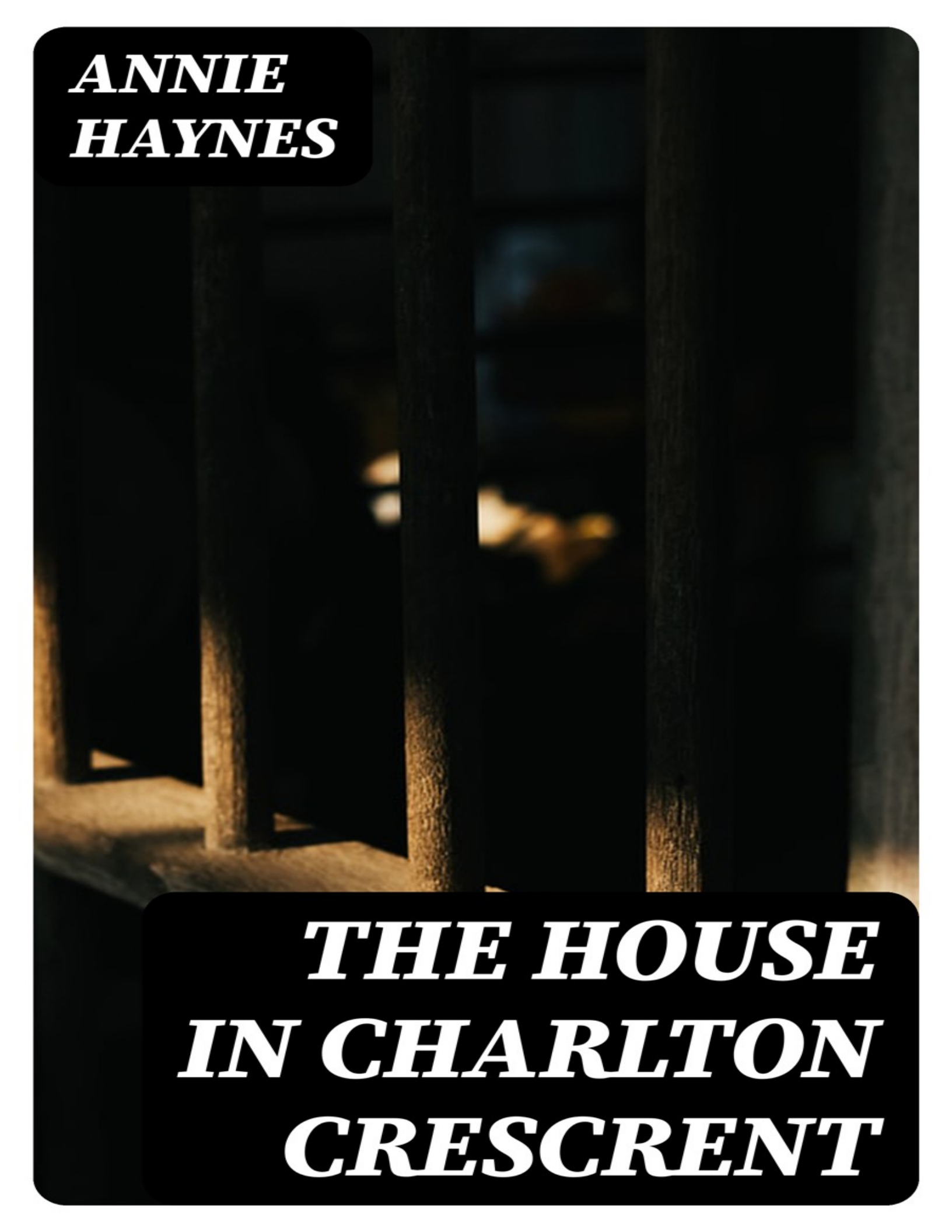




***ANNIE
HAYNES***

***THE HOUSE
IN CHARLTON
CRESCENT***

Annie Haynes

The House in Charlton Crescent

EAN 8596547396949

DigiCat, 2022

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Chapter I

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Lady Anne Daventry was not a pleasant old lady. Her nearest and dearest found her difficult to get on with, her servants called her "cantankerous," and her contemporaries—those who remembered her in her far-off beautiful youth—said she had a good heart.

She was not so very old really, not as people count age nowadays. More than a whole year lay between her and that seventieth birthday that makes such a very definite landmark in most people's lives. Trouble and ill-health had combined to make her look far older than her actual years. No one would have thought her younger than her only remaining brother—The Rev. and Hon. Augustus Fyvert—the rector of North Coton. Yet, in reality, Lady Anne had been a child in the nursery when he was a big boy going to Eton.

Life had not been kind to Lady Anne. The parents, whose petted darling she had been, had both died without seeing their youngest and most dearly-loved child grow up, and the man to whom she had been engaged in her youth, and whom she had passionately loved, had been false to her. Her subsequent marriage with Squire Daventry, of Daventry Keep, had been in the nature of a compromise, and her life with him had not been an easy one. One consolation she had had—the two bonny boys, who grew up to handsome manhood within the walls of Daventry Keep. Then, following swiftly on the old Squire's death, had come the great war; Christopher Daventry and his brother Frank had both died gloriously, fighting for England and freedom, and Lady Anne was left desolate.

The effect upon her of the double blow was devastating. For a time they feared for Lady Anne's life and reason, but she was not made of the stuff that goes under. Her vigorous vitality reasserted itself, and very soon Lady Anne came out into the world once more.

But she was never quite the same; grief seemed to have hardened, not softened, her whole nature. She who had been gracious and charming became snappy and irritable, and finally, when the rheumatism, from which she had suffered for years, became chronic and brought about a permanent stiffness of the limbs, Lady Anne, while saying little of her sufferings, was a distinctly cross and unpleasant old lady.

In her boys' time she had lived principally at Daventry Keep, which, by the terms of the old Squire's will, remained hers for life, but after the death of her sons she had found the quiet of the country oppressive, and for years now she had rented on a long lease the town house of the Daventrys in Charlton Crescent.

It overlooked the Park, and from her bedroom windows she could watch the stream of London traffic ebbing and flowing along the capital's great artery.

Lady Anne's sitting-room was on the first floor and looked out on the beautiful old-world garden beyond. It remained unchanged in its Victorian splendour as it had been at the time of her marriage; there were no modern furnishing vagaries for Lady Anne. The floor was carpeted all over in luxurious velvet-pile—Lady Anne liked its warmth and softness—the curtains were of lovely old brocade in faded pinks and blues, that was matched in the comfortable, spacious arm-chairs and settees. There were panels of beautiful old tapestry on the walls, quaint old lustre and cut-glass ornaments on the high marble mantelpiece;

daguerreotypes and old-fashioned photographs of the relatives and friends of Lady Anne's young days were everywhere. One table was devoted entirely to miniatures on ivory. There was even a spinet, which Lady Anne loved for the sake of the dear dead-and-gone women whose fingers had touched it, and a big jar of potpourri stood by one of the windows.

Lady Anne's escritoire was facing it—a very beautiful specimen of old Georgian workmanship. When let down for writing it disclosed a front and sides richly inlaid. The tiny drawers at each side had golden knobs. The cupboard in the middle, misnamed secret, had a door inlaid all over in a curious arabesque pattern, inset with ivory and jade, and in it gold, silver and copper were oddly mingled.

The big revolving chair before this table was Lady Anne's favourite seat. She came of a generation that did not believe in soft seats for themselves, even when crippled by rheumatism.

She was sitting there this morning, a quantity of papers on the slip-table before her, which she was perusing steadily and then docketing methodically on a small file. On her right hand there lay an open manuscript book, richly bound in grey and gold, with the word "Diary" scrawled across it in golden letters. She made several entries in this book as she filed her papers.

Every now and then her eyes strayed mechanically to the trees outside. It was evident that, busy as she seemed, her attention was wandering, her thoughts far away.

She was a picturesque figure in her black silk gown with its fichu of priceless old lace, a magnificent diamond crescent brooch gleaming amidst the filmy folds. Her still abundant snow-white hair was drawn back from her forehead over a Pompadour frame, and, with a fine

disregard for the present fashion, coiled high on the top of her head and crowned with a tiny scrap of lace which she referred to sometimes as "my cap."

For the rest she was very pale; her skin with its network of wrinkles was the colour of old ivory. The once beautiful mouth had fallen in, but the big, very light blue eyes, beneath her still dark, straight brows, gave character to her face. Not on the whole an agreeable character! Lady Anne was an irritable, impatient old lady, and looked it!

At last she pushed the papers from her with a jerk, and opening one of the small drawers of the escritoire took out a tiny box, just a very ordinary-looking little pill-box. She opened it. Inside there were eight little pills, all sugar-coated; ordinary-looking enough contents for an ordinary box; yet Lady Anne's face went very white as she gazed at them.

Moving them very gingerly with the tip of her finger, she scrutinized each one with meticulous care as she did so.

"Yes, yes. There can be no doubt," she murmured to herself. Then, as if coming to some definite decision, she put on the lid of the pill-box firmly and laid it back in its place in the inlaid drawer. She waited again when she had pushed the drawer back.

Opposite, there hung a beautiful old mirror; Lady Anne loved that mirror. It had been given her when she was a young girl. She had taken it to the Keep when she married, and when she made up her mind to live in London she had brought the mirror with her. Now it seemed like an old friend. It had shown her herself as a young girl, as a bride, as a happy mother, then as a sorrow-stricken woman and one verging on old age, but never had there looked back at her such a reflection as she saw this morning. The cheeks, even the lips, were white. The big light eyes, still beautiful in

shape and size, were wide with fear. Altogether the face in the glass looked like that of a woman oppressed by some terrible dread—some nameless horror!

Lady Anne stared straight at it for a minute or two as at the face of a stranger, then a long shiver shook her from head to foot. Like a woman returning from a trance she pressed her handkerchief over her lips, and turning back to her papers she drew from among them what looked like a list of business firms. She scrutinized it for a moment with knit brows, running her pen up and down the column as she did so; at last she stopped—Wilkins and Alleyn, Private Inquiry Agents, Parlere St., Strand, she read. "Yes, I think that is the firm."

She turned to the telephone which stood beside her and rang up Wilkins and Alleyn. Fortunately the line was clear and she was able to be put through at once. It was evidently a woman's voice that answered, and Lady Anne frowned. She had no opinion of her own sex in business.

"Messrs. Wilkins and Alleyn," she said sharply, "I wish to speak to one of the principals—Lady Anne Daventry."

There was a pause, and then a man's voice—a cultured man's voice—spoke:

"I am Bruce Cardyn, a junior partner in the firm of Messrs. Wilkins and Alleyn. You wished to speak to me?"

"Yes." Lady Anne's voice faltered, then gathered strength as it went on. "I wish to consult a member of your firm. As I am a chronic invalid, unable to get out much, I cannot come to you. Besides, under the circumstances, I should not wish it to be known that I have paid a visit to your office, so I should be glad if one of your principals could call upon me as soon as possible. And I dare say that you will think this a strange request, but possibly you are used to them. Would you be kind enough to say at the door that

you are applying for this post as secretary? I dismissed my secretary a few days ago and am now looking out for another. If you will allow it to be supposed that you are coming after the post, your being admitted will excite no surprise or suspicion in the household, and I am most anxious to avoid this."

Another pause. Lady Anne fancied that there was a consultation, then the same voice spoke again.

"Certainly. That would be the best plan. Would it suit you if I came in an hour's time?"

"Yes, it would," Lady Anne said decidedly. "Unless," she added grimly, "you could come in half an hour's time!"

Lady Anne did not move; very often on her bad days she did not go down to the dining-room for meals, but had something brought to her in her room. To-day, however, she gave orders that she was not to be disturbed until Mr. Cardyn's arrival.

It seemed a very long hour to her, and the soft spring gloaming had merged into something like darkness before Mr. Cardyn came.

The blinds had been closely drawn and the electric light turned on fully. In the old days Lady Anne had loved the twilight, but now she had got into the habit of glancing into the corners in a frightened fashion, and if she were alone the light was always turned on at the earliest possible moment.

She looked with curiosity at the man who came forward when the door closed.

"Mr. Bruce Cardyn?"

He bowed.

"You look very young," Lady Anne said discontentedly. "I hoped to see some one much older and with more experience."

Mr. Cardyn permitted himself a slight smile.

"I have had a good deal of experience and—I am not so young as I look, perhaps, Lady Anne; I am thirty-one."

"Are you indeed?" Lady Anne said incredulously, as she glanced at his fair, clean-shaven countenance, at the close-cut, fair hair, brushed straight back from his forehead, and the slim, youthful figure.

"I am, indeed," he confirmed.

"I heard of your firm from my friend, General Hetherington," Lady Anne resumed as she motioned him to a chair very close to her own. "I believe Messrs. Wilkins and Alleyn did some very successful work for him—not only discovered the criminal but recovered the stolen property. I am speaking of a burglary that took place at Hetherington Hall last year."

"I remember," Bruce Cardyn nodded. "Yes, we were fortunate enough to satisfy General Hetherington."

"But the General spoke of Messrs. Wilkins and Alleyn. I never heard him mention your name."

"I dare say not." Bruce Cardyn's smile deepened. "Yet I am the junior partner. My senior's name is Misterton. Wilkins and Alleyn is merely a—shall I say?—*nom de plume*. You see, if we visited you under our own names we should be more likely to be recognised by any professional crook who has read the list of private inquiry agents. If you will entrust your business to us, Lady Anne, I can promise that we will do our best for you."

"I believe you will. But it is no easy problem that I wish you to solve."

She stopped, and seemed for a moment to be really struggling for words in which to state her dilemma.

As Bruce Cardyn watched her the pity in his grey eyes grew and strengthened. There was something very pathetic

about the stern old face, with the strong mouth that twitched every now and then, and the nameless dread looking out of the big shadowed eyes.

At last Lady Anne seemed to rally her courage by a supreme effort.

"Mr. Cardyn, I have never been a coward in my life—till now! And here to-day I am living in my own house, surrounded by servants, who have for the most part grown grey in my service, and by those who are bound to me by ties of blood and professed affection, yet—"

"Yet?" Bruce Cardyn echoed, a touch of surprise in his grey eyes.

Lady Anne looked at him, the faint colour that had come back to her withered cheeks ebbing once more; the dread in her eyes deepening. Her voice sank to a whisper:

"And yet, as I say, in my own house, surrounded by those I know and love, and who one would expect to have some sort of liking for me, some one is trying to kill me!"

It was not at all what Bruce Cardyn had expected to hear. He was silent for a minute. Sundry stories he had heard of old people who accused their own families of trying to murder them recurred to his mind, but Lady Anne was not old enough for that.

"You have some ground for your belief?" he hazarded at last.

Lady Anne bent her head.

"At first it was only a mere suspicion. I tried to smother it, to assure myself that it was only the merest fancy. I said to myself I am a disagreeable, snappy old woman, I know, but surely I am not so bad that anyone should wish to murder me. Now, however, conviction has been forced upon me. But, Mr. Cardyn, before we proceed, can you with as many underlings as you choose to bring, with any and every

expense guaranteed, can you promise me safety in my own house?"

Bruce Cardyn's face was very grave. Lady Anne's aspect was so controlled, so direct, that the momentary suspicion that had flitted across his mind was dismissed finally and for ever.

"We will do our best to ensure your safety in every way, Lady Anne," he said steadily. "And I think we ought to succeed. More it is not in the power of mortal man to promise."

"It is not!" Lady Anne assented. "Well, Mr. Cardyn, I am going to trust you to safeguard me. Life is sweet to anyone, I suppose, even when one is old and lonely. And we all shrink from the great abyss. Now, as I tell you, my life is being attempted, has been attempted by some member of my household, as I believe, and I want you to discover who it is, and to prevent the crime. But, above all things, I do not want the regular police called in. I want the whole thing kept as quiet as possible. I know that this will make your work more difficult, but I hope you will be none the less willing to undertake it."

"Certainly we will undertake it," Bruce Cardyn promised, his face pale and grave. "But first can you give some of the ground you have to go upon, Lady Anne?"

Lady Anne hesitated a minute, then she bent forward and took the pill-box again.

"I think this will show you best what I have to fear. Look!" She held the box toward him.

He put up a monocle and looked at its contents with great curiosity as it lay in his hand.

"The pills in that box originally were made up by the chemist I have employed for years, from a prescription given me by my own doctor. I was taking one the last thing

every night. There were twelve in the box when it came. I took one at bed-time for five nights. I was glancing at them, only after I had taken the fifth; there were still eight left! What do you make of that?"

Mr. Cardyn looked at the pills; the gravity of his expression deepened.

"You are quite sure of your facts, Lady Anne. It would not be difficult, for instance, to make a mistake in the number of pills or of the number of nights you took them."

For answer, Lady Anne drew a small silver key from the handbag in front of her, and unlocked another small drawer. Inside was a sheet of embossed letter-paper. There were very few lines upon it, but the signature was one of the best known of the day:

DEAR LADY ANNE,

I have analysed the pills you sent me. Seven of them are harmless. The eighth contains hyoscine enough to kill ten women. I am returning them as you requested.

What can I do for you now? Please let me help you.

Yours always,
ROBERT SAINTSBURY.

"That," said Lady Anne very deliberately, "settles the question, I think!"

Chapter II

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Bruce Cardyn put the box down. "It certainly does appear to settle the question that some one is attempting your life. But—pardon me—it proves nothing with regard to the would-be assassin being a member of your household."

"Do you not think so?" Lady Anne questioned coldly. "Since the pills were kept in a drawer in my bedroom, it is difficult to see how anyone, not a member of my household, could have access to them."

"Difficult," Bruce Cardyn assented, "but not impossible. And, in a case of this kind, we cannot afford to rule out any possibilities, Lady Anne. But, now, is this all you have to go upon?"

"I am sorry to say it is not." Lady Anne's pale blue eyes were mechanically watching the flickering of the leaves on a branch of the creeper that had strayed over her window. "I have had several curious accidents, but the most serious of them all, to my mind, is this. To begin with, it is my custom to take a glass of hot milk the last thing at night. For some time I have not been feeling very well—indigestion, I thought it to be—and took my usual simple remedies without success.

"I am not over fond of doctors, but was beginning to think I should have to consult my old friend, Dr. Spencer, when, one night as I was drinking my milk, I became conscious of a very curious taste. It set me thinking. I put the glass down, meaning to make inquiries, and went on with my reading. Half an hour later, when the milk had got cold, my pet Persian cat, climbing about as she does

sometimes, got on the table by my side and lapped up some of it before noticed what she was doing. A very short time afterwards she was violently sick and lay writhing about in awful pain. I thought at first that she was going to die, but in the end got her round again. Since then I have taken no more hot milk. It goes down the drain, and I feel better. My indigestion is a thing of the past."

"And that is all?" Bruce Cardyn questioned.

"Is it not enough?" Lady Anne parried.

"It ought to be," Cardyn assented. "But, Lady Anne, have you no idea who is your would-be assassin?"

Lady Anne shook her head.

"None! Of course I do not say that my fancy has not strayed from one to another, and have said to myself—'it could not be so-and-so, it could not be so-and-so,' but of real knowledge, or even suspicion, I have none."

"I see."

There was a long pause. Cardyn sat with his eyes apparently studying the pattern of the carpet. At last he raised them and gave Lady Anne one long, penetrating look.

"Has anyone in the house any motive for desiring your death?"

"Every one of them," Lady Anne said slowly, a momentary moisture clouding her glasses. "Every servant in my employ comes in for a legacy at my death, small or large according to their time of service. This is well known and one which might have provided a motive."

"Exactly," Cardyn acquiesced. "And if the motive seems inadequate, one must remember for what exceedingly small sums murders have been committed in the past. Now will you tell me exactly of whom your household consists? First the servants?" He took out his note-book and waited.

Lady Anne's pale eyes gave him one swift look and then glanced obliquely away.

"To begin with there are Soames, the butler, and my maid, Pirnie. Both of them have been with me—with us—for many years. Pirnie came as quite a young girl, soon after my marriage. Then there are two housemaids, a kitchen-maid, and the cook-housekeeper, who has been here some years, a young footman under Soames, and a boy. That is all the indoor staff except that both the girls have maids—Miss Fyvert and Miss Balmaine, I mean. Outside we have a head gardener with a couple of men under him, and a chauffeur. But those, as I say, are out of count."

"I cannot at present put anyone out of count," Bruce Cardyn dissented, as he wrote a few lines rapidly in his note-book. "Now the members of your family, Lady Anne, please."

"They are soon told."

For a moment the detective fancied that Lady Anne's stern lips quivered; then he told himself that he must be mistaken as she went on in the same clear voice:

"There are my two nieces, Dorothy and Maureen Fyvert. They have made their home with me for the most part since their mother's death two years ago. Maureen is a child of twelve, usually at a boarding-school at Torquay, but at present at home on account of an outbreak of measles. Dorothy is twenty, and a very good girl. Then there is Margaret Balmaine, my husband's granddaughter."

She was not looking at the detective now or she would have seen his interested expression change to one of utter amazement.

"Miss Margaret Balmaine!" he repeated, but even as he spoke the veil of inscrutability dropped over his features

once more, and he became again the impassive-looking detective.

"Has Miss Balmaine, too, been here for some time?"

"No, she is a comparatively recent comer," Lady Anne said quietly. "She has not been here quite three months as a matter of fact."

Cardyn was writing quickly now. "You said your husband's granddaughter?" he questioned.

"Yes," Lady Anne said, with another quick glance at the detective's sleek, bent head. "My husband had been married and lost his wife before he met me. He had one daughter who ran away and nearly broke her father's heart. She died many years ago in Australia, and we had no idea that she had left any children until this girl turned up a few months ago and introduced herself to me."

"She had, I presume, the necessary credentials?"

"Oh, yes. Quite so. Quite so!" Lady Anne assented. "My lawyer saw to that, naturally. And, as a matter of course, the girl is making her home with me while she remains in England. Then, running up and down so often that, though he is not a member of my household, he might almost be reckoned as such, is John Daventry, my husband's nephew, who succeeded to the estate on the death of his—cousins."

There was a momentary break in the firm voice at the allusion to her dead sons, then she went on: "He is half engaged to my elder niece, Dorothy Fyvert. At least for some years it has been a sort of family arrangement about them. Just of late, however, I have begun to wonder whether it will ever come to anything. They seem to regard one another as cousins and Mr. Daventry certainly admires Miss Balmaine. This is being very confidential, Mr. Cardyn, but I wish you to be thoroughly *au courant* with everything in the house."

"I quite understand that," Cardyn said quietly. "But you said just now that every member of the household had a motive. I presume these young people are included?"

Lady Anne bent her head and for a moment pressed her dainty handkerchief to her lips.

"Every one in the house has some motive, as I said. By my husband's will, his private fortune—a very large one—is divided at my death between John Daventry and the heirs of my husband's daughter, Marjorie—Miss Balmaine, in other words. Should Mr. Daventry predecease me his share passes on with my estate. Oh, I was forgetting! Until last Saturday my house had another inmate—my secretary, David Branksome. Now, Mr. Cardyn, as I told you, I am looking for a new secretary, and it occurred to me that the post might be occupied by one of your employees who, while ostensibly working with me, might be really watching over my safety."

"A very good idea," Cardyn assented. "With your permission I will take the post myself. I suppose there are no special qualifications needed."

Lady Anne looked a little doubtful.

"I have a collection of wonderful old miniatures, which I am having catalogued and described. Do you know anything of them? Of course I could help you."

"I think I should be able to manage." Cardyn made an entry in his book. Then he looked at her, tapping his lips with his pencil as he waited. "May I ask why Mr. Branksome left?"

Lady Anne hesitated.

"I had some reason to be displeased with him," she said stiffly. "But that does not enter into this matter at all."

Bruce Cardyn frowned.

"Pardon me, I think it does. In that very cause for your displeasure may lie the clue to the mystery we are trying to

solve. You must be perfectly frank with me, Lady Anne."

Lady Anne's indecision was apparent, but at last common-sense prevailed.

"Well, I do not see how it can have the slightest connection," she surrendered. "But, though David Branksome was in some respects a good enough secretary, I did not care for him; he took too much upon himself—I hardly know how to describe it—and I seriously objected to his manner with Miss Balmaine. She, of course, coming from Australia, where I suppose all men are equal, apparently saw no harm in it. She assured me that she had no thought of anything serious and begged me not to dismiss him, but I felt it best to keep to my resolution. But I think this is begging the question, Mr. Cardyn. David Branksome alone of my household was not mentioned in my will. He was only a recent acquisition called in to help me in cataloguing my collection of miniatures, and the old editions in the library downstairs. Thus he had no motive. And, moreover, he had left me before I discovered the eighth pill. No, he had certainly no motive."

"H'm! No. Nevertheless, I think I will look Mr. Branksome up a bit. There is no certainty, as far as can see, when the extra pill was added. Was he with you before Miss Balmaine came, Lady Anne?"

"Oh, yes. A couple of months, I should think." Lady Anne wrinkled up her brows. "I can give you the exact dates by looking up my diary."

She drew the book at her side towards her and turned over the pages rapidly.

"Here it is! Branksome came to me on the 12th of September last year; Miss Balmaine reached us on the 29th of October."

"I see." Bruce Cardyn put the elastic band round his pocket-book. "Lady Anne, your new secretary would like to come in at once."

"To-day?" Lady Anne questioned.

"In an hour's time," Cardyn acquiesced. "I have to go back to the office to make a few arrangements. For, with your permission, I am going to set a watch on the house outside!"

"Outside?" Lady Anne raised her eyebrows. "Really, I do not think that is necessary, Mr. Cardyn. The outside staff have no possible means of access—"

"It is not so much the outside staff that I am thinking of, though I shall give them a little attention, too, but I want any communication that the people inside the house have with outsiders carefully watched. In some cases, too, there will be probably shadowing to be done. But you have given me carte blanche, Lady Anne, though I will not trouble you with the details of my precautions, I want you to feel that you are perfectly safe. For a few days I am going to ask you to eat only at meal-times, when there can be no certainty beforehand who will partake of the food. Eschew all odd cups of milk, even your morning tea, until the assassin is found. I will get your prescription made up at the chemist's myself, if you will permit, and give the medicines into your own hands. While you will, I hope, keep them all locked up and allow no one to have access to them."

"I dare say I can manage it," Lady Anne said doubtfully. "But I am afraid Pirnie will be offended. She is my confidential maid, you understand, and the most faithful, the most honest creature in the world. For me even to say that she is entirely beyond suspicion is absurd."

Bruce Cardyn coughed.

"Nevertheless, even the most confidential of maids must be suspect until we have discovered the guilty person. I must ask you to adhere strictly to this rule, please, Lady Anne."

"Well, well, I leave it in your hands," Lady Anne conceded. "Only make me safe, though I dare say you are thinking it is an unnecessary bother to make about an old woman."

The detective got up.

"I will safeguard your life as I would have done my own mother's, Lady Anne."

He took a few steps up the room looking grave and preoccupied.

"Of course it is my duty to tell you that it is my opinion that the only way to make you absolutely safe is for you to leave this house, letting no one know where you go or how long you will be away, taking no one with you, and of course not returning until we have discovered the identity of the would-be assassin."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," Lady Anne said in her most positive tone. "My good man, I have long since given up going away for change of air, as they call it. I can get all the change of air that I want in London, and an invalid is best by her own fireside. So, if you cannot make me safe here—" Her gesture was expressive.

"I feel no doubt but that we shall be able to do so," Bruce Cardyn said quickly, "only I was bound to lay the other possibility before you."

Something like a grim smile passed over Lady Anne's countenance.

"Well, you have put it before me and I refuse to have anything to do with it; therefore the responsibility is off your shoulders. In an hour, then, I shall expect you, Mr. Cardyn."

By the way, under what name shall you pass as my secretary?"

"Oh, Cardyn, please," the detective said at once. "Of course, in any mention of our work officially, we are called by the name of the firm, and even that is not as well-known to the criminal classes as I should like it to be."

"As you wish." Lady Anne touched the bell and the footman appeared to show Cardyn out.

The detective glanced at him keenly. "A young man from the country," he decided.

Soames, the butler, was hovering about in the hall, a benevolent-looking, elderly man, whose bland face and dignified, stately manner might have been those of a Bishop or a Minister of State.

Cardyn took a taxi back to his office. As he let himself in with a key his partner looked out of the adjoining room—a keen-faced, clean-shaven man, a few years older than Cardyn.

"Well!"

"Well!" Cardyn responded in a non-committal voice.

The other laughed.

"Is it to be you or me?"

"Me, I think!" Cardyn's voice was firm. "For the reason I told you I wish to undertake the work."

Chapter III

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"Monsieur Melange is with her ladyship, sir."

"Monsieur Melange!" Bruce Cardyn repeated with a doubtful glance at Soames's placid face.

"The French gentleman to see the miniatures, sir," the butler went on, his manner as gravely respectful to the secretary as though the young man had been Squire Daventry himself. Soames's manners were always perfect. Somehow he conveyed the impression that they were something demanded by his self-respect, and quite irrespective of the person whom he was addressing.

"Yes, sir. His lordship and Lady Barminster are coming to lunch. They are coming over with Miss Fyvert and Mr. John Daventry."

"Is that so? Mr. Daventry is Squire Daventry of the Keep, isn't he?" Bruce questioned.

"Yes, sir. Though it seems strange to think of him there, and the old Squire and both his sons gone."

"Oh, well, times change and we change with them," Bruce said as he went on.

The butler looked after him with an indulgent smile. Bruce Cardyn in his character as secretary had been a week at the house in Charlton Crescent, and he appeared to be gaining golden opinions from the household, including the mistress. There was something so boyish and attractive about his personality. It is probable that the dignified Soames would have received the shock of his life if he had been told that the young man was a private detective. But