

CHAPTER V

LADY UNDERHILL RECEIVES A SHOCK

I

There are streets in London into which the sun seems never to penetrate. Some of these are in fashionable quarters, and it is to be supposed that their inhabitants find an address which looks well on note-paper a sufficient compensation for the gloom that goes with it. The majority, however, are in the mean neighbourhoods of the great railway termini, and appear to offer no compensation whatever. They are lean, furtive streets, grey as the January sky with a sort of arrested decay. They smell of cabbage and are much prowled over by vagrom cats. At night they are empty and dark, and a stillness broods on them, broken only by the cracked tingle of an occasional piano playing one of the easier hymns, a form of music to which the dwellers in the dingy houses are greatly addicted. By day they achieve a certain animation through the intermittent appearance of women in aprons, who shake rugs out of the front doors or, emerging from areas, go down to the public-house on the corner with jugs to fetch the supper-beer. In almost every ground-floor window there is a card announcing that furnished lodgings may be had within. You will find these streets by the score if you leave the main thoroughfares and take a short cut on your way to Euston, to Paddington, or to Waterloo.

But the dingiest and deadliest and most depressing lie round about Victoria. And Daubeny Street, Pimlico, is one of the worst of them all.

On the afternoon following the events recorded, a girl was dressing in the ground-floor room of Number Nine, Daubeny Street. A tray bearing the remains of a late breakfast stood on the rickety table beside a bowl of wax flowers. From beneath the table peered the green cover of a copy of *Variety*. A grey parrot in a cage by the window cracked seed and looked out into the room with a satirical eye. He had seen all this so many times before--Nelly Bryant arraying herself in her smartest clothes to go out and besiege agents in their offices off the Strand. It happened every day. In an hour or two she would come back as usual, say "Oh, Gee!" in a tired sort of voice, and then Bill the parrot's day proper would begin. He was a bird who liked the sound of his own voice, and he never got the chance of a really sustained conversation till Nelly returned in the evening.

"Who cares?" said Bill, and cracked another seed.

If rooms are an indication of the characters of their occupants, Nelly Bryant came well out of the test of her surroundings. Nothing can make a London furnished room much less horrible than it intends to be, but Nelly had done her best. The furniture, what there was of it, was of that lodging-house kind which resembles nothing else in the world. But a few little touches here and there, a few instinctively tasteful

alterations in the general scheme of things, had given the room almost a cosy air. Later on, with the gas lit, it would achieve something approaching homeliness. Nelly, like many another nomad, had taught herself to accomplish a good deal with poor material. On tour in America, she had sometimes made even a bedroom in a small hotel tolerably comfortable, than which there is no greater achievement. Oddly, considering her life, she had a genius for domesticity.

To-day, not for the first time, Nelly was feeling unhappy. The face that looked back at her out of the mirror at which she was arranging her most becoming hat was weary. It was only a moderately pretty face, but loneliness and underfeeding had given it a wistful expression that had charm. Unfortunately, it was not the sort of charm which made a great appeal to the stout, whisky-nourished men who sat behind paper-littered tables, smoking cigars, in the rooms marked "Private" in the offices of theatrical agents. Nelly had been out of a "shop" now for many weeks--ever since, in fact, "Follow the Girl" had finished its long run at the Regal Theatre.

"Follow the Girl," an American musical comedy, had come over from New York with an American company, of which Nelly had been a humble unit, and, after playing a year in London and some weeks in the number one towns, had returned to New York. It did not cheer Nelly up in the long evenings in Daubeny Street to reflect that, if she had wished, she could have gone home with the rest of the company. A mad impulse had seized her to try her luck in London, and here she was now, marooned.

"Who cares?" said Bill.

For a bird who enjoyed talking he was a little limited in his remarks and apt to repeat himself.

"I do, you poor fish!" said Nelly, completing her manoeuvres with the hat and turning to the cage. "It's all right for you--you have a swell time with nothing to do but sit there and eat seed--but how do you suppose I enjoy tramping around looking for work and never finding any?"

She picked up her gloves. "Oh, well!" she said. "Wish me luck!"

"Good-bye, boy!" said the parrot, clinging to the bars.

Nelly thrust a finger into the cage, and scratched his head.

"Anxious to get rid of me, aren't you? Well, so long."

"Good-bye, boy!"

"All right, I'm going. Be good!"

"Woof-woof-woof!" barked Bill the parrot, not committing himself to any promises.

For some moments after Nelly had gone he remained hunched on his perch, contemplating the infinite. Then he sauntered along to the seed-box and took some more light nourishment. He always liked to spread his meals out, to make them last longer. A drink of water to wash the food down, and he returned to the middle of the cage, where he proceeded to conduct a few intimate researches with his beak under his left wing. After which he mewed like a cat, and relapsed into silent meditation once more. He closed his eyes and pondered on his favourite problem--Why was he a parrot? This was always good for an hour or so, and it was three o'clock before he had come to his customary decision that he didn't know. Then, exhausted by brain-work and feeling a trifle hipped by the silence of the room, he looked about him for some way of jazzing existence up a little. It occurred to him that if he barked again it might help.

"Woof-woof-woof!"

Good as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. It was not real excitement. Something rather more dashing seemed to him to be indicated. He hammered for a moment or two on the floor of his cage, ate a mouthful of the newspaper there, and stood with his head on one side, chewing thoughtfully. It didn't taste as good as usual. He suspected Nelly of having changed his Daily Mail for the Daily Express or something. He swallowed the piece of paper, and was struck by the thought that a little climbing exercise might be what his soul

demanded. (You hang on by your beak and claws and work your way up to the roof. It sounds tame, but it's something to do.) He tried it. And, as he gripped the door of the cage it swung open. Bill the parrot now perceived that this was going to be one of those days. He had not had a bit of luck like this for months.

For a while he sat regarding the open door. Unless excited by outside influences, he never did anything in a hurry. Then proceeding cautiously, he passed out into the room. He had been out there before, but always chaperoned by Nelly. This was something quite different. It was an adventure. He hopped on to the window-sill. There was a ball of yellow wool there, but he had lunched and could eat nothing. He cast around in his mind for something to occupy him, and perceived suddenly that the world was larger than he had supposed. Apparently there was a lot of it outside the room. How long this had been going on he did not know, but obviously it was a thing to be investigated. The window was open at the bottom, and just outside the window were what he took to be the bars of another and larger cage. As a matter of fact they were the railings which afforded a modest protection to Number Nine. They ran the length of the house, and were much used by small boys as a means of rattling sticks. One of these stick-rattlers passed as Bill stood there looking down. The noise startled him for a moment, then he seemed to come to the conclusion that this sort of thing was to be expected if you went out into the great world and that a parrot who intended to see life must not allow himself to be deterred by trifles. He crooned a little, and finally, stepping in a stately way over the

window-sill, with his toes turned in at right angles, caught at the top of the railing with his beak, and proceeded to lower himself. Arrived at the level of the street, he stood looking out.

A dog trotted up, spied him, and came to sniff.

"Good-bye, boy!" said Bill chattily.

The dog was taken aback. Hitherto, in his limited experience, birds had been birds and men men. Here was a blend of the two. What was to be done about it? He barked tentatively, then, finding that nothing disastrous ensued, pushed his nose between two of the bars and barked again. Any one who knew Bill could have told him that he was asking for it, and he got it. Bill leaned forward and nipped his nose. The dog started back with a howl of agony. He was learning something new every minute.

"Woof-woof-woof!" said Bill sardonically.

He perceived trousered legs, four of them, and, cocking his eye upwards, saw that two men of the lower orders stood before him. They were gazing down at him in the stolid manner peculiar to the proletariat of London in the presence of the unusual. For some minutes they stood drinking him in, then one of them gave judgment.

"It's a parrot!" He removed a pipe from his mouth and pointed with the

stem. "A perishin' parrot, Erb."

"Ah!" said Erb, a man of few words.

"A parrot," proceeded the other. He was seeing clearer into the matter every moment. "That's a parrot, that is Erb. My brother Joe's wife's sister had one of 'em. Come from abroad, they do. My brother Joe's wife's sister 'ad one of 'em. Red-'aired gel she was. Married a feller down at the Docks She 'ad one of 'em. Parrots they're called."

He bent down for a closer inspection, and inserted a finger through the railings. Erb abandoned his customary taciturnity and spoke words of warning.

"Tike care 'e don't sting yer, 'Enry!"

Henry seemed wounded.

"Woddyer mean, sting me? I know all abart parrots, I do. My brother Joe's wife's sister 'ad one of 'em. They don't 'urt yer, not if you're kind to 'em. You know yer pals when you see 'em, don't yer, mate?" he went on, addressing Bill, who was contemplating the finger with one half-closed eye.

"Good-bye, boy," said the parrot, evading the point.

"Jear that?" cried Henry delightedly. "'Goo'-bye, boy! 'Uman they are!"

"'E'll 'ave a piece out of yer finger," warned Erb the suspicious.

"Wot, 'im?" Henry's voice was indignant. He seemed to think that his reputation as an expert on parrots had been challenged. "'E wouldn't 'ave no piece out of my finger."

"Bet yer a narf-pint 'e would 'ave a piece out of yer finger," persisted the sceptic.

"No blinkin' parrot's goin' to 'ave no piece of no finger of mine! My brother Joe's wife's sister's parrot never 'ad no piece out of no finger of mine!" He extended the finger further and wagged it enticingly beneath Bill's beak. "Cheerio, matey!" he said winningly. "Polly want a nut?"

Whether it was mere indolence or whether the advertised docility of that other parrot belonging to Henry's brother's wife's sister had caused him to realize that there was a certain standard of good conduct for his species one cannot say; but for a while Bill merely contemplated temptation with a detached eye.

"See!" said Henry.

"Woof-woof-woof!" said Bill.

"Wow-Wow-Wow!" yapped the dog, suddenly returning to the scene and going on with the argument at the point where he had left off.

The effect on Bill was catastrophic. Ever a high-strung bird, he lost completely the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere and the better order of parrot. His nerves were shocked, and, as always under such conditions, his impulse was to bite blindly. He bit, and Henry--one feels sorry for Henry: he was a well-meaning man--leaped back with a loud howl.

"That'll be 'arf a pint," said Erb, always the business man.

There was a lull in the rapid action. The dog, mumbling softly to himself, had moved away again and was watching affairs from the edge of the sidewalk. Erb, having won his point, was silent once more. Henry sucked his finger. Bill, having met the world squarely and shown it what was what, stood where he was, whistling nonchalantly.

Henry removed his finger from his mouth. "Lend the loan of that stick of yours, Erb," he said tensely.

Erb silently yielded up the stout stick which was his inseparable companion. Henry, a vastly different man from the genial saunterer of a moment ago, poked wildly through the railings. Bill, panic-stricken

now and wishing for nothing better than to be back in his cosy cage, shrieked loudly for help. And Freddie Rooke, running round the corner with Jill, stopped dead and turned pale.

"Good God!" said Freddie.

II

In pursuance of his overnight promise to Derek, Freddie Rooke had got in touch with Jill through the medium of the telephone immediately after breakfast, and had arranged to call at Ovingdon Square in the afternoon. Arrived there, he found Jill with a telegram in her hand. Her Uncle Christopher, who had been enjoying a breath of sea-air down at Brighton, was returning by an afternoon train, and Jill had suggested that Freddie should accompany her to Victoria, pick up Uncle Chris, and escort him home. Freddie, whose idea had been a tête-à-tête involving a brotherly lecture on impetuosity, had demurred but had given way in the end; and they had set out to walk to Victoria together. Their way had lain through Daubeny Street, and they turned the corner just as the brutal onslaught on the innocent Henry had occurred. Bill's shrieks, which were of an appalling timbre, brought them to a halt.

"What is it?" cried Jill.

"It sounds like a murder!"

"Nonsense!"

"I don't know, you know. This is the sort of street chappies are murdering people in all the time."

They caught sight of the group in front of them, and were reassured. Nobody could possibly be looking so aloof and distraught as Erb if there were a murder going on.

"It's a bird!"

"It's a jolly old parrot. See it? Just inside the railings."

A red-hot wave of rage swept over Jill. Whatever her defects--and already this story has shown her far from perfect--she had the excellent quality of loving animals and blazing into fury when she saw them ill-treated. At least three draymen were going about London with burning ears as the result of what she had said to them on discovering them abusing their patient horses. Zoologically, Bill the parrot was not an animal, but he counted as one with Jill, and she sped down Daubeny Street to his rescue--Freddie, spatted and hatted and trousered as became the man of fashion, following disconsolately, ruefully aware that he did not look his best sprinting like that. But Jill was cutting out a warm pace, and he held his hat on with one

neatly-gloved hand and did what he could to keep up.

Jill reached the scene of battle, and, stopping, eyed Henry with a baleful glare. We, who have seen Henry in his calmer moments and know him for the good fellow he was, are aware that he was more sinned against than sinning. If there is any spirit of justice in us, we are pro-Henry. In his encounter with Bill the parrot, Henry undoubtedly had right on his side. His friendly overtures, made in the best spirit of kindness, had been repulsed. He had been severely bitten. And he had lost half a pint of beer to Erb. As impartial judges we have no other course before us than to wish Henry luck and bid him go to it. But Jill, who had not seen the opening stages of the affair, thought far otherwise. She merely saw in Henry a great brute of a man poking at a defenceless bird with a stick.

She turned to Freddie, who had come up at a gallop and was wondering why the deuce this sort of thing happened to him out of a city of six millions.

"Make him stop, Freddie!"

"Oh, I say, you know, what?"

"Can't you see he's hurting the poor thing? Make him leave off!

Brute!" she added to Henry (for whom one's heart bleeds), as he jabbed once again at his adversary.

Freddie stepped reluctantly up to Henry, and tapped him on the shoulder. Freddie was one of those men who have a rooted idea that a conversation of this sort can only be begun by a tap on the shoulder.

"Look here, you know, you can't do this sort of thing, you know!" said Freddie.

Henry raised a scarlet face.

"Oo are you?" he demanded.

This attack from the rear, coming on top of his other troubles, tried his restraint sorely.

"Well--" Freddie hesitated. It seemed silly to offer the fellow one of his cards. "Well, as a matter of fact, my name's Rooke...."

"And who," pursued Henry, "arsked you to come shoving your ugly mug in 'ere?"

"Well, if you put it that way...."

"E comes messing abart," said Henry complainingly, addressing the universe, "and interfering in what don't concern 'im and mucking around and interfering and messing abart.... Why," he broke off in a

sudden burst of eloquence, "I could eat two of you for a relish wiv me tea, even if you 'ave got white spats!"

Here Erb, who had contributed nothing to the conversation, remarked "Ah!" and expectorated on the sidewalk. The point, one gathers, seemed to Erb well taken. A neat thrust, was Erb's verdict.

"Just because you've got white spats," proceeded Henry, on whose sensitive mind these adjuncts of the costume of the well-dressed man about town seemed to have made a deep and unfavourable impression, "you think you can come mucking around and messing abart and interfering and mucking around. This bird's bit me in the finger, and 'ere's the finger, if you don't believe me--and I'm going to twist 'is ruddy neck, if all the perishers with white spats in London come messing abart and mucking around, so you take them white spats of yours 'ome and give 'em to the old woman to cook for your Sunday dinner!"

And Henry, having cleansed his stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart, shoved the stick energetically once more through the railings.

Jill darted forward. Always a girl who believed that, if you want a thing well done, you must do it yourself, she had applied to Freddie for assistance merely as a matter of form. All the time she had felt that Freddie was a broken reed, and such he had proved himself.

Freddie's policy in this affair was obviously to rely on the magic of speech, and any magic his speech might have had was manifestly offset by the fact that he was wearing white spats and that Henry, apparently, belonged to some sort of league or society which had for its main object the discouragement of white spats. It was plainly no good leaving the conduct of the campaign to Freddie. Whatever was to be done must be done by herself. She seized the stick and wrenched it out of Henry's hand.

"Woof-woof-woof!" said Bill the parrot.

No dispassionate auditor could have failed to detect the nasty ring of sarcasm. It stung Henry. He was not normally a man who believed in violence to the gentler sex outside a clump on the head of his missus when the occasion seemed to demand it; but now he threw away the guiding principles of a lifetime and turned on Jill like a tiger.

"Gimme that stick!"

"Get back!"

"Here, I say, you know!" said Freddie.

Henry, now thoroughly overwrought, made a rush at Jill; and Jill, who had a straight eye, hit him accurately on the side of the head.

"Goo!" said Henry, and sat down.

And then, from behind Jill, a voice spoke.

"What's all this?"

A stout policeman had manifested himself from empty space.

"This won't do!" said the policeman.

Erb, who had been a silent spectator of the fray, burst into speech.

"She 'it 'im!"

The policeman looked at Jill. He was an officer of many years' experience in the Force, and time had dulled in him that respect for good clothes which he had brought with him from Little-Sudbury-in-the-Wold in the days of his novitiate. Jill was well dressed, but, in the stirring epoch of the Suffrage disturbances, the policeman had been kicked on the shins and even bitten by ladies of an equally elegant exterior. Hearts, the policeman knew, just as pure and fair may beat in Belgrave Square as in the lowlier air of Seven Dials, but you have to pinch them just the same when they disturb the peace. His gaze, as it fell upon Jill, red-handed as it were with the stick still in her grasp, was stern.

"Your name, please, and address, miss?" he said.

A girl in blue with a big hat had come up, and was standing staring open-mouthed at the group. At the sight of her Bill the parrot uttered a shriek of welcome. Nelly Bryant had returned, and everything would now be all right again.

"Mariner," said Jill, pale and bright-eyed. "I live at Number Twenty-two, Ovingdon Square."

"And yours, sir?"

"Mine? Oh, ah, yes. I see what you mean. Rooke, you know. F. L. Rooke. I live at the Albany and all that sort of thing."

The policeman made an entry in his note-book.

"Officer," cried Jill, "this man was trying to kill that parrot and I stopped him...."

"Can't help that, miss. You 'adn't no right to hit a man with a stick. You'll 'ave to come along."

"But, I say, you know!" Freddie was appalled. This sort of thing had happened to him before, but only on Boat-Race Night at the Empire, where it was expected of a chappie. "I mean to say!"

"And you, too, sir. You're both in it."

"But...."

"Oh, come along, Freddie," said Jill quietly. "It's perfectly absurd, but it's no use making a fuss."

"That," said the policeman cordially, "is the right spirit!"

III

Lady Underhill paused for breath. She had been talking long and vehemently. She and Derek were sitting in Freddie Rooke's apartment at the Albany, and the subject of her monologue was Jill. Derek had been expecting the attack, and had wondered why it had not come before. All through supper on the previous night, even after the discovery that Jill was supping at a near-by table with a man who was a stranger to her son, Lady Underhill had preserved a grim reticence with regard to her future daughter-in-law. But to-day she had spoken her mind with all the energy which comes of suppression. She had relieved herself with a flow of words of all the pent-up hostility that had been growing within her since that first meeting in this same room. She had talked rapidly, for she was talking against time. The Town Council of the principal city in Derek's constituency in the north of England had decided that to-morrow morning should witness the laying of the

foundation stone of their new Town Hall, and Derek as the sitting member was to preside at the celebration. Already Barker had been dispatched to telephone for a cab to take him to the station, and at any moment their conversation might be interrupted. So Lady Underhill made the most of what little time she had.

Derek listened gloomily, scarcely rousing himself to reply. His mother would have been gratified could she have known how powerfully her arguments were working on him. That little imp of doubt which had vexed him in the cab as he drove home from Ovingdon Square had not died in the night. It had grown and waxed more formidable. And now, aided by this ally from without, it had become a Colossus straddling his soul. Derek looked frequently at the clock, and cursed the unknown cabman whose delay was prolonging the scene. Something told him that only flight could serve him now. He never had been able to withstand his mother in one of her militant moods. She seemed to numb his faculties. Other members of his family had also noted this quality in Lady Underhill, and had commented on it bitterly in the smoking-rooms of distant country-houses at the hour when men meet to drink the final whisky-and-soda and unburden their souls.

Lady Underhill, having said all she had to say, recovered her breath and began to say it again. Frequent iteration was one of her strongest weapons. As her brother Edwin, who was fond of homely imagery, had often observed, she could talk the hind-leg off a donkey.

"You must be mad, Derek, to dream of handicapping yourself at this vital stage of your career with a wife who not only will not be a help to you, but must actually be a ruinous handicap. I am not blaming you for imagining yourself in love in the first place, though I really should have thought that a man of your strength and character would.... However, as I say, I am not blaming you for that.

Superficially, no doubt, this girl might be called attractive. I do not admire the type myself, but I suppose she has that quality--in my time we should have called it boldness--which seems to appeal to the young men of to-day. I could imagine her fascinating a weak-minded imbecile like your friend Mr. Rooke. But that you.... Still, there is no need to go into that. What I am trying to point out is that in your position, with a career like yours in front of you--it's quite certain that in a year or two you will be offered some really big and responsible position--you would be insane to tie yourself to a girl who seems to have been allowed to run perfectly wild, whose uncle is a swindler...."

"She can't be blamed for her uncle."

"... Who sups alone with strange men in public restaurants...."

"I explained that."

"You may have explained it. You certainly did not excuse it or make it a whit less outrageous. You cannot pretend that you really imagine

that an engaged girl is behaving with perfect correctness when she allows a man she has only just met to take her to supper at the Savoy, even if she did know him slightly years and years ago. It is very idyllic to suppose that a childhood acquaintance excuses every breach of decorum, but I was brought up to believe otherwise. I don't wish to be vulgar, but what it amounts to is that this girl was having supper--supper! In my days girls were in bed at supper-time!--with a strange man who picked her up at a theatre!"

Derek shifted uneasily. There was a part of his mind which called upon him to rise up and challenge the outrageous phrase and demand that it be taken back. But he remained silent. The imp-Colossus was too strong for him. She is quite right, said the imp. That is an unpleasant but accurate description of what happened. He looked at the clock again, and wished for the hundredth time that the cab would come. Jill's photograph smiled at him from beside the clock. He looked away, for, when he found his eyes upon it, he had an odd sensation of baseness, as if he were playing some one false who loved and trusted him.

"Well, I am not going to say any more," she said, getting up and buttoning her glove. "I will leave you to think it over. All I will say is that, though I only met her yesterday, I can assure you that I am quite confident that this girl is just the sort of harum-scarum so-called 'modern' girl who is sure some day to involve herself in a really serious scandal. I don't want her to be in a position to drag you into it as well. Yes, Barker, what is it? Is Sir Derek's cab

here?"

The lantern-jawed Barker had entered softly, and was standing deferentially in the doorway. There was no emotion on his face beyond the vague sadness which a sense of what was correct made him always wear like a sort of mask when in the presence of those of superior station.

"The cab will be at the door very shortly, m'lady. If you please, Sir Derek, a policeman has come with a message."

"A policeman?"

"With a message from Mr. Rooke."

"What do you mean?"

"I have had a few words of conversation with the constable, sir," said Barker sadly, "and I understand from him that Mr. Rooke and Miss Mariner have been arrested."

"Arrested! What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Rooke desired the officer to ask you to be good enough to step round and bail them out!"

The gleam in Lady Underhill's eye became a flame, but she controlled her voice.

"Why were Miss Mariner and Mr. Rooke arrested, Barker?"

"As far as I can gather, m'lady, Miss Mariner struck a man in the street with a stick, and they took both her and Mr. Rooke to the Chelsea Police Station."

Lady Underhill glanced at Derek, who was looking into the fire.

"This is a little awkward, Derek," she said suavely. "If you go to the police-station, you will miss your train."

"I fancy, m'lady, it would be sufficient if Sir Derek were to dispatch me with a cheque for ten pounds."

"Very well. Tell the policeman to wait a moment."

"Very good, m'lady."

Derek roused himself with an effort. His face was drawn and gloomy. He sat down at the writing-table, and took out his cheque-book. There was silence for a moment, broken only by the scratching of the pen. Barker took the cheque and left the room.

"Now, perhaps," said Lady Underhill, "you will admit that I was right!" She spoke in almost an awed voice, for this occurrence at just this moment seemed to her very like a direct answer to prayer. "You can't hesitate now! You must free yourself from this detestable entanglement!"

Derek rose without speaking. He took his coat and hat from where they lay on a chair.

"Derek! You will! Say you will!"

Derek put on his coat.

"Derek!"

"For heaven's sake, leave me alone, mother. I want to think."

"Very well. I will leave you to think it over, then." Lady Underhill moved to the door. At the door she paused for a moment, and seemed about to speak again, but her mouth closed resolutely. She was a shrewd woman, and knew that the art of life is to know when to stop talking. What words have accomplished, too many words can undo.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, mother."

"I'll see you when you get back?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I'm not certain when I shall return. I may go away for a bit."

The door closed behind Lady Underhill. Derek sat down again at the writing-table. He wrote a few words on a sheet of paper, then tore it up. His eye travelled to the mantelpiece. Jill's photograph smiled happily down at him. He turned back to the writing-table, took out a fresh piece of paper, thought for a few moments, and began to write again.

The door opened softly.

"The cab is at the door, Sir Derek," said Barker.

Derek addressed an envelope, and got up.

"All right. Thanks. Oh, Barker, stop at a district-messenger office on your way to the police-station, and have this sent off at once."

"Very good, Sir Derek," said Barker.

Derek's eyes turned once more to the mantelpiece. He stood looking for an instant, then walked quickly out of the room.