

Murder by Proxy

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At two o'clock precisely on that sweltering 12th of August, Eric Neville, young, handsome, *débonnaire*, sauntered through the glass door down the wrought-iron staircase into the beautiful, old-fashioned garden of Berkly Manor, radiant in white flannel, with a broad-brimmed Panama hat perched lightly on his glossy black curls, for he had just come from lazing in his canoe along the shadiest stretches of the river, with a book for company.

The back of the Manor House was the south wall of the garden, which stretched away for nearly a mile, gay with blooming flowers and ripening fruit. The air, heavy with perfume, stole softly through all the windows, now standing wide open in the sunshine, as though the great house gasped for breath.

When Eric's trim, tan boot left the last step of the iron staircase it reached the broad gravelled walk of the garden. Fifty yards off the head gardener was tending his peaches, the smoke from his pipe hanging like a faint blue haze in the still air that seemed to quiver with the heat. Eric, as he reached him, held out a petitionary hand, too lazy to speak.

Without a word the gardener stretched for a huge peach that was striving to hide its red face from the sun under narrow ribbed leaves, plucked it as though he loved it, and put it softly in the young man's hand.

Eric stripped off the velvet coat, rose-coloured, green, and amber, till it hung round the fruit in tatters, and made his sharp, white teeth meet in the juicy flesh of the ripe peach.

BANG!

The sudden shock of sound close to their ears wrenched the nerves of the two men; one dropped his peach, and the other his pipe. Both stared about them in utter amazement.

'Look there, sir,' whispered the gardener, pointing to a little cloud of smoke oozing lazily through a window almost directly over their

head, while the pungent spice of gunpowder made itself felt in the hot air.

'My uncle's room,' gasped Eric. 'I left him only a moment ago fast asleep on the sofa.'

He turned as he spoke, and ran like a deer along the garden walk, up the iron steps, and back through the glass door into the house, the old gardener following as swiftly as his rheumatism would allow.

Eric crossed the sitting-room on which the glass door opened, went up the broad, carpeted staircase four steps at a time, turned sharply to the right down a broad corridor, and burst straight through the open door of his uncle's study.

Fast as he had come, there was another before him. A tall, strong figure, dressed in light tweed, was bending over the sofa where, a few minutes before, Eric had seen his uncle asleep.

Eric recognized the broad back and brown hair at once.

'John,' he cried—'John, what is it?'

His cousin turned to him a handsome, manly face, ghastly pale now even to the lips.

'Eric, my boy,' he answered falteringly, 'this is too awful. Uncle has been murdered—shot stone dead.'

'No, no; it cannot be. It's not five minutes since I saw him quietly sleeping,' Eric began. Then his eyes fell on the still figure on the sofa, and he broke off abruptly.

Squire Neville lay with his face to the wall, only the outline of his strong, hard features visible. The charge of shot had entered at the base of the skull, the grey hair was all dabbled with blood, and the heavy, warm drops still fell slowly on to the carpet.

'But who can have——' Eric gasped out, almost speechless with horror.

'It must have been his own gun,' his cousin answered. 'It was lying there on the table, to the right, barrel still smoking, when I came in.'

'It wasn't suicide—was it?' asked Eric, in a frightened whisper.

'Quite impossible, I should say. You see where he is hit.'

'But it was so sudden. I ran the moment I heard the shot, and you were before me. Did you see any one?'

'Not a soul. The room was empty.'

'But how could the murderer escape?'

'Perhaps he leapt through the window. It was open when I came in.'

'He couldn't do that, Master John.' It was the voice of the gardener at the door. 'Me and Master Eric was right under the window when the shot came.'

'Then how in the devil's name did he disappear, Simpson?'

'It's not for me to say, sir.'

John Neville searched the room with eager eyes. There was no cover in it for a cat. A bare, plain room, panelled with brown oak, on which hung some guns and fishing-rods—old-fashioned for the most part, but of the finest workmanship and material. A small bookcase in the corner was the room's sole claim to be called 'a study'. The huge leather-covered sofa on which the corpse lay, a massive round table in the centre of the room, and a few heavy chairs completed the furniture. The dust lay thick on everything, the fierce sunshine streamed in a broad band across the room. The air was stifling with heat and the acrid smoke of gunpowder.

John Neville noticed how pale his young cousin was. He laid his hand on his shoulder with the protecting kindness of an elder brother.

'Come, Eric,' he said softly, 'we can do no good here.'

'We had best look round first, hadn't we, for some clue?' asked Eric, and he stretched his hand towards the gun; but John stopped him.

'No, no,' he cried hastily, 'we must leave things just as we find them. I'll send a man to the village for Wardle and telegraph to London for a detective.'

He drew his young cousin gently from the room, locked the door on the outside, and put the key in his pocket.

'Who shall I wire to?' John Neville called from his desk with pencil poised over the paper, to his cousin, who sat at the library table with his head buried in his hands. 'It will need a sharp man—one who can give his whole time to it.'

'I don't know any one. Yes, I do. That fellow with the queer name that found the Duke of Southern's opal—Beck. That's it. Thornton Crescent, WC, will find him.'

John Neville filled in the name and address to the telegram he had already written—

Come at once. Case of murder. Expense no object. John Neville, Berkly Manor, Dorset.

Little did Eric guess that the filling in of that name was to him a matter of life or death.

John Neville had picked up a timetable and rustled through the leaves. 'Hard lines, Eric,' he said; 'do his best, he cannot get here before midnight. But here's Wardle already, anyhow; that's quick work.'

A shrewd, silent man was Wardle, the local constable, who now came briskly up the broad avenue; strong and active too, though well over fifty years of age.

John Neville met him at the door with the news. But the groom had already told of the murder.

'You did the right thing to lock the door, sir,' said Wardle, as they passed into the library where Eric still sat apparently unconscious of their presence, 'and you wired for a right good man. I've worked with this here Mr Beck before now. A pleasant spoken man and a lucky one. "No hurry, Mr Wardle," he says to me, "and no fuss. Stir nothing. The things about the corpse have always a story of their own if they are let tell it, and I always like to have the first quiet little chat with them myself."'

So the constable held his tongue and kept his hands quiet and used his eyes and ears, while the great house buzzed with gossip. There was a whisper here and a whisper there, and the whispers patched themselves into a story. By slow degrees dark suspicion settled down and closed like a cloud round John Neville.

Its influence seemed to pass in some strange fashion through the closed doors of the library. John began pacing the room restlessly from end to end.

After a little while the big room was not big enough to hold his impatience. He wandered out aimlessly, as it seemed, from one room to another; now down the iron steps to gaze vacantly at the window of his uncle's room, now past the locked door in the broad corridor.

With an elaborate pretence of carelessness Wardle kept him in sight through all his wanderings, but John Neville seemed too self-absorbed to notice it.

Presently he returned to the library. Eric was there, still sitting with his back to the door, only the top of his head showing over the high chair. He seemed absorbed in thought or sleep, he sat so still.

But he started up with a quick cry, showing a white, frightened face, when John touched him lightly on the arm.

'Come for a walk in the grounds, Eric?' he said. 'This waiting and watching and doing nothing is killing work; I cannot stand it much longer.'

'I'd rather not, if you don't mind,' Eric answered wearily; 'I feel completely knocked over.'

'A mouthful of fresh air would do you good, my poor boy; you do look done up.'

Eric shook his head.

'Well, I'm off,' John said.

'If you leave me the key, I will give it to the detective, if he comes.'

'Oh, he cannot be here before midnight, and I'll be back in an hour.'

As John Neville walked rapidly down the avenue without looking back, Wardle stepped quietly after, keeping him well in view.

Presently Neville turned abruptly in amongst the woods, the constable still following cautiously. The trees stood tall and well apart, and the slanting sunshine made lanes of vivid green through the shade. As Wardle crossed between Neville and the sun his shadow fell long and black on the bright green.

John Neville saw the shadow move in front of him and turned sharp round and faced his pursuer.

The constable stood stock still and stared.

'Well, Wardle, what is it? Don't stand there like a fool fingering your baton! Speak out, man—what do you want of me?'

'You see how it is, Master John,' the constable stammered out, 'I don't believe it myself. I've known you twenty-one years—since you were born, I may say—and I don't believe it, not a blessed word of it. But duty is duty, and I must go through with it; and facts is facts, and you and he had words last night, and Master Eric found you first in the room when——'

John Neville listened, bewildered at first. Then suddenly, as it seemed to dawn on him for the first time that he *could* be suspected of this murder, he kindled a sudden hot blaze of anger.

He turned fiercely on the constable. Broad-chested, strong limbed, he towered over him, terrible in his wrath; his hands clenched, his muscles quivered, his strong white teeth shut tight as a rat-trap, and a reddish light shining at the back of his brown eyes.

'How dare you! how dare you!' he hissed out between his teeth, his passion choking him.

He looked dangerous, that roused young giant, but Wardle met his angry eyes without flinching.

'Where's the use, Master John?' he said soothingly. 'It's main hard on you, I know. But the fault isn't mine, and you won't help yourself by taking it that way.'

The gust of passion appeared to sweep by as suddenly as it arose. The handsome face cleared and there was no trace of anger in the frank voice that answered. 'You are right, Wardle, quite right. What is to be done next? Am I to consider myself under arrest?'

'Better not, sir. You've got things to do a prisoner couldn't do handy, and I don't want to stand in the way of your doing them. If you give me your word it will be enough.'

'My word for what?'

'That you'll be here when wanted.'

'Why, man, you don't think I'd be fool enough—innocent or guilty—to run away. My God! run away from a charge of murder!'

'Don't take on like that, sir. There's a man coming from London that will set things straight, you'll see. Have I your word?'

'You have my word.'

'Perhaps you'd better be getting back to the house, sir. There's a deal of talking going on amongst the servants. I'll keep out of the way, and no one will be the wiser for anything that has passed between us.'

Half-way up the avenue a fast-driven dog-cart overtook John Neville, and pulled up so sharply that the horse's hoofs sent the coarse gravel flying. A stout, thick-set man, who up to that had been in close chat with the driver, leapt out more lightly than could have been expected from his figure.

'Mr John Neville, I presume? My name is Beck—Mr Paul Beck.'

'Mr Beck! Why, I thought you couldn't have got here before midnight.'

'Special train,' Mr Beck answered pleasantly. 'Your wire said "Expense no object". Well, time is an object, and comfort is an object too, more or less, in all these cases; so I took a special train, and here I am. With your permission, we will send the trap on and walk to the house together. This seems a bad business, Mr Neville. Shot dead, the driver tells me. Any one suspected?'

'I'm suspected.' The answer broke from John Neville's lips almost fiercely.

Mr Beck looked at him for a minute with placid curiosity, without a touch of surprise in it.

‘How do you know that?’

‘Wardle, the local constable, has just told me so to my face. It was only by way of a special favour he refrained from arresting me then and there.’

Mr Beck walked on beside John Neville ten or fifteen paces before he spoke again.

‘Do you mind,’ he said, in a very insinuating voice, ‘telling me exactly why you are suspected?’

‘Not in the very least.’

‘Mind this,’ the detective went on quickly, ‘I give you no caution and make you no pledge. It’s my business to find out the truth. If you think the truth will help you, then you ought to help me. This is very irregular, of course, but I don’t mind that. When a man is charged with a crime there is, you see, Mr Neville, always one witness who knows whether he is guilty or not. There is very often only that one. The first thing the British law does by way of discovering the truth is to close the mouth of the only witness that knows it. Well, that’s not my way. I like to give an innocent man a chance to tell his own story, and I’ve no scruple in trapping a guilty man if I can.’

He looked John Neville straight in the eyes as he spoke.

The look was steadily returned. ‘I think I understand. What do you want to know? Where shall I begin?’

‘At the beginning. What did you quarrel with your uncle about yesterday?’

John Neville hesitated for a moment, and Mr Beck took a mental note of his hesitation.

‘I didn’t quarrel with him. He quarrelled with me. It was this way: There was a bitter feud between my uncle and his neighbour, Colonel Peyton. The estates adjoin, and the quarrel was about some shooting. My uncle was very violent—he used to call Colonel Peyton “a common poacher”. Well, I took no hand in the row. I was rather shy when I met the Colonel for the first time after it, for I knew my uncle had the wrong end of the stick. But the Colonel spoke to me in the kindest way. “No reason why you and I should cease to be friends, John,” he said. “This is a foolish business. I would give the best covert on my estate to be out of it. Men cannot fight duels in these days, and gentlemen cannot scold like fishwives. But I don’t expect people will call me a coward because I hate a row.”’

“Not likely,” I said.

‘The Colonel, you must know, had distinguished himself in a

dozen engagements, and has the Victoria Cross locked up in a drawer of his desk. Lucy once showed it to me. Lucy is his only daughter and he is devoted to her. Well, after that, of course, the Colonel and I kept on good terms, for I liked him, and I liked going there and all that. But our friendship angered my uncle. I had been going to the Grange pretty often of late, and my uncle heard of it. He spoke to me in a very rough fashion of Colonel Peyton and his daughter at dinner last night, and I stood up for them.

“By what right, you insolent puppy,” he shouted, “do you take this upstart’s part against me?”

“The Peytons are as good a family as our own, sir,” I said—that was true—“and as for right, Miss Lucy Peyton has done me the honour of promising to be my wife.”

‘At that he exploded in a very tempest of rage. I cannot repeat his words about the Colonel and his daughter. Even now, though he lies dead yonder, I can hardly forgive them. He swore he would never see or speak to me again if I disgraced myself of such a marriage. “I cannot break the entail,” he growled, “worse luck. But I can make you a beggar while I live, and I shall live forty years to spite you. The poacher can have you a bargain for all I care. Go, sell yourself as dearly as you can, and live on your wife’s fortune as soon as you please.’

‘Then I lost my temper, and gave him a bit of my mind.’

‘Try and remember what you said; it’s important.’

‘I told him that I cast his contempt back in his face; that I loved Lucy Peyton, and that I would live for her, and die for her, if need be.’

‘Did you say “it was a comfort he could not live for ever”? You see the story of your quarrel has travelled far and near. The driver told me of it. Try and remember—did you say that?’

‘I think I did. I’m sure I did now, but I was so furious I hardly knew what I said. I certainly never meant——’

‘Who was in the room when you quarrelled?’

‘Only Cousin Eric and the butler.’

‘The butler, I suppose, spread the story?’

‘I suppose so. I’m sure Cousin Eric never did. He was as much pained at the scene as myself. He tried to interfere at the time, but his interference only made my uncle more furious.’

‘What was your allowance from your uncle?’

'A thousand a year.'

'He had power to cut it off, I suppose?'

'Certainly.'

'But he had no power over the estate. You were heir-apparent under the entail, and at the present moment you are owner of Berkly Manor?'

'That is so; but up to the moment you spoke I assure you I never even remembered——'

'Who comes next to you in the entail?'

'My first cousin, Eric. He is four years younger than I am.'

'After him?'

'A distant cousin. I scarcely know him at all; but he has a bad reputation, and I know my uncle and he hated each other cordially.'

'How did your uncle and your cousin Eric hit it off?'

'Not too well. He hated Eric's father—his own youngest brother—and he was sometimes rough on Eric. He used to abuse the dead father in the son's presence, calling him cruel and treacherous, and all that. Poor Eric had often a hard time of it. Uncle was liberal to him so far as money went—as liberal as he was to me—had him to live at the Manor and denied him nothing. But now and again he would sting the poor lad by a passionate curse or a bitter sneer. In spite of all, Eric seemed fond of him.'

'To come now to the murder; you saw your uncle no more that night, I suppose?'

'I never saw him alive again.'

'Do you know what he did next day?'

'Only by hearsay.'

'Hearsay evidence is often first-class evidence, though the law doesn't think so. What did you hear?'

'My uncle was mad about shooting. Did I tell you his quarrel with Colonel Peyton was about the shooting? He had a grouse moor rented about twelve miles from here, and he never missed the first day. He was off at cock-shout with the head gamekeeper, Lennox. I was to have gone with him, but I didn't, of course. Contrary to his custom he came back about noon and went straight to his study. I was writing in my own room and heard his heavy step go past the door. Later on Eric found him asleep on the great leather couch in his study. Five minutes after Eric left I heard the shot and rushed into his room.'

'Did you examine the room after you found the body?'

'No. Eric wanted to, but I thought it better not. I simply locked the door and put the key in my pocket till you came.'

'Could it have been suicide?'

'Impossible, I should say. He was shot through the back of the head.'

'Had your uncle any enemies that you know of?'

'The poachers hated him. He was relentless with them. A fellow once shot at him, and my uncle shot back and shattered the man's leg. He had him sent to hospital first and cured, and then prosecuted him straight away, and got him two years.'

'Then you think a poacher murdered him?' Mr Beck said blandly.

'I don't well see how he could. I was in my own room on the same corridor. The only way to or from my uncle's room was past my door. I rushed out the instant I heard the shot, and saw no one.'

'Perhaps the murderer leapt through the window?'

'Eric tells me that he and the gardener were in the garden almost under the window at the time.'

'What's your theory, then, Mr Neville?'

'I haven't got a theory.'

'You parted with your uncle in anger last night?'

'That's so.'

'Next day your uncle is shot, and you are found—I won't say caught—in his room the instant afterwards.'

John Neville flushed crimson; but he held himself in and nodded without speaking.

The two walked on together in silence.

They were not a hundred yards from the great mansion—John Neville's house—standing high above the embowering trees in the glow of the twilight, when the detective spoke again.

'I'm bound to say, Mr Neville, that things look very black against you, as they stand. I think that constable Wardle ought to have arrested you.'

'It's not too late yet,' John Neville answered shortly, 'I see him there at the corner of the house and I'll tell him you said so.'

He turned on his heel, when Mr Beck called quickly after him: 'What about that key?'

John Neville handed it to him without a word. The detective took it

as silently and walked on to the entrance and up the great stone steps alone, whistling softly.

Eric welcomed him at the door, for the driver had told of his coming.

'You have had no dinner, Mr Beck?' he asked courteously.

'Business first; pleasure afterwards. I had a snack in the train. Can I see the gamekeeper, Lennox, for five minutes alone?'

'Certainly. I'll send him to you in a moment here in the library.'

Lennox, the gamekeeper, a long-limbed, high-shouldered, elderly man, shambled shyly into the room, consumed by nervousness in the presence of a London detective.

'Sit down, Lennox—sit down,' said Mr Beck kindly. The very sound of his voice, homely and good-natured, put the man at his ease. 'Now, tell me, why did you come home so soon from the grouse this morning?'

'Well, you see, sir, it was this ways. We were two hours hout when the Squire, 'e says to me, "Lennox," 'e says, "I'm sick of this fooling. I'm going 'ome."''

'No sport?'

'Birds wor as thick as blackberries, sir, and lay like larks.'

'No sportsman, then?'

'Is it the Squire, sir?' cried Lennox, quite forgetting his shyness in his excitement at this slur on the Squire. 'There wasn't a better sportsman in the county—no, nor as good. Real, old-fashioned style, 'e was. "Hang your barnyard shooting," 'e'd say when they'd ask him to go kill tame pheasants. 'E put up 'is own birds with 'is own dogs, 'e did. 'E'd as soon go shooting without a gun very near as without a dog any day. Aye and 'e stuck to 'is old "Manton" muzzle-loader to the last. "'Old it steady, Lennox," 'ed say to me oftentimes, "and point it straight. It will hit harder and further than any of their telescopes, and it won't get marked with rust if you don't clean it every second shot."

"'Easy to load, Squire," the young men would say, cracking up their hammerless breech-loaders.

"'Aye," he'd answer them back, "and spoil your dog's work. What's the good of a dog learning to 'down shot', if you can drop in your cartridges as quick as a cock can pick corn."

'A dead shot the Squire was, too, and no mistake, sir, if he wasn't flurried. Many a time I've seen him wipe the eyes of gents who

thought no end of themselves with that same old muzzle-loader that shot himself in the long run. Many a time I seen——'

'Why did he turn his back on good sport yesterday?' asked Mr Beck, cutting short his reminiscences.

'Well, you see, it was scorching hot for one thing, but that wasn't it, for the infernal fire would not stop the Squire if he was on for sport. But he was in a blazing temper all the morning, and temper tells more than most anything on a man's shooting. When Flora sprung a pack—she's a young dog, and the fault wasn't hers either—for she came down the wind on them—but the Squire had the gun to his shoulder to shoot her. Five minutes after she found another pack and set like a stone. They got up as big as haycocks and as lazy as crows, and he missed right and left—never touched a feather—a thing I haven't seen him do since I was a boy.

"'It's myself I should shoot, not the dog,'" he growled and he flung me the gun to load. When I'd got the caps on and had shaken the powder into the nipples, he ripped out an oath that 'e'd have no more of it. 'E walked right across country to where the trap was. The birds got up under his feet, but divil a shot he'd fire, but drove straight 'ome.

'When we got to the 'ouse I wanted to take the gun and fire it off, or draw the charges. But 'e told me to go to——, and carried it up loaded as it was to his study, where no one goes unless they're sent for special. It was better than an hour afterwards I heard the report of the "Manton"; I'd know it in a thousand. I ran for the study as fast as——'

Eric Neville broke suddenly into the room, flushed and excited.

'Mr Beck,' he cried, 'a monstrous thing has happened. Wardle, the local constable, you know, has arrested my cousin on a charge of wilful murder of my uncle.'

Mr Beck, with his eyes intent on the excited face, waved his big hand soothingly.

'Easy,' he said, 'take it easy, Mr Neville. It's hurtful to your feelings, no doubt; but it cannot be helped. The constable has done no more than his duty. The evidence is very strong, as you know, and in such cases it's best for all parties to proceed regularly.'

'You can go,' he went on, speaking to Lennox, who stood dumfounded at the news of John Neville's arrest, staring with eyes and mouth wide open.

Then turning again very quietly to Eric: 'Now, Mr Neville, I would like to see the room where the corpse is.'

The perfect placidity of his manner had its effect upon the boy, for he was little more than a boy, calming his excitement as oil smooths troubled water.

'My cousin has the key,' he said; 'I will get it.'

'There is no need,' Mr Beck called after him, for he was half-way out of the room on his errand: 'I've got the key if you will be good enough to show me the room.'

Mastering his surprise, Eric showed him upstairs, and along the corridor to the locked door. Half unconsciously, as it seemed, he was following the detective into the room, when Mr Beck stopped him.

'I know you will kindly humour me, Mr Neville,' he said, 'but I find that I can look closer and think clearer when I'm by myself. I'm not exactly shy you know, but it's a habit I've got.'

He closed the door softly as he spoke, and locked it on the inside, leaving the key in the lock.

The mask of placidity fell from him the moment he found himself alone. His lips tightened, and his eyes sparkled, and his muscles seemed to grow rigid with excitement, like a sporting dog's when he is close upon the game.

One glance at the corpse showed him that it was not suicide. In this, at least, John Neville had spoken the truth.

The back of the head had literally been blown in by the charge of heavy shot at close quarters. The grey hair was clammy and matted, with little white angles of bone protruding. The dropping of the blood had made a black pool on the carpet, and the close air of the room was foetid with the smell of it.

The detective walked to the table where the gun, a handsome, old-fashioned muzzle-loader, lay, the muzzle still pointed at the corpse. But his attention was diverted by a water-bottle, a great globe of clear glass quite full, and perched on a book a little distance from the gun, and between it and the window. He took it from the table and tested the water with the tip of his tongue. It had a curious, insipid, parboiled taste, but he detected no foreign flavour in it. Though the room was full of dust there was almost none on the cover of the book where the water-bottle stood, and Mr Beck noticed a gap in the third row of the bookcase where the book had been taken.

After a quick glance round the room Mr Beck walked to the

window. On a small table there he found a clear circle in the thick dust. He fitted the round bottom of the water-bottle to this circle and it covered it exactly. While he stood by the window he caught sight of some small scraps of paper crumbled up and thrown into a corner. Picking them up and smoothing them out he found they were curiously drilled with little burnt holes. Having examined the holes minutely with his magnifying glass, he slipped these scraps folded on each other into his waistcoat pocket.

From the window he went back to the gun. This time he examined it with the minutest care. The right barrel he found had been recently discharged, the left was still loaded. Then he made a startling discovery. *Both barrels were on half cock.* The little bright copper cap twinkled on the nipple of the left barrel, from the right nipple the cap was gone.

How had the murderer fired the right barrel without a cap? How and why did he find time in the midst of his deadly work to put the cock back to safety?

Had Mr Beck solved this problem? The grim smile deepened on his lips as he looked, and there was an ugly light in his eyes that boded ill for the unknown assassin. Finally he carried the gun to the window and examined it carefully through a magnifying glass. There was a thin dark line, as if traced with the point of a red-hot needle, running a little way along the wood of the stock and ending in the right nipple.

Mr Beck put the gun back quietly on the table. The whole investigation had not taken ten minutes. He gave one look at the still figure on the couch, unlocked the door, locking it after him, and walked out through the corridor, the same cheerful, imperturbable Mr Beck that had walked into it ten minutes before.

He found Eric waiting for him at the head of the stairs. 'Well?' he said when he saw the detective.

'Well,' replied Mr Beck, ignoring the interrogation in his voice, 'when is the inquest to be? That's the next thing to be thought of; the sooner the better.'

'Tomorrow, if you wish. My cousin John sent a messenger to Mr Morgan, the coroner. He lives only five miles off, and he has promised to be here at twelve o'clock tomorrow. There will be no difficulty in getting a jury in the village.'

'That's right, that's all right,' said Mr Beck, rubbing his hands;

'the sooner and the quieter we get those preliminaries over the better.'

'I have just sent to engage the local solicitor on behalf of my cousin. He's not particularly bright, I'm afraid, but he's the best to be had on a short notice.'

'Very proper and thoughtful on your part—very thoughtful indeed. But solicitors cannot do much in such cases. It's the evidence we have to go by, and the evidence is only too plain, I'm afraid. Now, if you please,' he went on more briskly, dismissing the disagreeable subject, as it were, with a wave of his big hand, 'I'd be very glad of that supper you spoke about.'

Mr Beck supped very heartily on a brace of grouse—the last of the dead man's shooting—and a bottle of ripe Burgundy. He was in high good-humour, and across 'the walnuts and the wine' he told Eric some startling episodes in his career, which seemed to divert the young fellow a little from his manifest grief for his uncle and anxiety for his cousin.

Meanwhile John Neville remained shut close in his own room, with the constable at the door.

The inquest was held at half-past twelve next day in the library.

The Coroner, a large, red-faced man, with a very affable manner, had got to his work promptly.

The jury 'viewed the body' steadily, stolidly, with a kind of morose delectation in the grim spectacle.

In some unaccountable way Mr Beck constituted himself a master of the ceremonies, a kind of assessor to the court.

'You had best take the gun down,' he said to the Coroner as they were leaving the room.

'Certainly, certainly,' replied the Coroner.

'And the water-bottle,' added Mr Beck.

'There is no suspicion of poison, is there?'

'It's best not to take anything for granted,' replied Mr Beck sententiously.

'By all means if you think so,' replied the obsequious Coroner. 'Constable, take that water-bottle down with you.'

The large room was filled with people of the neighbourhood, mostly farmers from the Berkly estate and small shopkeepers from the neighbouring village.

A table had been wheeled to the top of the room for the Coroner,

with a seat at it for the ubiquitous local newspaper correspondent. A double row of chairs were set at the right hand of the table for the jury.

The jury had just returned from viewing the body when the crunch of wheels and hoofs was heard on the gravel of the drive, and a two-horse phaeton pulled up sharp at the entrance.

A moment later there came into the room a handsome, soldier-like man, with a girl clinging to his arm, whom he supported with tender, protecting fondness that was very touching. The girl's face was pale, but wonderfully sweet and winsome; cheeks with the faint, pure flush of the wild rose, and eyes like a wild fawn's.

No need to tell Mr Beck that here were Colonel Peyton and his daughter. He saw the look—shy, piteous, loving—that the girl gave John Neville as she passed close to the table where he sat with his head buried in his hands; and the detective's face darkened for a moment with a stern purpose, but the next moment it resumed its customary look of good-nature and good-humour.

The gardener, the gamekeeper, and the butler were briefly examined by the Coroner, and rather clumsily cross-examined by Mr Waggles, the solicitor whom Eric had thoughtfully secured for his cousin's defence.

As the case against John Neville gradually darkened into grim certainty, the girl in the far corner of the room grew white as a lily, and would have fallen but for her father's support.

'Does Mr John Neville offer himself for examination?' said the Coroner, as he finished writing the last words of the butler's deposition describing the quarrel of the night before.

'No, sir,' said Mr Waggles. 'I appear for Mr John Neville, the accused, and we reserve our defence.'

'I really have nothing to say that hasn't been already said,' added John Neville quietly.

'Mr Neville,' said Mr Waggles pompously, 'I must ask you to leave yourself entirely in my hands.'

'Eric Neville!' called out the Coroner. 'This is the last witness, I think.'

Eric stepped in front of the table and took the Bible in his hand. He was pale, but quiet and composed, and there was an unaffected grief in the look of his dark eyes and in the tone of his soft voice that touched every heart—except one.

He told his story shortly and clearly. It was quite plain that he was most anxious to shield his cousin. But in spite of this, perhaps because of this, the evidence went horribly against John Neville.

The answers to questions criminating his cousin had to be literally dragged from him by the Coroner.

With manifest reluctance he described the quarrel at dinner the night before.

'Was your cousin very angry?' the Coroner asked.

'He would not be human if he were not angry at the language used.'

'What did he say?'

'I cannot remember all he said.'

'Did he say to your uncle: "Well, you will not live for ever"?'

No answer.

'Come, Mr Neville, remember you are sworn to tell the truth.'

In an almost inaudible whisper came the words: 'He did.'

'I'm sorry to pain you, but I must do my duty. When you heard the shot you ran straight to your uncle's room, about fifty yards, I believe?'

'About that.'

'Whom did you find there bending over the dead man?'

'My cousin. I am bound to say he appeared in the deepest grief.'

'But you saw no one else?'

'No.'

'Your cousin is, I believe, the heir to Squire Neville's property; the owner I should say now?'

'I believe so.'

'That will do; you can stand down.'

This interchange of question and answer, each one of which seemed to fit the rope tighter and tighter round John Neville's neck, was listened to with hushed eagerness by the room full of people.

There was a long, deep drawing-in of breath when it ended. The suspense seemed over, but not the excitement.

Mr Beck rose as Eric turned from the table, quite as a matter of course, to question him.

'You say you *believe* your cousin was your uncle's heir—don't you *know* it?'

Then Mr Waggles found his voice.

'Really, sir,' he broke out, addressing the Coroner, 'I must protest.'

This is grossly irregular. This person is not a professional gentleman. He represents no one. He has no *locus standi* in court at all.'

No one knew better than Mr Beck that technically he had no title to open his lips; but his look of quiet assurance, his calm assumption of unmistakable right, carried the day with the Coroner.

'Mr Beck,' he said, 'has, I understand, been brought down specially from London to take charge of this case, and I certainly shall not stop him in any question he may desire to ask.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Mr Beck, in the tone of a man whose clear right has been allowed. Then again to the witness: 'Didn't you know John Neville was next heir to Berkly Manor?'

'I know it, of course.'

'And if John Neville is hanged you will be the owner?'

Every one was startled at the frank brutality of the question so blandly asked. Mr Waggles bobbed up and down excitedly; but Eric answered, calmly as ever—

'That's very coarsely and cruelly put.'

'But it's true?'

'Yes, it's true.'

'We will pass from that. When you came into the room after the murder, did you examine the gun?'

'I stretched out my hand to take it, but my cousin stopped me. I must be allowed to add that I believe he was actuated, as he said, by a desire to keep everything in the room untouched. He locked the door and carried off the key. I was not in the room afterwards.'

'Did you look closely at the gun?'

'Not particularly.'

'Did you notice that both barrels were at half cock?'

'No.'

'Did you notice that there was no cap on the nipple of the right barrel that had just been fired?'

'Certainly not.'

'That is to say you did not notice it?'

'Yes.'

'Did you notice a little burnt line traced a short distance on the wood of the stock towards the right nipple?'

'No.'

Mr Beck put the gun into his hand.

'Look close. Do you notice it now?'

'I see it now for the first time.'

'You cannot account for it, I suppose?'

'No.'

'Sure?'

'Quite sure.'

All present followed this strange, and apparently purposeless cross-examination with breathless interest, groping vainly for its meaning.

The answers were given calmly and clearly, but those that looked closely saw that Eric's nether lip quivered, and it was only by a strong effort of will that he held his calmness.

Through the blandness of Mr Beck's voice and manner a subtle suggestion of hostility made itself felt, very trying to the nerves of the witness.

'We will pass from that,' said Mr Beck again. 'When you went into your uncle's room before the shot why did you take a book from the shelf and put it on the table?'

'I really cannot remember anything about it.'

'Why did you take the water-bottle from the window and stand it on the book?'

'I wanted a drink.'

'But there was none of the water drunk.'

'Then I suppose it was to take it out of the strong sun.'

'But you set it in the strong sun on the table?'

'Really I cannot remember those trivialities.' His self-control was breaking down at last.

'Then we will pass from that,' said Mr Beck a third time.

He took the little scraps of paper with the burnt holes through them from his waistcoat pocket, and handed them to the witness.

'Do you know anything about these?'

There was a pause of a second. Eric's lips tightened as if with a sudden spasm of pain. But the answer came clearly enough—

'Nothing whatever.'

'Do you ever amuse yourself with a burning glass?'

This seeming simple question was snapped suddenly at the witness like a pistol-shot.

'Really, really,' Mr Waggles broke out, 'this is mere trifling with the Court.'

'That question does certainly seem a little irrelevant, Mr Beck,' mildly remonstrated the Coroner.

‘Look at the witness, sir,’ retorted Mr Beck sternly. ‘He does not think it irrelevant.’

Every eye in court was turned on Eric’s face and fixed there.

All colour had fled from his cheeks and lips; his mouth had fallen open, and he stared at Mr Beck with eyes of abject terror.

Mr Beck went on remorselessly: ‘Did you ever amuse yourself with a burning glass?’

No answer.

‘Do you know that a water-bottle like this makes a capital burning glass?’

Still no answer.

‘Do you know that a burning glass has been used before now to touch off a cannon or fire a gun?’

Then a voice broke from Eric at last, as it seemed in defiance of his will; a voice unlike his own—loud, harsh, hardly articulate; such a voice might have been heard in the torture chamber in the old days when the strain on the rack grew unbearable.

‘You devilish bloodhound!’ he shouted. ‘Curse you, curse you, you’ve caught me! I confess it—I was the murderer!’ He fell on the ground in a fit.

‘And you made the sun your accomplice!’ remarked Mr Beck, placid as ever.