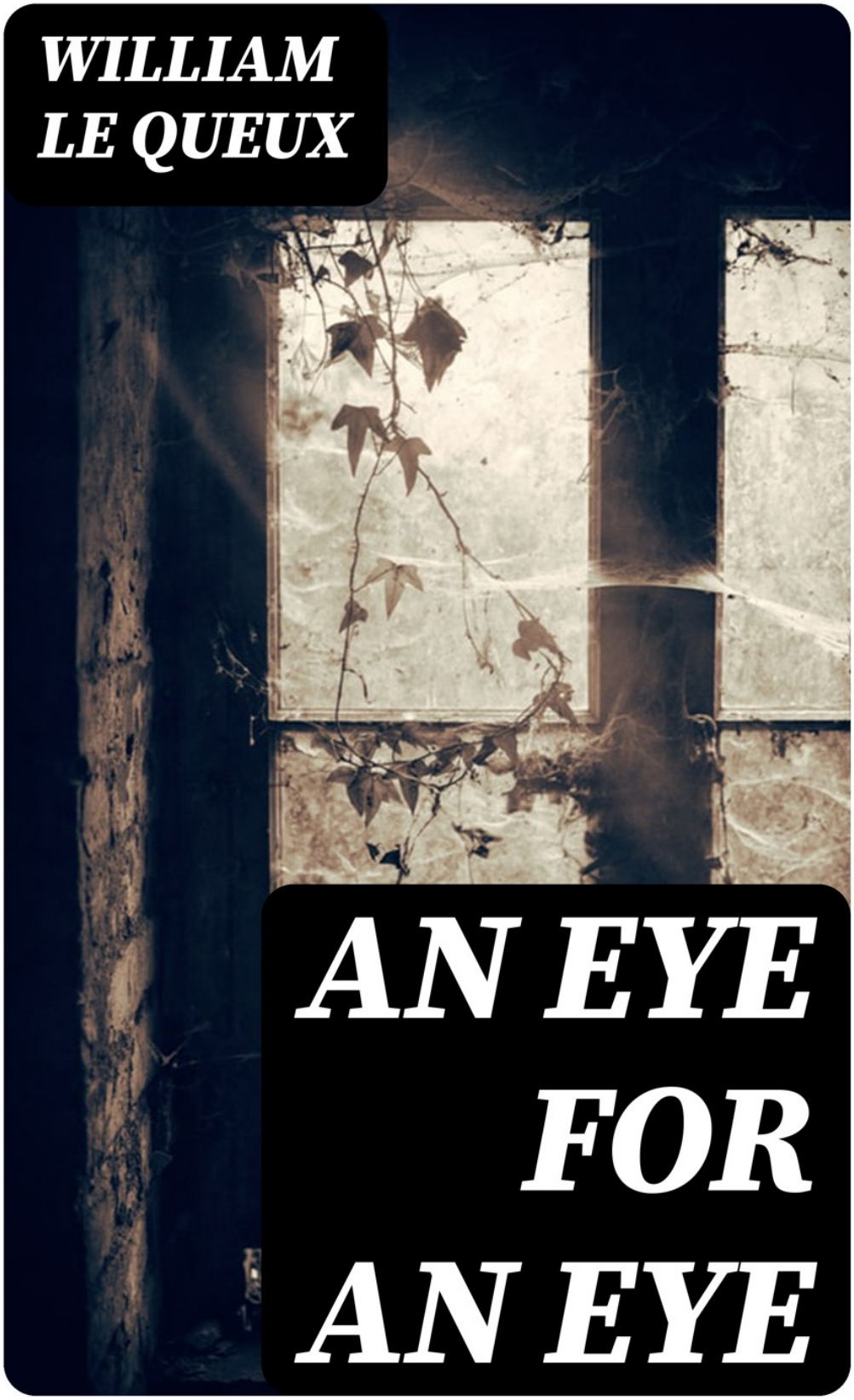
WILLIAM
LE QUEUX
AN EYE
FOR
AN EYE

William Le Queux

An Eye for an Eye

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Chapter One
The Mystery Man

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“Hush! Think, if you were overheard!”

“Well, my dear fellow, I only assert what’s true,” I said.

“I really can’t believe it,” observed my companion, shaking his head doubtfully.

“But I’m absolutely satisfied,” I answered. “The two affairs, mysterious as they are, are more closely connected than we imagine. I thought I had convinced you by my arguments. A revelation will be made some day, and it will be a startling one — depend upon it.”

“You’ll never convince me without absolute proof — never. The idea is far too hazy to be possible. Only a madman could dream such a thing.”

“Then I suppose I’m a madman?” I laughed.

“No, old chap. I don’t mean any insult, of course,” my friend the journalist, a youngish, dark-haired man, hastened to assure me. “But the whole thing is really too extraordinary to believe.”

We were seated together one June morning some years ago, in a train on the Underground Railway, and had been discussing a very remarkable occurrence which had been discovered a few days before — a discovery that was a secret between us. Scarcely, however, had he uttered his final denunciation of my theory when the train ran into the sulphurous ever-murky station of Blackfriars, for the electrification of the line was not then completed: and promising to continue our argument later, he bade me good-bye, sprang out, and hastened away in the crowd of silk-hatted City men on their way to their offices.

He was rather tall, aged about thirty, with a well-cut, clever face, a complexion unusually dark, a well-trimmed

black moustache, and a smart gait which gave him something of a military bearing. Yet his cravat was habitually tied with carelessness, and he usually wore a light overcoat except through the month of August. His name was Richard Cleugh, one of the sharpest men in Fleet Street, being special reporter of London's most up-to-date evening paper, the *Comet*.

When alone, I sat back in the ill-lit railway carriage and, during my short journey to Cannon Street, reflected deeply.

The affair was, as he had said, absolutely bewildering.

Indeed, this chain of curious facts, this romance of love and devotion, of guile, intrigue, and of the cardinal sins which it is my intention to here record, proved one of the strangest that has ever occurred in our giant London. It was an absolute mystery. Readers of newspapers know well the many strange stories told in courts of justice, or unearthed by the untiring "liner" and the reporter who is a specialist in the discovery of crime. Yet when we walk the streets of our Metropolis, where the fevered crowd jostles in the mad race of life, there is more romance around us, and of a character far more extraordinary than any that has ever appeared in the public prints.

The secrets of London's ever-throbbing heart, and her hidden and inexplicable mysteries which never get into the papers, are legion.

This is one of them.

In order to understand the facts aright, it is necessary to here explain that I, Frank Urwin, am myself a member of that ubiquitous and much maligned profession, journalism, being engaged at the time of the opening of this narrative as special reporter of a highly respectable London daily newspaper — a journal which was so superior that it never allowed itself to make any sensational statement. Its conductors as studiously avoided sensationalism as they did libel, and although we were very often in possession of "startling facts," and "sensational statements" which would

have sold the paper, and caused it to be quoted next morning up and down the country, yet we of the staff, forbidden to write anything so undignified, kept our information to ourselves, or, as was once rumoured, the office boy, a thrifty youth, went forth and calmly sold it to one of our more enterprising rivals. Hence, owing to the heaviness of its articles, which usually contained “chunks” of foreign quotations, and the paucity of its news, the paper was dubbed by its staff “the Magazine.”

Before being appointed to this pseudo-newspaper, where, by the way, work was light and remuneration good, I had been for several years engaged upon one of those enterprising evening journals who print their “specials” on tinted paper, and by reason of my constant investigations I had become well-known to the police, and perhaps something of a specialist in the revealing of hidden facts and the unravelling of mysteries.

Dick Cleugh was my most intimate friend, for we shared chambers in Gray’s Inn, a rather dingy and typical bachelor’s abode, be it said; but it had the advantage of being in close proximity to Fleet Street, and situated as we were, flying all over London day after day, we could not afford to live out in the peculiarly journalistic suburb of Brixton. Our little flat contained a very sad and shabby sitting-room — in which stood a couple of writing-tables whereat we often worked, joining in, and re-echoing, each other’s imprecations — a couple of bedrooms and a small box-room which, containing a gas-stove over which the diurnal chops were fried, was termed by the Inn authorities a kitchen. We, however, irreverently termed it “the sink.” Old Mrs Joad, a worthy old soul who lived across in Fetter Lane, “did for” us, and was known as “the Hag,” on account of her *passé* and extremely *bizarre* appearance. Her duties were not very onerous, consisting of preparing our morning tea, “doing up” the rooms, cooking the eternal chops or the everlasting steaks at six, when, our respective “special

editions” having gone to press, we both returned hungry to our dens, and lastly in drinking our whisky. She preferred gin, but took whisky in order to put us to no inconvenience.

Cleugh was one of the queer figures in journalistic London. Essentially of the Bohemian type, easy-going and possessed of a quaint, dry humour, many were the stories told in Fleet Street of his utter disregard for the *convenances*. Shrewd, witty, clever, well-educated, he was no respecter of persons. If he went forth to make an inquiry for his journal, he hesitated at nothing. With the constant companionship of an extremely foul briar pipe, it was his habit to “interview” people and obtain “latest details” of the day’s sensation without removing it from his lips, and it was well-known down at the Press Club, that dingy but interesting institution in Wine Office Court, that on one field-day at Aldershot he had actually chatted with the Commander-in-Chief, pipe in mouth, and afterwards put the conversation “on the wire” in the form of an interview. When having nothing to do he would clean that pipe for recreation, and such operation usually caused a rapid exit from the vicinity. Known to all in Fleet Street as “the Mystery Man,” he was clever-looking and dignified, and could snuff out an uncommunicative secretary, or a pompous policeman, with his marvellous control of expressions, sarcastic without being abusive. He was undoubtedly “a smart man” — and to be smart in journalism nowadays requires a good deal more than ordinary intelligence. An ex-Jesus man, he had been a True Blue, been ploughed for the Army, studied medicine, and travelled pretty widely, until having been a brilliant failure he had drifted into journalism, like so many other men have drifted, commencing as an outside contributor, or “liner,” and eventually, by dint of the swiftness and marvellous tact and ability with which he got at the bottom of the inquiries he made, he joined the regular staff of a popular evening sheet — which, by reason of having once tried the experiment of printing on scented paper, was

known in press circles as “The Stinker” — and subsequently became chief of the reporting staff of the *Comet* — as smart a staff as could be found in London.

In common with many other men in Fleet Street, that never-sleeping world of tape and flimsy, Dick had one failing — he had a penchant for a particular brand of whisky sold at the *Cheese*, the ancient house of steak-pudding fame, but he was always moderate, for his great pride was that his sub-editors could place the greatest reliance in him, as indeed they could. Dick Cleugh was certainly smart, even though his hair was often unkempt and a bundle of copy-paper usually poked out of the side-pocket of his well-worn overcoat. Over and over again had he proved himself a very brilliant pressman and had startled London by the “latest details” he had elicited where the police had failed.

I had arrived at our chambers about six, after a heavy day. I had visited Barking and Wandsworth, and had made an inquiry at Hammersmith, three districts far afield from one another, therefore I felt fagged and hungry. The Hag was engaged in fizzling the usual daily steak in the gas fumes, filling the place with a decidedly appetising odour; nevertheless, between Dick and I there was an arrangement that neither should eat without the other, unless a telegram arrived announcing a protracted absence. Therefore I lit a cigarette, cast myself into the trifle rickety but very comfortable armchair, and waited by the open window. I was just a trifle melancholy that evening, for there had come back to me recollections of a love-bond long since severed, of a face which was once very dear to me. But I was a lonely bachelor now. All was of the past. Soon, however, as I sat thinking, I saw Cleugh hurrying across the square, his silk hat, a trifle rusty, tilted at the back of his head, and a few moments later he burst merrily into the room, saying —

“Sorry to keep you so long, old chap, but we brought out an extra to-night. There’s a bit of a row down in Parliament.”

Then, calling to Mrs Joad, who was pottering in the “sink” beyond, he said, “Come along, mother. Look sharp with the horseflesh!”

We sat down and commenced our meal, while he, overflowing with spirits, told me how he had been out on an inquiry near to the *Welsh Harp*, spending a very pleasant afternoon there, and how he meant to “write it up” for the “mornings.” The old instinct of the “liner” was still upon him, and on his littered table he always kept his agate stylus and oiled tissue, known as “flimsy,” his “blacks” and his square of tin whereon to write. The sub-editors of the morning papers, the judges of next day’s intelligence, could always rely on Dick Cleugh’s “stuff,” therefore they used it, and he profited at the rate of a penny farthing per line. He was, in brief, purveyor of sensations to the newspaper-reading public.

“I’m going to take Lil out to-night,” my companion said between mouthfuls of steak, for he was ravenously hungry. “Smart girl, Lil.”

“Yes,” I answered. “She’s really awfully nice. By Jove! old chap, I envy you.”

The Mystery Man smiled contentedly with a piece of meat poised gracefully on his fork, then he began humming the latest love-song which the barrel-organs had made popular, beating time with his fork, at the same time placing his hand upon his heart in true operatic style.

This proceeding was, however, interrupted by the entrance of the Hag bearing a telegram for me. On opening it I found it contained only the one word “Come,” signed by the initial “P.”

I tossed it across to my companion without comment, and as I did so was surprised to notice a strange, puzzled look upon his dark face.

He glanced at it, then handing it back to me, exclaimed — “Wonder what’s up at Kensington?”

“Something unusual, or Patterson wouldn’t have wired,” I said.

“You’ll go, of course?”

“Yes. I’ll just see what it looks like, and if there’s anything in it I’ll let you know.”

“Well, old dawdler,” he laughed, “if it’s a good thing, leave a bit of the latest intelligence for me to pick up for my early edition to-morrow. To-night I can’t disappoint Lily, you know. She’s a good girl, and never worries.”

“I’ll tell you all about it when I come back; then you can write up something in readiness for to-morrow. If it’s a mystery my people won’t touch it, you know.”

“Of course,” he said. “Your staff is only paid to look pleasant.”

The mysterious telegram had come from the police headquarters at Kensington, an early intimation that something unusual had occurred. In years of reporting in London I had become friendly with many police inspectors and detectives, and had long ago made arrangements with some of them whereby they would send me a wire by day, or a line by boy-messenger at night with information of the latest “sensation.” The reason why all were signed with initials was because such intimation was contrary to the order of the Chief Commissioner.

I therefore left Dick sucking his foul briar, and, taking a motor-bus to Kensington, entered the police-station, which stands back hidden in a courtyard opposite St. Mary Abbot’s Church. In the charge-room, with its bare, grey-painted walls, its steel-railed dock for prisoners, its loud-ticking clock, and its desk, whereon the oblong charge-book lay open, I found my old friend Inspector Patterson in earnest conversation with two men of the working class, who spoke with a strong Cockney accent and addressed him familiarly as “guv’nor.” They were evidently policemen’s noses, or, in criminal parlance, “narks.”

“Good evening, Mr Urwin,” the inspector exclaimed, putting forth his big hand. He was a tall, fair-moustached, easy-going fellow, an excellent officer, tender-hearted where the deserving poor was concerned, but harsh and unbending towards the habitual offender. From constable, as I had first known him in the T or Hammersmith Division, he had been moved to St. Luke’s, to Paddington, to Leman Street and to Bow Street, until, owing to the marks which various magistrates had made upon his charge sheets, he had now at last risen to the rank of first-class inspector.

He was discreet in his every action, therefore he did not refer to the telegram he had sent me lest any of the men should overhear, but when we had chatted for a few moments he whispered —

“Go over to the bar at High Street Railway Station and wait there for me. I want to see you very particularly.”

I nodded. Then, after some further conversation, I left him and wandered across to the refreshment room he had indicated.

Chapter Two
The Penny in Paper

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About twenty minutes elapsed before Patterson rejoined me, but expressing a fear that we might be overheard there, we went forth together and strolled along High Street, until, coming to a quiet turning which, I think, led past the workhouse, we strolled along it, and there he commenced his explanation.

"The fact is," he said in a nervous, hushed voice, "there's been a most extraordinary occurrence here to-night. The mystery is the strangest in all my experience, and I've made inquiries into one or two in my time, as you know."

"Tell me all about it," I said, my curiosity whetted.

"I wish I could, my dear fellow," he answered.

"I mean, tell me all the known facts."

"Nothing is known — save the discovery," he replied. "As soon as it became known I wired to you. When the papers get hold of it, it will make the greatest sensation ever known in London."

"Well, that's saying a good deal," I remarked. "Who made the discovery?"

"I did," he answered, adding quickly, "but don't mention me, or the superintendent may suspect me of giving you information. He already has a suspicion that I'm a bit too friendly with you gentlemen of the press. A contravention of the Commissioner's orders against giving information to the papers might get me carpeted up at the Yard, you know."

"And the discovery?" I asked impatiently. "What's its nature?"

"Most astounding," he replied, with a bewildered look. "I'm a police officer, Urwin," he added hoarsely, "and I'm not often unnerved. But to-night, by Jove! I'm upset —

altogether upset. The whole affair is so devilish uncanny and unnatural."

"Tell me the story," I urged. "If it is so strange the evening papers will have a good time to-morrow."

"No, no," he cried in quick alarm. "You must publish nothing yet — nothing. You understand that I give you these facts only on condition that you promise not to publish any thing until I give you permission. You alone will know of it. We must preserve the utmost secrecy. Not a word must leak out yet. You understand in what an awkward position you would place me were you to publish anything of this affair."

"Of course. I promise you to keep the matter a strict secret," I answered. "There are many cases in which the publication of the details of a crime might defeat the efforts of the police, and this I supposed to be one of them."

"Well," he said, "I made the discovery in a most curious manner. Just before seven o'clock this evening, just as it was growing dark, I was returning to the station after visiting the 'fixed-point' at the corner of Earl's Court Road. You know the spot — just opposite Holland Park."

I nodded. I knew that particular street-corner where Earl's Court Road joined Kensington Road quite well.

"I had previously been my usual round through Campden Hill Road and Holland Walk, and was strolling back along the main Kensington Road, past that terrace of houses Upper Phillimore Place, when my attention was suddenly arrested by seeing on the steps leading from the pavement up to the front garden of one of the houses a small object moving. It was inside the gate, and in the dim half-light I bent to examine it. What do you think it was?"

"Don't know," I replied. "Don't ask riddles — describe facts."

"Well, it was the very last thing one would dream of finding on a London doorstep — a small, strangely-marked snake."

“A snake!” I echoed. “You didn’t arrest it for being found without visible means of subsistence, I suppose?”

“No,” he answered, controlling the smile which played about his lips. “But the thing’s too serious for joking, as you’ll recognise when I’ve told you all. Well, the squirming reptile, as soon as it saw me, coiled itself round, and with head erect and swelled, commenced hissing viciously. I saw that there was considerable danger in a thing like that being at large, and surmising that it had escaped from the house, having been kept in captivity by somebody fond of such pets, I opened the gate, passed it, not, however, without it making a dart at me, and walking up to the door, rang the bell. The house was in total darkness, but daylight had only just faded, and in many of the houses in the same terrace the gas in the hall had not yet been lit. I rang and rang, but there was no response. In a large house of that character it seemed strange that no servant was about. Indeed, most of the houses there, large, roomy and old-fashioned, let furnished apartments, but this one seemed to be superior to its neighbours, inasmuch as it has a balcony on the first floor, and the small front garden is well-kept in comparison to the patches of bald, weedy grass with which the others are content. As I stood on the doorstep, trying to arouse the inmates, I watched the reptile squirming about the paved path, apparently enjoying its liberty immensely. I placed my ear attentively at the door, trying to detect some sound of movement, but failed, until suddenly I heard within the ringing of an electric bell, subdued by reason of the closed door. It was certain that, after all, some one was within.”

“Was your summons answered?” I asked eagerly.

“No. I rang fully a dozen times, but nobody came. It occurred to me that within might be an invalid, and that, hearing my ring, he or she had rung the bell to the kitchen, but the servants were absent. There was an area door, so I descended, and tried that. The handle yielded. It was unlocked. Therefore I pushed it open and went in, though I

was certainly not prepared for the discovery I afterwards made. As I entered, the electric bell commenced ringing again, but it was apparently above me, on the ground floor, and not in the kitchen where I stood. In the cooking-stove the fire was dying out, and there were other signs that servants had been about recently. Finding no one in the basement I ascended to the first floor, when there greeted my nostrils a most delicious fragrance, very similar to the incense which the Roman Catholics burn. The place smelt like the Brompton Oratory."

"Well, what did you do next?" I asked, excited at his extraordinary narrative.

"I searched the two big rooms — a dining-room and a back sitting-room — on the ground floor, but finding no one, I stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted, thinking to discover the whereabouts of the invalid who had rung the bell. There was no answer. The place was dark, so I struck a match, ascended to the first floor and entered the front room, which proved to be a good-sized, well-furnished drawing-room, dimly lit by the street-lamp opposite shining through the windows. At the further end, suspended from the ceiling, a curious lamp was burning in red glass, just like those one sees in Roman Catholic churches, and on examining it I found it to be a little float in oil, so arranged that it would burn continuously for many days and nights without attention. It looked strange and weird, a red spot in the darkness at the end of the room; but what was stranger and more amazing was a discovery I made a moment later when, my eyes having grown used to the semi-obscurity of the room, I discerned two human forms, one that of a woman lying back in an armchair as if asleep, and the other a man, who had fallen close by and was lying outstretched upon the carpet. Even the faint light of the match I struck told me that both were dead, and so startled was I by this unexpected revelation that with scarcely a second glance

round the weird place I hastened downstairs and left by the front door."

"You went on to the station at once, I suppose?"

"Yes," he answered; then after a pause he looked straight into my face, adding, "but to tell the truth, Urwin, you and I are the only persons who know of this affair. I haven't reported it."

"Haven't reported it?" I echoed. "Why not? Delay may prevent the mystery being unravelled."

"I know it's absurd and foolish," he faltered in an unsteady voice, "but the fact is, I entertain a deep-rooted superstition about snakes. My poor wife was always dreaming of snakes before she died, and strangely enough, whenever I have seen those reptiles in my dreams some bad luck, catastrophe or bereavement has always fallen upon me immediately afterwards."

"It isn't like you to speak thus, Patterson," I said, knowing him to be a fearless man who more than once had boldly faced a burglar's revolver.

"I really don't know what to do," he said. "It's nearly two hours ago since I entered the place. I was so upset when I came out that I went to the telegraph office and wired to you, in the hope that you might be able to suggest some plan of action."

"Report at once and let's thoroughly investigate it," I said promptly.

"No. I can't report it on account of that snake. If I did, I feel assured that some fatality would fall upon me."

"You're unnerved by what you've seen," I said. "It certainly was not a nice position to unexpectedly find oneself alone with the dead in a dark deserted house like that. In any case, however, the matter is a queer one and must be sifted."

"Yes," he said, "it appears to be a most remarkable affair."

“Well,” I exclaimed, “if you are determined not to report it just at present I’m ready to go with you and search the place. The area door is still unlocked, you say?”

He hesitated, pale and agitated. The effect of this discovery upon him had been really remarkable.

“Yes, the door is still unlocked, of course,” he said reflectively, “but personally I don’t care about returning.”

“Rubbish, my dear chap,” I exclaimed. “I don’t believe in superstitions. The finding of the snake was curious, no doubt, but this isn’t the first time snakes have been found in the streets of London. Lots have been discovered about Covent Garden Market, having come over in baskets of fruit.”

He was silent. Evidently his discovery had been a very unusual one. I know well the row of houses he had indicated, the most old-fashioned, perhaps, in the district, for they had formed a part of old Kensington over a century ago, and even now the great iron extinguishers ornamented some of the doorways, mute remembrancers of the days of sedan chairs and linkmen.

“Let’s go and explore the place, and report afterwards,” I urged, my appetite for adventure whetted by his strong disinclination to return. “I’ll report it as a discovery of my own if you are disinclined to do so.”

“Very well,” he answered at last, “let’s go. But before we enter I tell you that it is a very mysterious house. Recollect that strange ringing I heard.”

“We’ll look into all that later on,” I said, surprised at his unusual agitation. There, facing one of the busiest thoroughfares of the West End, little harm surely could come to us. “Come along,” I said, and thus persuaded, he quickened his footsteps. We passed along Abingdon Villas into Earl’s Court Road, where, meeting a constable on duty, he borrowed his lamp; then turning into the Kensington Road we at length reached the house of mystery, which, as he had said, was a gloomy-looking place in total darkness.

We peered eagerly inside the gate, but could distinguish no sign of the reptile which had so strangely attracted my friend's attention in the first instance. It had no doubt withdrawn among the plants and shrubs in the little smoke-dried garden, and was watching us unseen. Without hesitation, in order not to attract the curiosity of any passer-by whose attention might be arrested by Patterson's uniform, we walked straight to the area door, and gaining the kitchen, at once lit the gas. As he had said, there was every sign that the place had been recently occupied, but with only a cursory examination of the basement we passed upstairs to the dining-room. Here we also lit the gas and saw that the table had been laid for three persons in a manner quite luxurious, with real silver, cut glass and tiny vases of fresh flowers arranged artistically. Beside each plate were blue glass finger-bowls filled with water which gave out a strong perfume of roses. The chairs had been placed, and the *hors d'oeuvres*, olives, anchovies and caviare were already on the table, showing that all preparations for dinner had been made. Yet strangely enough, in the kitchen the greater part of the meat and vegetables remained uncooked.

From this room we passed into the smaller one adjoining, lighting the gas as we went, but this seemed to have been used as a smoking-room, and contained nothing of note.

It was, however, in the drawing-room above where we made the most astounding discoveries. The apartment was spacious for the size of the house, upholstered in pale-blue with furniture of expensive character, and large growing palms placed on stands. In the centre was a great circular settee, and in the corners wide soft divans of pale-blue velvet with golden fringe. Comfort and luxury had been studied by whoever had furnished the place, for as we lit one of the side gas-brackets we saw that it was really a very artistic room, the floor covered with a real Turkey carpet of softest hues, while the few paintings on the walls were

choice examples of well-known artists. At the end opposite the grate was suspended from the ceiling by three gilt chains the mysterious little red lamp, burning steadily without a flicker, and beneath it, fallen back in a large armchair, was a woman, whose face, although waxen white, was eminently beautiful. The paleness of death was upon her, yet her handsome head with its wealth of gold brown hair was pillowed upon the cushion of yellow silk, and upon the cold, slightly-parted lips there played a strange, bitter smile. She was young, twenty or so, dressed in an artistically-made gown of pale mauve, trimmed with lace. Her teeth were even and perfect; her cheeks round and well-moulded; her chin slightly protruding, and a piquant little nose; but that smile in death seemed revolting in its hideousness. Her eyes large, of a deep blue, once luminous as stars no doubt, but now dull and filmy, were wide open, as though gazing out upon us in an endeavour to speak and tell us the truth of the strange and tragic occurrence. I looked upon her bewildered, dumbfounded.

Not three yards away, stretched at her feet, was a man of about thirty-five, well-dressed in frock coat and light-coloured trousers, with collar and cravat of the latest mode, and wearing on his cold, stiff hand a ring set with a single diamond of unusual lustre. His face was towards the carpet, and while I held the lamp, Patterson bent and turned him over. We then saw that he was dark and good-looking, a gentleman evidently, although from the upward curl of his moustache and his smartness of attire he appeared to be something of a fop.

“It looks a good deal like murder and suicide,” Patterson exclaimed, still bending over him. “I wonder who he is?”

“There’s initials on his sleeve-links,” I said, for I had detected an engraved cipher upon the plain gold buttons at his wrists.

“They’re two ‘K’s’ intertwined, surmounted by a crest,” my companion said in a strange voice. “I wonder what’s on

him?” and he proceeded to search the breast-pocket of the dead man’s coat. The contents, which we afterwards examined together, consisted only of two prospectuses of new companies, an amber cigar-tube mounted in gold, and the envelope of a letter addressed in a woman’s hand to “George Grove, Poste Restante, Charing Cross,” and bearing the Manchester post-mark of three days before. The letter had unfortunately been destroyed; only the envelope remained. But we both recollected that persons who have letters addressed to the Poste Restante do not usually give their correct names.

In one of the vest pockets were three ten-pound notes folded carelessly together, while in the trousers pockets was a quantity of loose silver. Beyond that there was nothing else upon him. Contrary to the effect of death upon his unfortunate companion, his face was slightly distorted, the tip of the tongue protruding, and both hands clenched, showing that he had endured a momentary spasm of agony as the last spark of life died out, while from the fact that a small tripod table with painted plate-glass top had been overturned and broken it seemed apparent that he had staggered and clutched wildly at the first object within his reach.

But on neither could we detect any wound, nor was there anything to show the cause of death. I examined the hand of the woman, a tiny, slim, cold hand, the contact of which thrilled me by its chilliness, and saw that her rings, set with emeralds, rubies and diamonds, were of the finest quality.

“She’s beautiful,” Patterson observed, gazing down upon her. “Perhaps she was his wife.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “Curious that they should have both died together in this manner.”

“They were evidently sitting here chatting before dinner, when both were either murdered, or died suddenly before assistance could reach them. She died before he did.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked quickly, my eyes wandering around the large, comfortable room, the atmosphere of which was heavy with fragrant odours.

“Because he placed that cushion beneath her head,” answered the shrewd, observant police-officer. “He had kissed her, and she was in the act of smiling at his last act of love when her heart suddenly failed, and soul and body parted.”

“And he died immediately afterwards, you think?”

“Yes, that’s what I surmise. What’s your opinion?”

“I can form no theory at present,” I answered, bewildered. In the course of years spent in the investigation of crime for journalistic purposes I had had my wits sharpened, and rather prided myself upon the soundness of the theories I propounded in the articles I wrote. Patterson knew this, and probably for that reason had invoked my companionship in this curious affair.

Together we made a searching examination of the whole room, but there was absolutely nothing to show the motive, or even the mode, of the tragedy. The absence of servants was of course extremely suspicious, but neither of us attached much importance to that. A close examination of the scene was our present object, experience having taught that upon the scene of most crimes there remains some trace of the assassin. The old saying that “Murder will out” is truer than the majority of people believe, for even that night we had had a striking illustration in Patterson’s attention being attracted by the snake in the gateway.

Beside the dead woman’s chair was lying a handkerchief, a tiny square of lawn and lace, which I picked up. It emitted an odour very sweet and subtle, such as I had never before smelt.

Patterson sniffed it, but placed it down.

“Some new scent,” he said. “Women are always going in for the latest inventions in perfumes.”

“But this is an extraordinary one,” I said, again smelling it. “Terribly strong, too,” I added, for the odour had a strange, half-intoxicating effect upon me. The small red light steadily burning, the fragrance of the incense, the two dead forms lying there, still and cold, and the single gas-burner, hissing as it flared, combined to present a weird, lurid picture, each detail of which has ever since been indelibly photographed upon my memory.

The smile of death upon that woman’s lips was horrible. That look of hers has ever since haunted me, for now that I know the truth and have realised all that had taken place in that room prior to the tragedy, that laugh of derision has a significance which renders its recollection bitter, gruesome, hideous.

I know not what prompted me at that moment, but bending again beside the prostrate man I placed my hand inside his vest, recollecting that sometimes tailors, adopting the French mode, made pockets there, and that therein many men carried articles of value in secrecy and safety.

As I did so, I felt that there was a pocket in the lining, that it was buttoned, and that there was something within. Quickly I unbuttoned it and drew forth a small packet wrapped in glazed writing-paper, dirty and worn through being carried for a long time. With care I opened it, and inside found an object which caused us both to give vent to an ejaculation of wonder.

It was simply a penny.

“His mascot, I suppose,” remarked the inspector. “A lucky coin.”

“But it has no hole through it,” I observed.

“The hole is of no importance. The coin may have been given him for luck,” replied my companion. “Lots of people believe in such things, especially betting men.”

“He was evidently very careful of it,” I said, at the same time searching and finding another pocket on the other side of the vest, and from this I took a neat little cloth-covered

case, not much larger than those containing cigarette tubes, and found on opening it that it contained a small hypodermic syringe, complete with its needles and accessories.

“This shows that he was addicted to the morphia habit,” I remarked. “An overdose, perhaps.”

My friend, who had now recovered something of his coolness and self-possession, took the tiny instrument and examined it carefully beneath the gas-light.

“There’s been no morphia in this lately,” he said. “It’s quite dry, and certainly hasn’t been used to-day.”

“Let’s search the whole house,” I suggested. “We may find something which will give us a clue as to who and what these people were. Funny that the servants don’t come back, isn’t it?”

“I don’t expect they will,” answered Patterson.

“Depend upon it that there’s more mystery in this affair than we at present suspect.”

“Why?”

“Look at these,” he said, passing over to me the three banknotes found upon the dead man. “They are spurious!”

No second glance was needed to convince me that he spoke the truth. They were clever imitations of ten-pound notes, but the paper, the despair of the forger, was thick and entirely different to that of the genuine bank-note.

Again I glanced at that beautiful woman’s face with its smile of mingled ecstatic pleasure and bitterness. Her sightless eyes seemed fixed upon me, following me as I moved.

I drew back horrified, shuddering. Her gaze was ghastly.

“It certainly is a most mysterious affair,” I ejaculated again, glancing around the place. “You ought at once to report it.”

“No,” cried my companion quickly. “The discovery must be yours. You must report it, Mr Urwin.”

“Why?”

“Because, as I’ve already told you, I fear to do so on account of the snake.”

I smiled at his curious objection, but an instant later grew serious because of the sharp and sudden ringing of an electric bell somewhere on the ground floor. It was the bell my companion had heard when first knocking at the door.

We both listened for a few moments while the ringing continued, until with sudden resolve I dashed downstairs to ascertain where the bell was. Without difficulty I found it, for there in the hall, revealed by the gas-lamp we had lit, was a telephone instrument with its bell agitated violently.

Without a second’s delay I placed the receiver to my ear and gave the usual signal —

“Hulloa! Hulloa?”

The whirr and clicking stopped, and a voice, squeaky as that of an elderly person, said petulantly —

“I’ve been ringing up for an hour or more. What’s wrong that you haven’t replied? You’re at fifty-eight, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I answered, recollecting that fifty-eight was the number of that house. “Nothing is wrong. Why? Can’t you be patient?”

“I felt uneasy,” answered the mysterious voice apologetically. “I thought there might possibly have been some hitch as you haven’t rung up.”

“No,” I responded. “None.”

“Then of course it’s all over?” inquired the voice. I started at this strange query. This unknown inquirer was evidently in possession of the truth, and believed himself to be talking to an accomplice. He knew of the commission of the crime, therefore it occurred to me that by the exercise of due caution I might be able to discover his identity.

“Yes,” I answered, breathless in excitement.

“Both?” asked the voice.

“Both,” I responded.

“Good. Then I shall see you at the place we arranged — eh?”