture or even guesswork. Certain bald facts stick out, and on those pegs we have had to build up our theory. How much of that theory is right, and how much wrong, only time will show. And reading between the lines of a letter Standish wrote me, I think the time is pretty close at hand.

"However, let's get on with it. About five years ago there was a series of extraordinary and apparently disconnected crimes. They were not confined to England: in fact some of the most remarkable of them took place abroad. To take only a few at random. The murder of Rodrigo, the Spanish millionaire banker, in his house in Madrid; the death of Steiner, the German coal magnate, in Essen; Vanderstum the Dutchman, who was shot late one night when going back from a dinner-party in Amsterdam; Leyland, one of our own millionaires who was brutally done to death in an hotel in Liverpool—there are four that spring to my mind. And as I say, at first sight there seemed no connection between