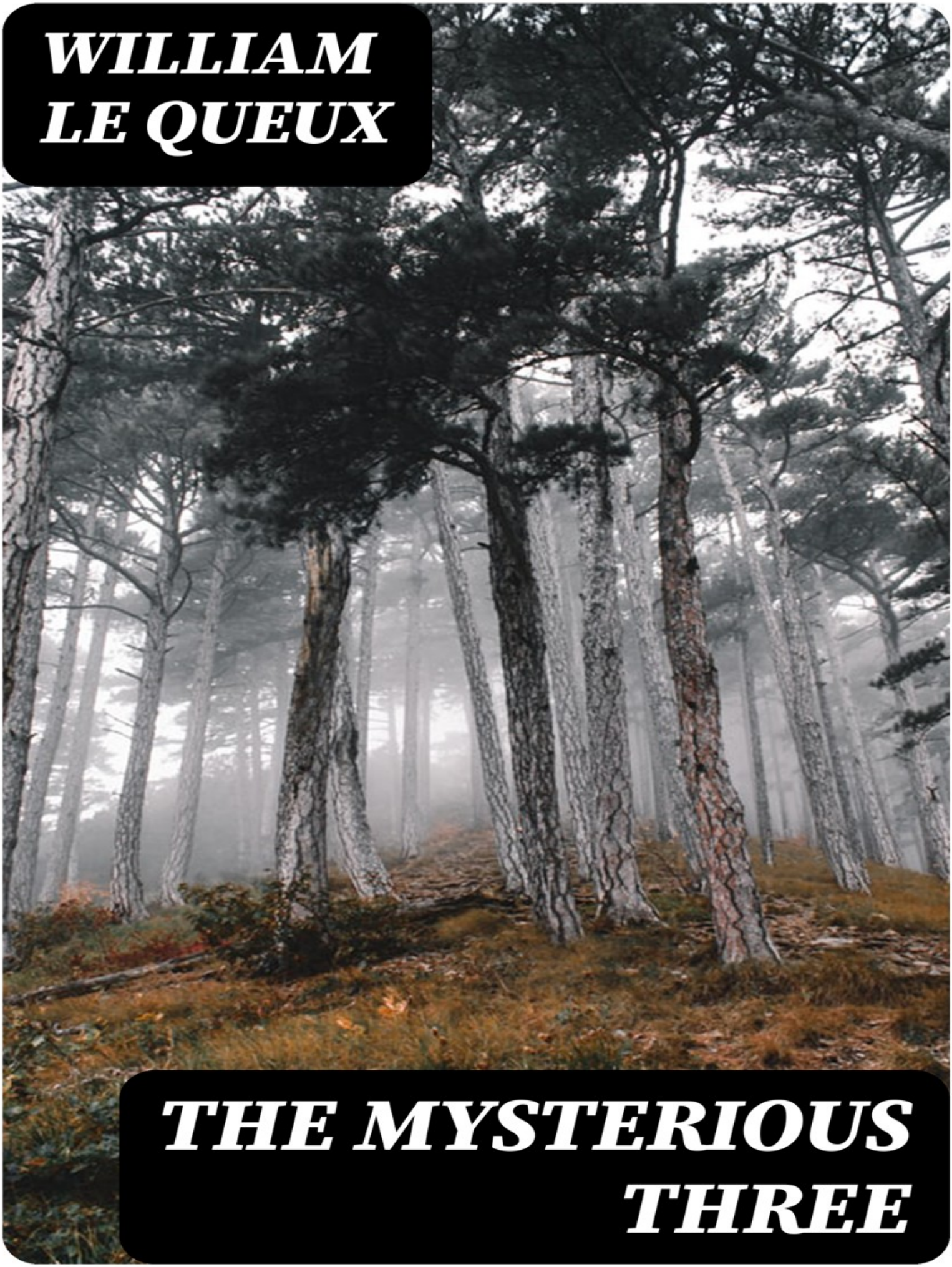
WILLIAM LE QUEUX
THE MYSTERIOUS THREE

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"The Mysterious Three"

Chapter One.

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Concerns a Visitor.

“Do you know a Mr Smithson, Gwen?” Sir Charles Thorold asked his wife abruptly as he stood astride before the big fire in the hall.

“Smithson?” Lady Thorold answered as she poured out the tea. “No. Who is he?”

“I have no idea. Never heard of him.”

Then, addressing the butler, Sir Charles asked anxiously —

“Did he leave a card, James?”

“No, Sir Charles. He asked to see you—or her ladyship.”

“Or me?” Lady Thorold exclaimed. “Why, how very mysterious. What was he like?”

“A tall, powerfully-built man, m’lady.”

“A gentleman?”

“M’yes, m’lady. He came in a car.”

As James said this in his grave, solemn way, I saw Vera Thorold’s eyes twinkle with amusement. For Sir Charles’s only child possessed that gift rare in a woman—a sense of humour.

“You are sure you have the name right?” Thorold said, after a moment’s pause.

“Quite, Sir Charles. I think he was not going to give his name, as you were out. I asked him what name, and he seemed to hesitate, then he said: ‘Oh, say Mr Smithson called, Sir Charles knows me,’ and then he seemed to smile, Sir Charles.”

“He seemed to smile. I wonder why?”

His master turned to Lady Thorold.

“What do you make of it, Gwen?”

“I make nothing of it,” replied his wife. “Is it some friend of yours, Vera?”

“Mother, how ridiculous,” the girl exclaimed; “as if I should have a friend called ‘Smithson’!”

“Pardon me, Sir Charles, but—” broke in the butler.

“Well, what?”

“There is a portrait of him in the morning-room.”

“A portrait?” gasped his master. “A portrait of Smithson! Then why the deuce didn’t you say so before! Which is it? I should really like to know.”

“There are so many portraits in the morning-room,” Lady Thorold interrupted, “we had better go in, and James will show us which it is. He may have mistaken the name, after all.”

We all got up from tea in the hall, made our way to the drawing-room, and thence into the morning-room, which opened out of it. There was plenty of daylight still. James came in after us, and went straight up to a framed panel portrait which stood with others on a small table in a remote corner. It showed a tall handsome, clean-shaved man of three or four and thirty, of fine physique, seated astride a chair, his arms folded across the back of the chair as he faced the camera.

“This is the one, Sir Charles,” the butler said, pointing to it.

I distinctly saw Lady Thorold give a start. Sir Charles, tanned though his face was by wind and sun, turned quite

pale. Vera, who was standing by me at the moment, suddenly gripped my arm, I think unconsciously. As I glanced down at her I noticed that her eyes were set upon her mother. They had in them an expression of deep anxiety, almost of terror. Sir Charles was the first to recover his composure.

“Oh—that one,” he exclaimed slowly, with a forced laugh. “Then there is no mystery at all. His giving the name ‘Smithson’ was of course his joke. Now we know why he smiled. Thank you, James. You can go.”

I confess that I was puzzled. Indeed, I felt greatly mystified, and to some extent perturbed. I knew quite well by my host’s tone and manner and by the look in Lady Thorold’s eyes, perhaps most of all by that squeeze Vera had unconsciously given my arm, that all three had received some very unpleasant, apparently some terrible shock. But why? And what could have caused it? Who was that big man whose portrait stood framed there? What was his name? Why had he called himself “Smithson”? What was the mystery concerning him in relation to my hosts, or the mystery concerning my hosts in relation to him? My curiosity was keenly aroused.

I don’t think I am likely ever to forget that date—Wednesday, February 5, 1911, for it marks the beginning of a train of events so remarkable, I would call it amazing only I am not addicted to talking in superlatives. Yet I do assure you that I in no way exaggerate, and that the story I am about to tell is but a record of bare facts.

That February morning was quite bright and balmy, I remember it because it was the first day of the Waterloo

Cup meeting. Rather warm, indeed, for hunting, and at the meet and the coverside the scraps of conversation one overheard referred chiefly to a big ball at Oakham.

Hounds had not been thrown into Colly Weston Wood more than a quarter of an hour when a piercing “View Holloa” echoed through the wood, and a long, lean, yellow-bodied fox broke away not two hundred yards from the spot where the majority of the field sat waiting on their impatient, fidgety mounts, and with a single glance behind him at the mottled pack streaming out of the cover in full cry, crossed a ploughed field, popped through a hedge and disappeared.

A few moments later came the usual wild stampede, and in less than a minute hounds and horses were fast disappearing in the distance, the music of the flying pack growing rapidly fainter in the distance.

By a singular stroke of ill-luck—or so I thought it then—I had got left. I had set my horse at a treacherous stake-and-wattle fence, hoping thus to steal a march on the rest of the field galloping wildly for a couple of open gates. My horse had blundered, I daresay partly through my fault, and had staked himself, though only slightly. To cut a long story short, my day’s amusement was over, for, after doing what I could to staunch the bleeding, I had to lead the poor beast all the way home to Houghton Park, a distance of at least eight miles.

Naturally I expected to be home long before my host, Sir Charles Thorold, and his wife and daughter, for as I entered the Park gates, with my lame animal crawling slowly after me, it was barely three o’clock. I was a good deal surprised,

therefore to see Sir Charles and the two coming along another of the Park roads, and not a hundred yards away from me. They had entered by another gate.

“Hello, Ashton!” Thorold called out to me cheerily. “Why, where have you been, and what is amiss?”

I explained as soon as we were all together, and he sympathised. So did Miss Thorold. She was genuinely sorry I had missed the really splendid run.

“We all missed our second horses,” she added, “and our animals were so dead beat that we decided to come home, though hounds were, I believe, going to draw again.”

Her sympathy soothed me a good deal, for I think that even then I was in love with the tall, graceful, fair-haired girl who, on horseback, looked so perfectly bewitching. The exercise, the fresh air and the excitement of the morning’s sport had combined to give a colour to her cheeks and to impart a singular brightness to her eyes that together enhanced her quite exceptional loveliness.

Though I could remember her as a child, I had not seen her for eleven years until a fortnight previously, her father had invited me to Houghton Park, in Rutland. He had invited me the previous year, but on that occasion Vera had been away in Switzerland.

We had got rid of our muddy hunting kit, indulged in hot baths, and, feeling delightfully clean and comfortable and at peace with all the world, were at tea in the great hall of Houghton, a fine, many-gabled country mansion, with rows of twisted chimneys said to date back to a period of Elizabeth, when James the butler, calm and stately—I can see him still—had walked in his slow, dignified manner into

the hall, to tell Sir Charles that “a gentleman had called shortly before he returned,” a gentleman named Smithson.

We went back to the big oak-panelled hall to finish our tea, and though Sir Charles and Lady Thorold made light of the incident, and quickly changed the subject of conversation, the entire “atmosphere” seemed somehow different. Our relations appeared suddenly to have become quite strained.

Half an hour later I found Vera in the library. I had noticed that, since our return downstairs, my presence had been distasteful to her—or at least I thought so.

She was seated on a big settee, near the fire, pretending to read a newspaper, but her fingers twitched nervously, and presently I saw one hand squeeze the paper convulsively.

I tossed away my cigarette, and crossed over to her.

“Vera,” I said in a low tone, “tell me what is amiss. What has happened? why do you look so worried?”

We were alone, and the door was closed.

She looked up, and her eyes met mine. Her lips parted as if she were about to speak, then they shut tightly. Suddenly she bit her lip, and her big, expressive eyes filled with tears.

“Vera,” I said very gently, sinking down beside her, for I felt a strange affinity between us—an affinity of soul, “What is it? What’s the matter? Tell me, dear. I won’t tell a soul.”

I couldn’t help it. My arm stole round her waist and my lips touched her cold forehead. Had she sprung away from me, turned upon me with flaming eyes and boxed my ears even, I should have been less surprised than at what happened, for never before had I taken such a liberty.

Instead, she turned her pretty head, sank with a sigh upon my shoulder, and an instant later her arms encircled my neck. She was sobbing bitterly, so terribly that I feared she was about to become hysterical.

“Oh, Mr Ashton!” she burst out, “oh, if you only knew!”

“Knew what?” I whispered. “Tell me. I won’t breathe it to a single living person.”

“But that’s it,” she exclaimed as she still wept bitterly. “I don’t know—but I suspect—I fear something so terribly, and yet I don’t know what it is!”

This was an enigma I had not looked for.

“What is going to happen?” I asked, more to say something, anything, than to sit there speechless and supine.

“If only I knew I would tell you,” she answered between her sobs, “I would tell you sooner than anybody because—oh, I love you so, I love you so!”

I shall never forget how my heart seemed to spring within me at those blessed words.

“Vera! My darling!”

She was in my arms. I was kissing her passionately. Now I knew what I had not before realised—I was desperately in love with Vera Thorold, this beautiful girl with the wonderful, deep eyes and the glorious hair, who when I had last seen her, had been still a child in short frocks, though lovely then.

Footsteps were approaching. Quickly we sprang apart as the door opened.

“Her ladyship wishes you to come at once, mademoiselle,” said a voice in the shadow in what struck

me as being rather a disagreeable tone, with a slightly foreign accent. It was Judith, Lady Thorold's French maid.

Vera rose at once. For a brief instant her eyes met mine. Then she was gone.

I sat there in the big book-lined room quite alone, smoking cigarette after cigarette, wondering and wondering. Who was "Smithson?" What was this strange, unexpected mystery? Above all, what was this trouble that Vera dreaded so, or was it merely some whim of her imagination? I knew her to be of a highly-strung, super-sensitive nature.

The big grandfather-clock away in a corner hissed and wheezed for some moments, then slowly struck seven. I waited for the dressing gong to sound. Usually James, or the footman, Henry, appeared as soon as the clock had finished striking, and made an intolerable noise upon the gong. Five minutes passed, ten, fifteen. Evidently the gong had been forgotten, for Sir Charles dined punctually at the unfashionable hour of half-past seven. I rose and went upstairs to dress.

At the half-hour I came down and went towards the small drawing-room where they always assemble before dinner. To my surprise the room was in darkness.

"Something seems to be amiss to-night," I remember saying mentally as I switched on the light. The domestic service at Houghton was habitually like clockwork in its regularity.

A quarter to eight struck. Eight o'clock! I began to wonder if dinner had been put off. A quarter-past eight chimed out.

I went over to the fireplace and pressed the electric bell. Nobody came. I pressed it again. Finally I kept my finger pressed upon it.

This was ridiculous. Thoroughly annoyed, I went into the dining-room. It was in darkness. Then I made my way out to the servants' quarters. James was sitting in the pantry, in his shirt sleeves, smoking a cigar. A brandy bottle stood upon the dresser, and a syphon, also a half-empty tumbler.

"Is anything the matter, James?" I asked, with difficulty concealing the irritation I felt.

"Not as I know of," he answered in rather a rude tone. I saw at once that he had been drinking.

"At what time is dinner?"

"Dinner?"

He laughed outright.

"There ain't no dinner. Why ain't you gone too?"

"Gone? Where?"

"With Sir Charles and her ladyship and Miss Vera and Judith."

"I don't understand you. What do you mean?"

"They went an hour ago, or more."

"Went where?"

"Oh, ask me another. I don't know."

James in his cups was a very different person from sober, respectful, deferential James. And then it came back to me that, about an hour before, I had heard a car going down the avenue, and wondered whose it was.

The sound of loud, coarse laughter reached me from the kitchen.

“Well, all I says is it’s a pretty state of things,” a woman’s high, harsh voice exclaimed. I think it was the cook’s. “Cleared and gone with bags and baggage as if the devil hisself was after ’em.”

“P’r’aps ’e is,” a man’s voice, that I recognised as Henry’s, announced, and again came peals of laughter.

This was a pleasant situation, certainly. My hosts vanished. The butler drunk. The servants apparently in rebellion!

Restlessly I paced the hall. My thoughts always work quickly, and my mind was soon made up.

First I went to the telephone, rang up the *Stag’s Head Hotel* in Oakham, the nearest town—it was eight miles off—and asked the proprietor, whom I knew personally, to send me out a car as quickly as possible, also to reserve a room for me for the night. Then I went into the morning-room, tucked the big panel photograph, in its frame, under my arm, took it up to my room, and deposited it in the bottom of my valise. As I finished packing my clothes and other belongings I heard the car hooting as it came quickly up the long beech avenue leading from the lodge-gates.

My valise was not heavy, and I am pretty strong. Also I am not proud. I lifted it on to my bed, crouched down, hoisted the valise on to my back, as the railway porters do, carried it downstairs, and let the driver have it. He was a man I knew, and I noticed that he was grinning.

“Taking physical exercise, sir?” he asked lightly.

“Yes,” I answered, “it’s better sport than foxhunting.”

He laughed outright, then helped me into my overcoat. A minute later we were on the road to Oakham.

And all the while the sad face of the girl for whom I had that evening declared my love—as I had last seen it, with her eyes set on mine as though in mute appeal—kept rising before me like a vision.

Chapter Two.

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Contains Certain Revelations.

Until lunch-time next day I remained in Oakham, not knowing what to do, uncertain what steps to take.

I am a bachelor with a comfortable income, and, I am ashamed to say, an idler. Work never did really appeal to me. I try to compensate for not working by paying my taxes regularly and being as charitable as I can to people I come across and like, and whom the world seems to treat unjustly.

My father, Richard Ashton, was Colonel in the Blues. I was his only child, for my mother died in bringing me into the world to live at ease and waste my time. When my father died I found myself heir to a small property in Rutland, which I promptly let, and One Hundred and Eighty Thousand pounds safely invested—mostly in Consols. Sport in general, especially hunting and shooting, also reading, constitute my favourite forms of recreation. Generally I live in London, where I have a flat in King Street, St. James's.

I don't remember what made me do it, but while lunching at the *Stag's Head* I decided that I would take the car out to Houghton Park again. I think I was curious to see if any fresh development had taken place there.

Nobody answered my repeated rings at the front door, so I went round to the back. The door was locked. I rang, and rang again, and knocked. But nobody came.

I walked right round the house. Every window was shut, and apparently fastened. The whole place was as still as death. Then I went to the stables. I could hear the

occasional rattle of a headstall chain, but the horses were all locked in.

Having lit a cigar and told my driver to await my return, I sauntered aimlessly up into the woods—Houghton Park is one of the most beautifully wooded estates in Rutland, with a lake seven acres in extent hidden away in a delightfully picturesque spot surrounded by pine-grown hills. Several times during the past fortnight I had rambled up into these woods accompanied by Vera, and the association brought her back into my thoughts with renewed vividness. Where was she at that moment? What was she doing? Was she happy? Had any evil befallen her? When should I hear of her again? When should I see her?

These, and many other reflections, came crowding in confusion into my brain. What could be the meaning of this extraordinary mystery, so suddenly created, so unexpected? I had known Sir Charles and Lady Thorold many years, in fact since I was a child. For years they had lived in London—in Belgravia. Then, two years previously, they had rented Houghton Park and come to live there. The “County people” of Rutland are perhaps as conservative as any in England, and, knowing little about Sir Charles and Lady Thorold, who had received their title through political influence before settling in that county, they had not made haste to call.

As soon, however, as it had become known that the new arrivals were extremely rich, also that Sir Charles meant to entertain largely, and was going to hunt, and that the Houghton covers were to be well preserved, the barriers of exclusiveness upon which the old families so pride themselves, had been quickly swept away.

Somewhat out of breath after my slow climb up through the woods, I rested at the top of the hill, from which a glorious view could be obtained of the picturesque landscape of early spring, that unfolded itself as far as sight could reach, a perfect panorama of our beautiful English scenery that Americans so much admire, probably because it affords so striking a contrast to their never-ending prairies and gigantic mountains. Upon the opposite side of the hill on which I stood, deep down in a ravine thick with brambles and undergrowth, the face of the placid lake glistened like a mirror between the budding trees, sparkling here and there with a blinding brightness where the sun shone straight upon it.

A pheasant springing into the air within a yard of me made me jump, and brought my wandering thoughts quickly back to earth. Why had I rambled up here? I could not say. I had walked and climbed in a kind of dream, so deeply was my mind engrossed with thoughts of what had happened and with conjectures as to the future. And now, unconsciously, my attention gradually became centred upon the lake, or rather upon a curious-looking, dark object among the weeds upon its surface, within a stone’s throw of the bank.

I glanced at my watch. It was barely three o’clock. I had nothing at all to do, so decided to make my way down through the undergrowth and find out what this strange object might be.

Yes, I had not been mistaken. The first impression I had formed had been the right one, though I had tried to persuade myself it could not be. I was standing on the bank

now, not ten yards from the object, and I could see distinctly what it was. A human body, fully clothed, lay there motionless—a man's body, face downward, the head almost submerged.

My first thought was to plunge in and swim out to it and try to rescue the drowning man. But an instant's reflection caused me to refrain. The man, whoever he was, must be dead. He had been there a long time, or the head would not have sunk, nor, indeed, would the body have floated.

I made my way as quickly as I could along the footpath on the bank until I reached the boathouse, a hundred yards away. It was locked. With a big stone I shattered the padlock, and in a minute I was rowing towards the body.

With some difficulty I succeeded in hitching the painter round the feet. Having at last done so, I rowed back to the bank, towing the drowned man.

And there I turned the body over. It must have been in the water many hours, probably all night, I saw at once. And directly I saw the face I recognised it, drawn and disfigured though it was.

The drowned man was Thorold's butler, James.

What had happened? Had he fallen into the lake while under the influence of drink? Had he committed suicide? Or had he—

Somehow this last reflection startled me. Was it possible there had been foul play?

I had to leave the body there, for I found it impossible to lift it on to the bank without help.

"The great house," as the tenantry called it, was still locked when I got back there. Silence still reigned

everywhere. The driver of my taxi was fast asleep on his seat.

When I prodded him with my stick he sat up with a start, and apologised.

“Get back to Oakham as quickly as you can,” I said to him as I stepped into the car and slammed the door.

He turned his starting handle without result. He lifted the bonnet, and for a long time examined the machinery. Then, removing his coat, he wormed himself underneath the car, lying flat upon his back.

When at last he emerged he was red in the face and perspiring freely.

“Oh, by the way, sir,” he said suddenly, picking up his coat and thrusting his hand into one of its pockets, “I think you dropped this.”

As he stopped speaking he pulled his hand out and held out to me a little silver flask about four inches square.

I took it, and examined it.

“This isn’t mine,” I said. “Where did you find it?”

“Just there, sir,” and he pointed to the ground beside the car.

When I looked at the flask again, I noticed that the tiny shield in the middle was engraved. The engraving was a cipher, which, on scrutinising closely, I made out to be the letters “D.P.” intertwined.

I unscrewed the stopper and smelt the contents. The smell, though peculiar, was not wholly unfamiliar. Still, for the moment I could not classify it.

“Didn’t you drop it, sir?”

“No.”

“Then perhaps I had better take it,” and he held out his hand.

“No, I’ll keep it—you needn’t be anxious,” I said. “I have been staying here, and probably it belongs to somebody in the house, or to somebody who has called.”

I fumbled in my pocket and produced two half-crowns, which at once allayed any conscientious squeamishness afflicting the driver at the thought of handing over his treasure-trove to a stranger.

But where was Vera? Where, indeed, were the Thorolds?

The chauffeur continued to overhaul his engine and its complicated mechanism. While he was thus engaged I poured a little of the fluid out of the flask, which was quite full. The colour was a dark, transparent brown, almost the shade of old brandy. Somehow I could not help thinking that this flask might—

And yet, why should it prove a clue? What reason was there to suppose it had been dropped by the strange visitor on the previous day, the mysterious Smithson?

“Hullo, sir, this is curious!”

My driver was bending over the machinery he had been examining so closely. His hands, which had previously been in the gear-box resembled a nigger’s, only they looked more slimy.

“What is it?” I asked, approaching him.

“The plugs have been tampered with. No wonder she wouldn’t start. Look.”

He was holding out a damaged sparking-plug.

I own a car and, being well acquainted with its intricacies, saw at once that what he said was true.

Somebody—presumably while he was wandering about the lawns and back premises—must have lifted the bonnet and injured the plugs. There was no other solution. The car could not have travelled out from Oakham, or travelled at all, had that damage been done before.

We looked at each other, equally puzzled.

“You ain’t been playing me a trick, sir?” he said suddenly, an expression of mistrust coming into his eyes.

“Oh, don’t be a fool!” I answered irritably.

He turned sulky.

“Some one ’as, anyway,” he grunted. “And it’s just a chance I’ve some spare plugs with me.”

He produced his tool-box, rummaged among its contents with his filthy hands, discovered what he wanted, and adjusted them. Then he shut down the bonnet with a vicious bang and set his engine going.

He was about to step on to his seat, when simultaneously a sharp report a good way off and the “zip” of a bullet close to us made us spring away in alarm.

Together, without uttering a word, we gazed up towards the wood on the hill, where the sound of the report had come from.

Another shot rang out. This time the bullet shattered the car headlight.

“Ah! God!” the driver gasped. “Help! I—I—”

Poor fellow. Those were his last words. Almost as he uttered them there came a third report, and the driver, shot through the head, collapsed into a heap beside the car.

And then, what I saw as I turned sharply, sent a shiver through me.

I held my breath. What further mystery was there?

Surely some great evil had fallen upon the house of the Thorolds.

Chapter Three.

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The Name of “Smithson.”

A man was kneeling, facing me, on the outskirts of the wood on the hill, not a hundred yards away. His face was in shadow, and partly hidden by a slouch hat, so that I could hardly see it. The rifle he held was levelled at me—he was taking steady aim—his left arm extended far up the barrel, so that his hand came near the muzzle—the style adopted by all first-class shots, as it ensures deadly accuracy.

I am bound to confess that I completely lost my nerve. I sprang to one side almost as he fired. I had just enough presence of mind left to pick up the driver in my arms—even at the risk of my life I couldn’t leave him there—lift him into the car, and slam the door. Then I jumped on to the driving-seat, put in the clutch—in a perfect frenzy of fear lest I myself should be shot at the next instant—and the car flew down the avenue.

Twice I heard reports, and with the second one came the sound of a whistling bullet. But it went wide of the mark.

The lodge came quickly into view. It was well out of sight of the wood on the hill where the shots had been fired. I uttered an exclamation as I saw that the big white gate was shut. It was hardly ever shut.

Slowing down, I brought the car to a standstill within a few yards of the lodge, jumped out, and ran forward to open the gate.

It was fastened with a heavy chain, and the chain was securely padlocked.