

# The Man Who Disappeared



BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

**I** AM a lawyer by profession, and have a snug set of chambers in Chancery Lane. My name is Charles Pleydell. I have many clients, and can already pronounce myself a rich man.

On a certain morning towards the end of September in the year 1897 I received the following letter :—

SIR,—I have been asked to call on you by a mutual friend, General Cornwallis, who accompanied my step-daughter and myself on board the *Osprey* to England. Availing myself of the General's introduction, I hope to call to see you or to send a representative about eleven o'clock to-day.

The General says that he thinks you can give me advice on a matter of some importance.

I am a Spanish lady. My home is in Brazil, and I know nothing of England or of English ways. I wish, however, to take a house near London and to settle down. This house must be situated in the neighbourhood of a large moor or common. It must have grounds surrounding it, and must have extensive cellars or basements, as my wish is to furnish a laboratory in order to carry on scientific research. I am willing to pay any sum in reason for a desirable habitation, but one thing is essential : the house must be as near London as is possible under the above conditions.—Yours obediently, STELLA SCAIFFE.

This letter was dated from the Carlton Hotel.

Now, it so happened that a client of mine had asked me a few months before to try and let his house—an old-fashioned and somewhat gruesome mansion, situated on a lonely part of Hampstead Heath. It occurred to me that this house would exactly suit the lady whose letter I had just read.

At eleven o'clock one of my clerks brought

me in a card. On it were written the words, "Miss Muriel Scaiffe." I desired the man to show the lady in, and a moment later a slight, fair-haired English girl entered the room.

"Mrs. Scaiffe is not quite well and has sent me in her stead. You have received a letter from my step-mother, have you not, Mr. Pleydell?"

"I have," I replied. "Will you sit down, Miss Scaiffe?"

She did so. I looked at her attentively. She was young and pretty. She also looked good, and although there was a certain anxiety about her face which she could not quite repress, her smile was very sweet.

"Your step-mother," I said, "requires a house with somewhat peculiar conditions?"

"Oh, yes," the girl answered. "She is very anxious on the subject. We want to be settled within a week."

"That is a very short time in which to take and furnish a house," I could not help remarking.

"Yes," she said, again. "But, all the same, in our case it is essential. My step-mother says that anything can be done if there is enough money."

"That is true in a sense," I replied, smilingly. "If I can help you I shall be pleased. You want a house on a common?"

"On a common or moor."

"It so happens, Miss Scaiffe, that there is a place called The Rosary at Hampstead which may suit you. Here are the particulars. Read them over for yourself and tell me if there is any use in my giving you an order to view."

She read the description eagerly, then she said:—

"I am sure Mrs. Scaiffe would like to see this house. When can we go?"

"To-day, if you like, and if you particularly wish it I can meet you at The Rosary at three o'clock."

"That will do nicely," she answered.

Soon afterwards she left me.

The rest of the morning passed as usual, and at the appointed hour I presented myself at the gates of The Rosary. A carriage was already drawn up there, and as I approached a tall lady with very dark eyes stepped out of it.

A glance showed me that the young lady had not accompanied her.

"You are Mr. Pleydell?" she said, holding out her hand to me, and speaking in excellent English.

"Yes," I answered.

"You saw my step-daughter this morning?"

"Yes," I said again.

"I have called to see the house," she continued. "Muriel tells me that it is likely to suit my requirements. Will you show it to me?"

I opened the gates, and we entered a wide carriage-drive. The Rosary had been unlet for some months, and weeds partly covered the avenue. The grounds had a desolate and gloomy appearance, leaves were falling thickly from the trees, and altogether the entire place looked undesirable and neglected.

The Spanish lady, however, seemed delighted with everything. She looked around her with sparkling glances. Flashing her dark eyes into my face, she praised the trees and avenue, the house, and all that the house contained.

She remarked that the rooms were spacious, the lobbies

wide; above all things, the cellars numerous.

"I am particular about the cellars, Mr. Pleydell," she said.

"Indeed!" I answered. "At all events, there are plenty of them."

"Oh, yes! And this one is so large. It will quite suit our purpose. We will turn it into a laboratory."

"My brother and I— Oh, I have not told you about my brother. He is a Spaniard—Señor Merello—he joins us here next week. He and I are scientists, and I hope scientists of no mean order. We have come to England for the purpose of experimenting. In this land of the free we can do what we please. We feel, Mr. Pleydell—you look so sympathizing that I cannot help confiding in you—we feel that we are on the verge of a very great—a very astounding discovery, at which the world, yes, the whole world will wonder. This house is the one of all others for our purpose. When can we take possession, Mr. Pleydell?"

I asked several questions, which were all answered to my satisfaction, and finally returned to town, prepared to draw up a lease by which the house and grounds known as The Rosary, Hampstead Heath, were to be handed over at a very high rent to Mrs. Scaiffe.



"THE SPANISH LADY SEEMED DELIGHTED WITH EVERYTHING."

I felt pleased at the good stroke of business which I had done for a client, and had no apprehensions of any sort. Little did I guess what that afternoon's work would mean to me, and still more to one whom I had ever been proud to call my greatest friend.

Everything went off without a hitch. The Rosary passed into the hands of Mrs. Scaiffe, and also into the hands of her brother, Señor Merello, a tall, dark, very handsome man, bearing all over him the well-known characteristics of a Spanish don.

A week or two went by and the affair had well-nigh passed my memory, when one afternoon I heard eager, excited words in my clerks' room, and the next moment my head clerk entered, followed by the fair-haired English-looking girl who had called herself Muriel Scaiffe.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Pleydell," she said, in great agitation. "Can I see you alone, and at once?"

"Certainly," I answered. I motioned to the clerk to leave us and helped the young lady to a chair.

"I cannot stay a moment," she began. "Even now I am followed. Mr. Pleydell, he has told me that he knows you; it was on that account I persuaded my step-mother to come to you about a house. You are his greatest friend, for he has said it."

"Of whom are you talking?" I asked, in a bewildered tone.

"Of Oscar Digby!" she replied. "The great traveller, the great discoverer, the greatest, most single-minded, the grandest man of his age. You know him? Yes—yes."

She paused for breath. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Indeed, I do know him," I answered. "He is my very oldest friend. Where is he? What is he doing? Tell me all about him."

She had risen. Her hands were clasped tightly together, her face was white as death.

"He is on his way to England," she answered. "Even now he may have landed. He brings great news, and the moment he sets foot in London he is in danger."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you what I mean. I dare not. He is your friend, and it is your province to save him."

"But from what, Miss Scaiffe? You have no right to come here and make ambiguous statements. If you come to me at all you ought to be more explicit."

She trembled and now, as though she could not stand any longer, dropped into a chair.

"I am not brave enough to explain things more fully," she said. "I can only repeat my words, 'Your friend is in danger.' Tell him—if you can, if you will—to have nothing to do with us. Keep him, at all risks, away from us. If he mentions us pretend that you do not know anything about us. I would not speak like this if I had not cause—the gravest. When we took The Rosary I did not believe that matters were so awful; indeed, then I was unaware that Mr. Digby was returning to London. But last night I overheard . . . Oh! Mr. Pleydell, I can tell you no more. Pity me and do not question me. Keep Oscar Digby away from The Rosary and, if possible, do not betray me; but if in no other way you can insure his leaving us alone, tell him that I—yes, I, Muriel Scaiffe—wish it. There, I cannot do more."

She was trembling more terribly than ever. She took out her handkerchief to wipe the moisture from her brow.

"I must fly," she said. "If this visit is discovered my life is worth very little."

After she had gone I sat in absolute amazement. My first sensation was that the girl must be mad. Her pallor, her trembling, her vague innuendoes pointed surely to a condition of nerves the reverse of sane. But although the madness of Muriel Scaiffe seemed the most possible solution of her strange visit, I could not cast the thing from my memory. I felt almost needlessly disturbed by it. All day her extraordinary words haunted me, and when, on the next day, Digby, whom I had not seen for years, unexpectedly called, I remembered Miss Scaiffe's visit with a queer and ever-increasing sense of apprehension.

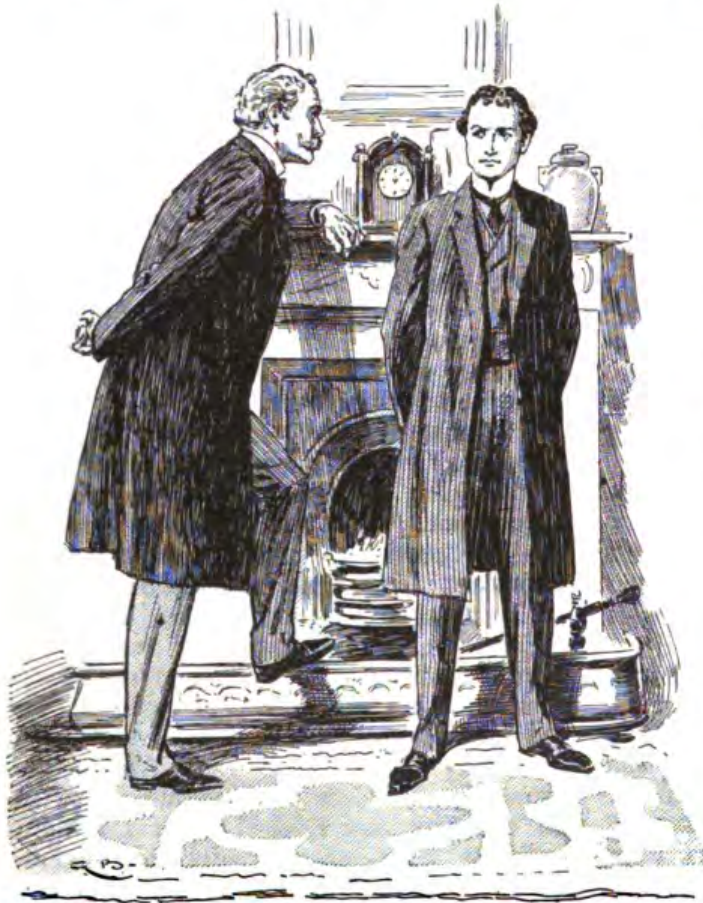
Digby had been away from London for several years. Before he went he and I had shared the same rooms, had gone about together, and had been chums in the fullest sense of the word. It was delightful to see him once again. His hearty, loud laugh fell refreshingly on my ears, and one or two glances into his face removed my fears. After all, it was impossible to associate danger with one so big, so burly, with such immense physical strength. His broad forehead, his keen, frank blue eyes, his smiling mouth, his strong and muscular hands, all denoted strength of mind and body. He looked as if he were muscle all over.

"Well," he said, "here I am, and I have a good deal to tell you. I want your help also, old man. It is your business to introduce me to the most promising and most

enterprising financier of the day. I have it in my power, Pleydell, to make his fortune, and yours, and my own, and half-a-dozen other people's as well."

"Tell me all about it," I said. I sat back in my chair, prepared to enjoy myself.

Oscar was a very noted traveller and thought much of by the Geographical Society.



"I WANT YOUR HELP ALSO, OLD MAN."

He came nearer to me and dropped his voice a trifle.

"I have made an amazing discovery," he said, "and that is one reason why I have hurried back to London. I do not know whether you are sufficiently conversant with extraordinary and out-of-the-way places on our globe. But anyhow, I may as well tell you that there is a wonderful region, as yet very little known, which lies on the watershed of the Essequibo and Amazon rivers. In that region are situated the old Montes de Cristaes or Crystal Mountains, the disputed boundary between British Guiana and Brazil. There also, according to the legend, was supposed to be the wonderful lost city of Manos. Many expeditions were sent out to discover it in the seventeenth century, and it

was the Eldorado of Sir Walter Raleigh's famous expedition in 1615, the failure of which cost him his head."

I could not help laughing.

"This sounds like an old geography lesson. What have you to do with this *terra incognita*?"

He leant forward and dropped his voice.

"Do not think me mad," he said, "for I speak in all sanity. I have found the lost Eldorado!"

"Nonsense!" I cried.

"It is true. I do not mean to say that I have found the mythical city of gold; that, of course, does not exist. But what I have discovered is a spot close to Lake Amacu that is simply laden with gold. The estimates computed on my specimens and reports make it out to be the richest place in the world. The whole thing is, as yet, a close secret, and I have come to London now to put it into the hands of a big financier. A company must be formed with a capital of something like ten millions to work it."

"By Jove!" I cried. "You astonish me."

"The thing will create an enormous sensation," he went on, "and I shall be a millionaire; that is, if the secret does not leak out."

"The secret," I cried.

"Yes, the secret of its exact locality."

"Have you charts?"

"Yes; but those I would rather not disclose, even to you, old man, just yet."

I was silent for a moment, then I said:—

"Horace Lancaster is the biggest financier in the whole of London. He is undoubtedly your man. If you can satisfy him with your reports, charts, and specimens he can float the company. You must see him, Digby."

"Yes, that is what I want," he cried.

"I will telephone to his office at once."

I rang the bell for my clerk and gave him directions.

He left the room. In a few moments he returned with the information that Lancaster was in Paris.

"He won't be back for a week, sir," said the clerk.

He left the room, and I looked at Digby.

"Are you prepared to wait?" I asked.

He shrugged his great shoulders.

"I must, I suppose," he said. "But it is provoking. At any moment another may forestall me. Not that it is likely; but there is always the possibility. Shall we talk over matters to-night, Pleydell? Will you dine with me at my club?"

"With a heart and a half," I answered.

"By the way," continued Digby, "some friends of mine—Brazilians—ought to be in London now: a lady of the name of Scaiffe, with her pretty little step-daughter, an English girl. I should like to introduce you to them. They are remarkably nice people. I had a letter from Mrs. Scaiffe just as I was leaving Brazil telling me that they were *en route* for England and asking me to look her up in town. I wonder where they are? Her brother, too, Señor Merello, is a most charming man. Why, Pleydell, what is the matter?"

I was silent for a moment; then I said: "If I were you I would have nothing to do with these people. I happen to know their whereabouts, and——"

"Well?" he said, opening his eyes in amazement.

"The little girl does not want you to call on them, Digby. Take her advice. She looked true and good." To my astonishment I saw that the big fellow seemed quite upset at my remarks.

"True!" he said, beginning to pace the room. "Of course the little thing is true. I tell you, Pleydell, I am fond of her. Not engaged, or anything of that sort, but I like her. I was looking forward to meeting them. The mother—the step-mother, I mean—is a magnificent woman. I am great friends with her. I was staying at their Quinta last winter. I also know the brother, Señor Merello. Has little Muriel lost her head?"

"She is anxious and frightened. The whole thing seems absurd, of course, but she certainly did beg of me to keep you away from her step-mother, and I half promised to respect her secret and not to tell you the name of the locality where Mrs. Scaiffe and Señor Merello are at present living."

He tried not to look annoyed, but he evidently was so. A few moments later he left me.

That evening Digby and I dined together. We afterwards went exhaustively into the great subject of his discovery. He showed me his specimens and reports, and, in short, so completely fired my enthusiasm that I was all impatience for Lancaster's return. The thing was a big thing, one worth fighting for. We said no more about Mrs. Scaiffe, and I hoped that my friend would not fall into the hands of a woman who, I began to fear, was little better than an adventuress.

Three or four days passed. Lancaster was still detained in Paris, and Digby was evidently eating his heart out with impatience at the unavoidable delay in getting his great scheme floated.

One afternoon he burst noisily into my presence.

"Well," he cried. "The little girl has discovered herself. Talk of women and their pranks! She came to see me at my hotel. She declared that she could not keep away. I just took the little thing in my arms and hugged her. We are going to have a honeymoon when the company is floated, and this evening, Pleydell, I dine at The Rosary.



"I JUST TOOK THE LITTLE THING IN MY ARMS"  
ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATION

Ha! ha! my friend. I know all about the secret retreat of the Scaiffes by this time. Little Muriel told me herself. I dine there to-night, and they want you to come, too."

I was about to refuse when, as if in a vision, the strange, entreating, suffering face of Muriel Scaiffe, as I had seen it the day she implored me to save my friend, rose up before my eyes. Whatever her present inexplicable conduct might mean, I would go with Digby to-night.

We arrived at The Rosary between seven and eight o'clock. Mrs. Scaiffe received us in Oriental splendour. Her dress was a wonder of magnificence. Diamonds flashed in her raven black hair and glittered round her shapely neck. She was certainly one of the most splendid-looking women I had ever seen, and Digby was not many moments in her company before he was completely subjugated by her charms.

The pale little Muriel looked washed-out and insignificant beside this gorgeous creature. Señor Merello was a masculine edition of his handsome sister: his presence and his wonderful courtly grace of manner seemed but to enhance and accentuate her charms.

At dinner we were served by Spanish servants, and a repulsive-looking negro of the name of Samson stood behind Mrs. Scaiffe's chair.

She was in high spirits, drank freely of champagne, and openly alluded to the great discovery.

"You must show us the chart, my friend," she said.

"No!" he answered, in an emphatic voice. He smiled as he spoke and showed his strong, white teeth.

She bent towards him and whispered something. He glanced at Muriel, whose face was deadly white. Then he rose abruptly.

"As regards anything else, command me," he said; "but not the chart."

Mrs. Scaiffe did not press him further. The ladies went into the drawing-room, and by-and-by Digby and I found ourselves returning to London.

During the journey I mentioned to him that Lancaster had wired to say that he would be at his office and prepared for a meeting on Friday. This was Monday night.

"I am glad to hear that the thing will not be delayed much longer," he answered. "I may as well confess that I am devoured by impatience."

"Your mind will soon be at rest," I replied. "And now, one thing more, old

man. I must talk frankly. I do not like Mrs. Scaiffe—I do not like Señor Merello. As you value all your future, keep that chart out of the hands of those people."

"Am I mad?" he questioned. "The chart is seen by no living soul until I place it in Lancaster's hands. But all the same. Pleydell," he added, "you are prejudiced, Mrs. Scaiffe is one of the best of women."

"Think her so, if you will," I replied; "but, whatever you do, keep your knowledge of your Eldorado to yourself. Remember that on Friday the whole thing will be safe in Lancaster's keeping."

He promised, and I left him.

On Tuesday I saw nothing of Digby.

On Wednesday evening, when I returned home late, I received the following letter:—

I am not mad. I have heavily bribed the kitchen-maid, the only English woman in the whole house, to post this for me. I was forced to call on Mr. Digby and to engage myself to him at any cost. I am now strictly confined to my room under pretence of illness. In reality I am quite well, but a close prisoner. Mr. Digby dined here again last night and, under the influence of a certain drug introduced into his wine, has given away the whole of his discovery *except* the exact locality.

He is to take supper here late to-morrow night (Thursday) and to bring the chart. If he does, he will never leave The Rosary alive. All is prepared. *I speak who know.* Don't betray me, but save him.

The letter fell from my hands. What did it mean? Was Digby's life in danger, or had the girl who wrote to me really gone mad? The letter was without date, without any heading, and without signature. Nevertheless, as I picked it up and read it carefully over again, I was absolutely convinced beyond a shadow of doubt of its truth. Muriel Scaiffe was not mad. She was a victim, to how great an extent I did not dare to think. Another victim, one in even greater danger, was Oscar Digby. I must save him. I must do what the unhappy girl who was a prisoner in that awful house implored of me.

It was late, nearly midnight, but I knew that I had not a moment to lose. I had a friend, a certain Dr. Garland, who had been police surgeon for the Westminster Division for several years. I went immediately to his house in Eaton Square. As I had expected, he was up, and without any preamble I told him the whole long story of the last few weeks.

Finally, I showed him the letter. He heard me without once interrupting. He read the letter without comment. When he folded it up and returned it to me I saw that his keen, clean-shaven face was full of interest. He was silent for several minutes, then he said:—

"I am glad you came to me. This story of yours may mean a very big thing. We have four *prima-facie* points. *One*: Your friend has this enormously valuable secret about the place in Guiana or on its boundary; a secret which may be worth anything. *Two*: He is very intimate with Mrs. Scaiffe, her step-daughter, and her brother. The intimacy started in Brazil. *Three*: He is engaged to the step-daughter, who evidently is being used as a sort of tool, and is herself in a state of absolute terror, and, so far as one can make out, is not specially in love with Digby nor Digby with her. *Four*: Mrs. Scaiffe and her brother are determined, at any risk, to secure the chart which Digby is to hand to them to-morrow evening. The girl thinks this so important that she has practically risked her life to give you due warning. By the way, when did you say Lancaster would return? Has he made an appointment to see Digby and yourself?"

"Yes; at eleven o'clock on Friday morning."

"Doubtless Mrs. Scaiffe and her brother know of this."

"Probably," I answered. "As far as I can make out they have such power over Digby that he confides everything to them."

"Just so. They have power over him, and they are not scrupulous as to the means they use to force his confidence. If Digby goes to The Rosary to-morrow evening the interview with Lancaster will, in all probability, never take place."

"What do you mean?" I cried, in horror.

"Why, this. Mrs. Scaiffe and Señor Merello are determined to learn Digby's secret. It is necessary for their purpose that they should know the secret and also that they should be the *sole possessors* of it. You see why they want Digby to call on them? They must get his secret from him *before* he sees Lancaster. The chances are that if he gives it up he will never leave the house alive."

"Then, what are we to do?" I asked, for

Garland's meaning stunned me, and I felt incapable of thought or of any mode of action.

"Leave this matter in my hands. I am going immediately to see Inspector Frost. I will communicate with you directly anything serious occurs."

The next morning I called upon Digby and found him breakfasting at his club. He looked worried, and, when I came in, his greeting was scarcely cordial.

"What a solemn face, Pleydell!" he said. "Is anything wrong?" He motioned me to a seat near. I sank into it.

"I want you to come out of town with me," I said. "I can take a day off. Shall we both run down to Brighton? We can return in time for our interview with Lancaster to-morrow."

"It is impossible," he answered. "I should like to come with you, but I have an engagement for to-night."

"Are you going to The Rosary?" I asked.



"THEY HAVE SUCH POWER OVER DIGBY THAT HE CONFIDES EVERYTHING TO THEM."

"I am," he replied, after a moment's pause. "Why, what is the matter?" he added. "I suppose I may consider myself a free agent." There was marked irritation in his tone.

"I wish you would not go," I said.

"Why not?"

"I do not trust the people."

"Folly, Pleydell. In the old days you used not to be so prejudiced."

"I had not the same cause. Digby, if ever people are trying to get you into their hands, they are those people. Have you not already imparted your secret to them?"

"How do you know?" he exclaimed, springing up and turning crimson.

"Well, can you deny it?"

His face paled.

"I don't know that I want to," he said.

"Mrs. Scaiffe and Merello will join me in this matter. There is no reason why things should be kept dark from them."

"But is this fair or honourable to Lancaster? Remember, I have already written fully to him. Do, I beg of you, be careful."

"Lancaster cannot object to possible wealthy shareholders," was Digby's answer. "Anyhow," he added, laughing uneasily, "I object to being interfered with. Pray understand that, old man, if we are to continue friends; and now by-bye for the present. We meet at eleven o'clock to-morrow at Lancaster's."

His manner gave me no pretext for remaining longer with him, and I returned to my own work. About five o'clock on that same day a telegram was handed to me which ran as follows:—

Come here at once.—GARLAND.

I left the house, hailed a hansom, and in a quarter of an hour was shown into Garland's study. He was not alone. A rather tall, grey-haired, grey-moustached, middle-aged man was with him. This man was introduced to me as Inspector Frost.

"Now, Pleydell," said Garland, in his quick, incisive way, "listen to me carefully. The time is short. Inspector Frost and I have not ceased our inquiries since you called on me last night. I must tell you that we believe the affair to be of the most serious kind. Time is too pressing now to enter into all details, but the thing amounts to this. There is the gravest suspicion that Mrs. Scaiffe and her brother, Señor Merello, are employed by a notorious gang in Brazil to force Digby to disclose the exact position of the gold mine. We also know for certain that Mrs. Scaiffe is in constant and close communication with some very suspicious people both in London and in Brazil.

"Now, listen. The crisis is to be to-night. Digby is to take supper at The Rosary, and there to give himself absolutely away. He will take his chart with him; that is the scheme. Digby must not go—that is, if we can possibly prevent him. We expect you to do what you can under the circumstances, but as the case is so serious, and as it is more than probable that Digby will not be persuaded, Inspector Frost and myself and a number of men of his division will surround the house as soon as it becomes dark,

and if Digby should insist on going in every protection in case of difficulty will be given him. The presence of the police will also insure the capture of Mrs. Scaiffe and her brother."

"You mean," I said, "that you will, if necessary, search the house?"

"Yes."

"But how can you do so without a warrant?"

"We have thought of that," said Garland, with a smile. "A magistrate living at Hampstead has been already communicated with. If necessary, one of our men will ride over to his house and procure the requisite instrument to enforce our entrance."

"Very well," I answered; "then I will go at once to Digby's, but I may as well tell you plainly that I have very little hope of dissuading him."

I drove as fast as I could to my friend's rooms, but was greeted with the information that he had already left and was not expected back until late that evening. This was an unlooked-for blow.

I went to his club—he was not there. I then returned to Dr. Garland.

"I failed to find him," I said. "What can be done? Is it possible that he has already gone to his fate?"

"That is scarcely likely," replied Garland, after a pause. "He was invited to supper at The Rosary, and according to your poor young friend's letter the time named was late. There is nothing for it but to waylay him on the grounds before he goes in. You will come with us to-night, will you not, Pleydell?"

"Certainly," I answered.

Garland and I dined together. At half-past nine we left Eaton Square and, punctually at ten o'clock, the hansom we had taken put us down at one of the roads on the north side of the Heath. The large house which I knew so well loomed black in the moonlight.

The night was cold and fresh. The moon was in its second quarter and was shining brightly. Garland and I passed down the dimly-lit lane beside the wall. A tall, dark figure loomed from the darkness and, as it came forward, I saw that it was Inspector Frost.

"Mr. Digby has not arrived yet," he said. "Perhaps, sir," he added, looking at me, "you can even now dissuade him, for it is a bad business. All my men are ready," he continued, "and at a signal the house will be surrounded; but we must have one last try to prevent his entering it. Come this way,



please, sir," he added, beckoning to me to follow him.

We passed out into the road.

"I am absolutely bewildered, inspector," I said to him. "Do you mean to say there is really great danger?"

"The worst I ever knew," was his answer. "You cannot stop a man entering a house if he wishes to; but I can tell you, Mr. Pleydell, I do not believe his life is worth that if he goes in." And the inspector snapped his fingers.

He had scarcely ceased speaking when the jingling of the bells of a hansom sounded behind us. The cab drew up at the gates and Oscar Digby alighted close to us.

Inspector Frost touched him on the shoulder.

He swung round and recognised me.

"Halloa! Pleydell," he said, in no very cordial accents. "What in the name of Heaven are you doing here? What does this mean? Who is this man?"

"I am a police-officer, Mr. Digby, and I want to speak to you. Mr. Pleydell has asked you not to go into that house. You are, of course, free to do as you like, but I must tell you that you are running into great danger. Be advised by me and go away."

For answer Digby thrust his hand into his breast-pocket. He pulled out a note which he gave me.

"Read that, Pleydell," he said; "and receive my answer." I tore the letter from its envelope and read in the moonlight:—

Come to me. I am in danger and suffering. Do not fail me.—MURIEL.

"A hoax! A forgery!" I could not help crying. "For God's sake, Digby, don't be mad."

"Mad or sane, I go into that house," he said. His bright blue eyes flashed with passion and his breath came quickly.

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"Hands off, sir. Don't keep me."

He swung himself away from me.

"One word," called the inspector after him. "How long do you expect to remain?"

"Perhaps an hour. I shall be home by midnight."

"And now, sir, please listen. You can be assured, in case of any trouble, that we are here, and I may further tell you that if you are not out of the house by one o'clock, we shall enter with a search warrant."

Digby stood still for a moment, then he turned to me.

"I cannot but resent your interference, but I believe you mean well. Good-bye!" He



"HE SWUNG HIMSELF AWAY FROM ME."

wrung my hand and walked quickly up the drive.

We watched him ring the bell. The door was opened at once by the negro servant. Digby entered. The door closed silently. Inspector Frost gave a low whistle.

"I would not be that man for a good deal," he said.

Garland came up to us both.

"Is the house entirely surrounded, Frost?" I heard him whisper. Frost smiled, and I

saw his white teeth gleam in the darkness. He waved his hand.

"There is not a space of six feet between man and man," I heard him say; "and now we have nothing to do but to wait and hope for at least an hour and a half. If in an hour's time Mr. Digby does not reappear I shall send a man for the warrant. At one o'clock we enter the house."

Garland and I stood beneath a large fir tree in a dense shade and within the inclosed garden. The minutes seemed to crawl. Our conversation was limited to low whispers at long intervals.

Eleven o'clock chimed on the church clock near by; then half-past sounded on the night air. My ears were strained to catch the expected click of the front door-latch, but it did not come. The house remained wrapt in silence. Once Garland whispered:—

"Hark!" We listened closely. It certainly seemed to me that a dull, muffled sound, as of pounding or hammering, was just audible; but whether it came from the house or not it was impossible to tell.

At a quarter to twelve the one remaining lighted window on the first floor became suddenly dark. Still there was no sign of Digby. Midnight chimed.

Frost said a word to Garland and disappeared, treading softly. He was absent for more than half an hour. When he returned I heard him say:—

"I have got it," and he touched his pocket with his hand as he spoke.

The remaining moments went by in intense anxiety, and, just as the deep boom of one o'clock was heard the inspector laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Come along quietly," he whispered.

Some sign, conveyed by a low whistle, passed from him to his men, and I heard the bushes rustle around us.

The next moment we had ascended the steps, and we could hear the deep whirr of the front door bell as Frost pressed the button.

In less time than we had expected we heard the bolts shot back. The door was

opened on a chain and a black face appeared at the slit.

"Who are you and what do you want?" said a voice.

"I have called for Mr. Digby," said Frost. "Go and tell him that his friend, Mr. Pleydell, and also Doctor Garland want to see him immediately."

A look of blank surprise came over the negro's face.

"But no one of the name of Digby lives here," he said.

"Mrs. Scaiffe lives here," replied the inspector, "and also a Spanish gentleman of the name of Señor Merello. Tell them that I wish to see them immediately, and that I am a police-officer."

A short conversation was evidently taking place within. The next moment the door was flung open, electric lights sprang into being, and my eyes fell upon Mrs. Scaiffe.

She was dressed with her usual magnificence. She came forward with a stately calm and stood silently before us. Her large black eyes were gleaming.

"Well, Mr. Pleydell," she said, speaking in



"SHE CAME FORWARD WITH A STATELY CALM."

an easy voice, "what is the reason of this midnight disturbance? I am always glad to welcome you to my house, but is not the hour a little late?"

Her words were interrupted by Inspector Frost, who held up his hand.

"Your attitude, madam," he said, "is hopeless. We have all come here with a definite object. Mr. Oscar Digby entered this house at a quarter past ten to-night. From that moment the house has been closely surrounded. He is therefore still here."

"Where is your authority for this unwarrantable intrusion?" she said. Her manner changed, her face grew hard as iron. Her whole attitude was one of insolence and defiance.

The inspector immediately produced his warrant.

She glanced over it and uttered a shrill laugh.

"Mr. Digby is not in the house," she said.

She had scarcely spoken before an adjoining door was opened, and Señor Merello, looking gaunt and very white about the face, approached. She looked up at him and smiled, then she said, carelessly:—

"Gentlemen, this is my brother, Señor Merello."

The Señor bowed slightly, but did not speak.

"Once more," said Frost, "where is Mr. Digby?"

"I repeat once more," said Mrs. Scaiffe, "that Mr. Digby is not in this house."

"But we saw him enter at a quarter past ten."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He is not here now."

"He could not have gone, for the house has been surrounded."

Again she gave her shoulders a shrug. "You have your warrant, gentlemen," she said; "you can look for yourselves."

Frost came up to her.

"I regret to say, madam, that you, this gentleman, and all your servants must consider yourselves under arrest until we find Mr. Oscar Digby."

"That will be for ever, then," she replied; "but please yourselves."

My heart beat with an unwonted sense of terror. What could the woman mean? Digby, either dead or alive, must be in the house.

The operations which followed were conducted rapidly. The establishment, consisting of Mrs. Scaiffe, her brother, two Spanish men-servants, two maids, one of Spanish

extraction, and the negro who had opened the door to us, were summoned and placed in the charge of a police-sergeant.

Muriel Scaiffe was nowhere to be seen.

Then our search of the house began. The rooms on the ground-floor, consisting of the drawing-room, dining-room, and two other big rooms, were fitted up in quite an everyday manner. We did not take much time going through them.

In the basement, the large cellar which had attracted Mrs. Scaiffe's pleased surprise on the day when I took her to see *The Rosary* had now been fitted up as a laboratory. I gazed at it in astonishment. It was evidently intended for the manufacture of chemicals on an almost commercial scale. All the latest chemical and electrical apparatus were to be found there, as well as several large machines, the purposes of which were not evident. One in particular I specially noticed. It was a big tank with a complicated equipment for the manufacture of liquid air in large quantities.

We had no time to give many thoughts to the laboratory just then. A foreboding sense of ever-increasing fear was upon each and all of us. It was sufficient to see that Digby was not there.

Our search in the upper regions was equally unsuccessful. We were just going down stairs again when Frost drew my attention to a door which we had not yet opened. We went to it and found it locked. Putting our strength to work, Garland and I between us burst it open. Within, we found a girl crouching by the bed. She was only partly dressed, and her head was buried in her hands. We went up to her. She turned, saw my face, and suddenly clung to me.

"Have you found him? Is he safe?"

"I do not know, my dear," I answered, trying to soothe her. "We are looking for him. God grant us success."

"Did he come to the house? I have been locked in here all day and heavily drugged. I have only just recovered consciousness and scarcely know what I am doing. Is he in the house?"

"He came in. We are searching for him; we hope to find him."

"That you will never do!" She gave a piercing cry and fell unconscious on the floor.

We placed the unhappy girl on the bed. Garland produced brandy and gave her a few drops; she came to in a couple of minutes and began to moan feebly. We left her,



"WE WENT UP TO HER."

promising to return. We had no time to attend to her just then.

When we reached the hall Frost stood still.

"The man is not here," he muttered.

"But he is here," was Garland's incisive answer. "Inspector, you have got to tear the place to pieces."

The latter nodded.

The inspector's orders were given rapidly, and dawn was just breaking when ten policemen, ordered in from outside, began their systematic search of the entire house from roof to basement.

Pick and crowbar were ruthlessly applied, and never have I seen a house in such a mess. Floorings were torn up and rafters cut through. Broken plaster littered the rooms and lay about on the sumptuous furniture. Walls were pierced and bored through. Closets and cupboards were ransacked. The backs of the fireplaces were torn out and the chimneys explored.

Very little was said as our investigation proceeded, and room after room was checked off.

Finally, an exhaustive examination of the basement and cellars completed our search.

"Well, Dr. Garland, are you satisfied?" asked the inspector.

We had gone back to the garden, and Garland was leaning against a tree, his hands thrust in his pockets and his eyes fixed on the ground. Frost pulled his long moustache and breathed quickly.

"Are you satisfied?" he repeated.

"We must talk sense or we shall all go mad," was Garland's answer. "The thing is absurd, you know. Men don't disappear. Let us work this thing out logically. There are only three planes in space and we know matter is indestructible. If Digby left this house he went up, down, or horizontally. *Up is out of the question.* If he disappeared in a balloon or was shot off the roof he

must have been seen by us, for the house was surrounded. He certainly did not pass through the cordon of men. *He did not go down*, for every cubic foot of basement and cellar has been accounted for, as well as every cubic foot of space in the house.

"So we come to the chemical change of matter, dissipation into gas by heat. There are no furnaces, no ashes, no gas cylinders, nor dynamos, nor carbon points. The time when we lost sight of him to the time of entrance was exactly two hours and three-quarters. There is no way out of it. He is still there."

"He is not there," was the quiet retort of the inspector. "I have sent for the Assistant Commissioner to Scotland Yard, and will ask him to take over the case. It is too much for me."

The tension in all our minds had now reached such a state of strain that we began to fear our own shadows.

Oscar Digby, standing, as it were, on the threshold of a very great future, the hero of a legend worthy of old romance, had suddenly and inexplicably vanished. I could not get my reason to believe that he was not still in the house, for there was not the least doubt that he had not come out. What would happen in the next few hours?

"Is there no secret chamber or secret passage that we have overlooked?" I said, turning to the inspector.

"The walls have been tapped," he replied. "There is not the slightest indication of a

hollow. There are no underground passages. The man is not within these walls."

He now spoke with a certain degree of irritation in his voice which the mystery of the case had evidently awakened in his mind. A few moments later the sound of approaching wheels caused us to turn our heads. A cab drew up at the gates, out of which alighted the well-known form of Sir George Freer.

Garland had already entered the house, and on Sir George appearing on the scene he and I followed him.

We had just advanced across the hall to the room where the members of the household, with the exception of poor Muriel Scaiffe, were still detained, when, to our utter amazement, a long, strange peal of laughter sounded from below. This was followed by another, and again by another. The laughter came from the lips of Garland. We glanced at each other. What on earth did it mean? Together we darted down the stone steps, but before we reached the laboratory another laugh rang out. All hope in me was suddenly changed to a chilling fear, for the laugh was not natural. It had a clanging, metallic sound, without any mirth.

In the centre of the room stood Garland. His mouth was twitching and his breath jerked in and out convulsively.

"What is it? What is the matter?" I cried.

He made no reply, but, pointing to a machine with steel blocks, once more broke into a choking, gurgling laugh which made my flesh creep.

Had he gone mad? Sir George moved swiftly across to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Come, what is all this, Garland?" he said, sternly, though his own face was full of fear.

I knew Garland to be a man of extraordinary self-control, and I could see that he was now holding himself in with all the force at his command.

"It is no use—I cannot tell you," he burst out.

"What—you know what has become of him?"

"Yes."

"You can prove it?"

"Yes."

"Speak out, man."

"He is not here," said Garland.

"Then where is he?"

He flung his hand out towards the Heath, and I saw that the fit was taking him again, but once more he controlled himself. Then he said, in a clear, level voice:—

"He is dead, Sir George, and you can never see his body. You cannot hold an inquest, for there is nothing to hold it on. The winds have taken him and scattered him in dust on the Heath. Don't look at me like



"IN THE CENTRE OF THE ROOM STOOD GARLAND."

that, Pleydell. I am sane, although it is a wonder we are not all mad over this business. Look and listen."

He pointed to the great metal tank.

"I arrived at my present conclusion by a

process of elimination," he began. "Into that tank which contained liquid air Digby, gagged and bound, must have been placed violently, probably after he had given away the chart. Death would have been instantaneous, and he would have been frozen into complete solidity in something like forty minutes. The ordinary laboratory experiment is to freeze a rabbit, which can then be powdered into mortar like any other friable stone. The operation here has been the same. It is only a question of size. Remember, we are dealing with 312deg. below zero Fahrenheit, and then—well, look at this and these."

He pointed to a large machine with steel blocks and to a bench littered with saws, chisels, pestles, and mortars.

"That machine is a stone-breaker," he said. "On the dust adhering to these blocks I found this."

He held up a test tube containing a blue liquid.

"The Guaiacum test," he said. "In other words, blood. This fact taken with the facts we already know, that Digby never left the house; that the only other agent of destruction of a body, fire, is out of the question; that this tank is the receptacle of that enormous machine for making liquid air in very large quantities; and, above all, the practical possibility of the operation being conducted by the men who are at present in the house, afford me absolutely conclusive proof beyond a possibility of doubt as to what has happened. The body of that unfortunate man is as if it had never been, without a fragment of pin-point size for identification or evidence. It is beyond the annals of all the crimes that I have ever heard of. What law can help us? Can you hold an inquest on nothing? Can you charge a person with murder where no victim or trace of a victim can be produced?"

A sickly feeling came over me. Garland's words carried their own conviction, and we knew that we stood in the presence of a horror without a name. Nevertheless, to the police mind horror *per se* does not exist.

To them there is always a mystery, a crime, and a solution. That is all. The men beside me were police once more. Sentiment might come later.

"Are there any reporters here?" asked Sir George.

"None," answered Frost.

"Good. Mr. Oscar Digby has disappeared. There is no doubt how. There can, of course, be no arrest, as Dr. Garland has just said. Our official position is this. We suspect that Mr. Digby has been murdered, but the search for the discovery of the body has failed. That is our position."

Before I left that awful house I made arrangements to have Muriel Scaiffe conveyed to a London hospital. I did not consult Mrs. Scaiffe on the subject. I could not get myself to say another word to the woman. In the hospital a private ward was secured for the unhappy girl, and there for many weeks she hovered between life and death.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Scaiffe and her brother were detained at The Rosary. They were closely watched by the police, and although they made many efforts to escape they found it impossible. Our hope was that when Muriel recovered strength she would be able to substantiate a case against them. But, alas! this hope was unfounded, for, as the girl recovered, there remained a blank in her memory which no efforts on our part could fill. She had absolutely and completely forgotten Oscar Digby, and the house on Hampstead Heath was to her as though it had never existed. In all other respects she was well. Under these circumstances we were forced to allow the Spaniard and his sister to return to their own country, our one most earnest hope being that we might never see or hear of them again.

Meanwhile, Muriel grew better. I was interested in her from the first. When she was well enough I placed her with some friends of my own. A year ago she became my wife. I think she is happy. A past which is forgotten cannot trouble her. I have long ago come to regard her as the best and truest woman living.