

Chapter One

‘I want to make one thing absolutely plain,’ said the Honourable Mrs Florence Saunders. ‘After I’m dead, I will not come back.’

Jean Mackenzie, her companion, blinked. ‘I don’t quite...’

‘You know perfectly well what I mean. I don’t want you trying to get in touch with me at one of your séances. I’ll have far more interesting things to do than potter around down here, spouting a lot of platitudes about peace and love. Understand?’

‘Now, dear, you mustn’t talk like this. It’ll be many years yet—’

‘Jean, don’t talk nonsense. I’m ninety-six. It cannot possibly be *many* years. And I don’t mind at all. My husband’s dead. My only son is dead. I’ve had enough of this world now. I’ve repented of my sins and I’m ready to meet my Maker. So I want it made clear that there must be no long faces at my funeral. Let people enjoy themselves. I’ve taken one step in that direction already. Charlie Bradley has it in hand.’ She chuckled richly.

Jean looked doubtful. She was a thin, nondescript woman of about fifty, invariably clad in a tweed skirt and twin-set. Mostly her face wore an expression of doubt, or sometimes of anxiety.

Doubt was now dominant as she didn't know whether to take Florrie seriously. How could her solicitor ensure people enjoyed themselves at her funeral?

But then, Florrie had never been serious. Even the name. She should be called Florence, a properly dignified name for the widow of an Earl's son. Jean had never felt quite comfortable calling her by her first name at all. But from the time she had come to her, Mrs Saunders had been quite clear. 'Call me Florrie,' she had said. 'Everybody else does.'

It was her background, of course. Stage people were notoriously lax about such things. And although it must be seventy years since she had last trodden the boards, the music hall artiste, the old vaudevillian, was still there, struggling to get out.

Jean, though, wished she wouldn't talk about her death. For that made her think about what was going to happen to her when Florrie passed over. She had hardly any savings and it was many years before she would qualify for a small state pension. With no qualifications, she would have little chance of getting any job, except one as companion. And most paid companions were really no better than nurse and housemaid combined. But otherwise, what would she do? After twenty-three years in this lovely detached house, on the river, just outside London, it would be very hard to settle in some pokey bed-setter, even if she could afford the rent. Oh, if only she knew whether Florrie—

'Penny for 'em,' Florrie said suddenly.

Jean gave a slight start. 'I was just thinking what a

remarkable life you've had,' she said, untruthfully. 'Tell me, would you change anything?'

Florrie shook her head firmly. 'I had a wonderful time on the halls. Never made the West End, but might have done, if I hadn't got married. And I certainly don't regret that. People thought I was just Bertie's little bit of fluff and I craftily trapped him into marriage. Not so. It was a love match, even though he was a good bit older than me. And I worked hard to make sure he'd never be ashamed of me. In a few months I could speak and dress so you wouldn't know the difference between me and a Duchess. And I gave him a son. John was the apple of his eye. May sound shocking, but I'm always grateful Bertie died when he did. He saw John happily married to a lovely girl like Emma, with two daughters of his own. Then he passed away, less than nine months later Emma died, eighteen months after that John remarried – and within a few months was killed himself. It was a – a terrible time.'

Her voice quavered and stopped. Jean wisely remained silent while Florrie collected herself. She had, of course, listened to all this many times before. Florrie would reminisce for hours. But it didn't bore Jean, who never tired of hearing about an early life so different from her own ultra-respectable middle-class upbringing.

Florrie was continuing now, talking almost to herself. 'Worst choice John ever made, marrying Clara. I can understand why he did it: he thought Agatha and Dorothy needed a mother. And Clara could really turn on the charm, when she needed to. I don't know why she cut herself and the girls off from me

completely after John's death: jealousy, maybe, or snobbery. Yet I was always nice to her. I never let it show that she was a disappointment to me, after Emma. Then, when the girls are grown up, she suddenly realises I'm getting on, and she ought to make sure I don't get my own back by cutting them out of my will. So she brings them to see me, and fawns all over me, saying how fond she is of me. Lying cat. And Dorry just sits there, staring at the carpet and fiddling her thumbs, and Agatha is red in the face and fuming. Very painful. Only happened once, though.'

'Well, you did tell her you found three visitors rather tiring.'

'I was hinting it would be nice to see the girls on their own. But she wouldn't have that.'

'Still, you do see Agatha regularly now. I was amazed later on when I answered the door one day and there she was, in jodhpurs and all her motor-cycling outfit.'

'Yes, she's one of a kind, is Agatha. But imagine having to come secretly, so her stepmother doesn't find out! And Dorry so cowed she never comes at all and from what Agatha says is not much more than an unpaid skivvy.'

'Agatha seems to have made an independent life for herself.'

'As far as she could. She ought to get out of that house. But, of course, she's got no money. What they get under my will is going to make a difference, though.'

Chapter Two

'You're not going to get away with it, you loathsome old woman,' said the voice on the phone.

Clara Saunders gasped and nearly dropped the receiver. She was about to slam it down, but some instinct stopped her. Managing with great self-control to keep her voice steady, she said coolly: 'Who is that?'

'Oh, this is nobody at all. Nobody of any importance.' The words were slightly slurred, the voice husky. It could have been a man or a woman.

'Obviously true. Equally obviously you're drunk.'

'Oh yes, I'm drunk. And you know why? Because you've ruined my life.'

'You're insane.'

'Don't play the injured innocent. You sent that piece to the paper about me, you bitch.'

Clara drew her breath in sharply. But she wasn't going to take this sort of thing lying down. 'How dare you speak to me like that, you uncouth, insolent creature!'

'Insolent? How can one be insolent to a slimy toad like you?'

‘I am not going to stand here and listen to insults from a contemptible, cowardly drunk. And let me warn you that if you call again—’

‘No, let *me* warn *you*, my fine lady, that you’re not going to get away with it.’ The voice got louder. ‘You’ll pay, yes, you’ll pay. I’m going to get you. I’m—’

At this Clara did ring off. She stood quite still in the hall of the old, rambling house in Hampstead. Her heart was pounding and her legs felt weak. Never before had she been spoken to in that ghastly way. Old, indeed! She wasn’t sixty yet. But she did feel she’d handled the person with considerable dignity.

Suddenly she needed to sit down. She turned, to make her way back into the drawing-room, then gave a jump. Standing just two feet from her was a young woman. Clara clasped her hand to her heart. ‘Oh, Dorothy, don’t creep up on me like that!’

‘I didn’t. I just came to answer the phone,’ Dorothy Saunders said defensively. She was in her early thirties, painfully thin, with short, mousy brown hair, and a deathly pale complexion. She was wearing a drab brown dress, about ten years out of date, thick stockings and flat shoes. At the moment her eyes were big with alarm. ‘Mother, who *was* that?’

‘I don’t know. Just some drunk.’

‘He threatened you, didn’t he?’

‘Certainly not!’

‘But I heard him say, “You’ll pay, I’m going to get you.”’

‘He didn’t know what he was saying. He was totally out of control.’

‘It was terrible. It’s the way Al Capone and those other Chicago gangsters talk to their enemies.’

‘I’m pleased to say, I wouldn’t know. And I don’t know how you do.’

‘Only from the talkies. It was one of *them*, wasn’t it?’

‘A gangster? Don’t be ridiculous!’

‘No – one of those people you’ve told the papers about.’

‘I tell you I don’t know who it was.’

‘Aggie’s always said something like this would happen – that one of them would try and get revenge.’

‘Your sister is absurdly melodramatic sometimes.’

‘But he did threaten you. Mother, you must tell the police.’

‘No. What could they do? Besides, it was only empty bluster.’

‘It might not be. And at least if he rings again you could tell him the police had been notified. It might just frighten him off.’

‘Well, I’ll think about it, if it’ll keep you quiet. Now I don’t want to hear another word on the subject. Go and do something useful. Clean the bathroom.’

‘I cleaned it this morning.’

‘Well, clean something else!’

And Clara strode into the drawing-room and slammed the door behind her.

Chapter Three

'I wonder how many people will come to my funeral,' Florrie said reflectively.

Jean Mackenzie gave a tut. 'There you go again, dear. You really must not think about these things.'

'I like thinking about it. I want it to be a good one.'

'I'm sure it will be, if a funeral can ever be good. And no doubt there'll be lots of people there.'

'Hardly any family, though. All my generation long gone, and John's, too – all my nephews and nieces. Happened everywhere, of course. First the Great War, then the Spanish Flu.'

'But you've got lots of great nephews and nieces, and great-greats.'

'Four great nephews, one great niece and two great-great nieces. Yes, I expect they'll come. I think they're all in my will, aren't they? Let me have another look at it, will you, dear?'

Jean got to her feet and carefully navigated her way between the many stools, pouffes, chairs and occasional tables

to the big Victorian bureau. She had no difficulty in locating the will, as this was a routine which was gone through at least once a week. Florrie knew quite well who was in her will and who would be coming to her funeral. But she enjoyed the little ritual, it helped pass the time and at her age such harmless whims could be indulged.

Jean glanced down at the envelope wistfully as she made her way back. If only she knew whether *she* was mentioned in it. She had never liked to ask; it would seem such bad form. And Florrie hadn't ever given the slightest hint. It would be so easy, she thought for the umpteenth time, just to come in one day, when Florrie was in bed, and look. But it wouldn't be right. The mere fact that Florrie gave her the opportunity would make it wrong to take advantage of it. Though it was such a temptation...

She handed the envelope to Florrie, who opened it.

'Now, let me see. Well, George and Lavinia will come. I'm sure of that. They've always kept in touch. Never any snobbery with the *real* aristocrats you know, the one's who've got aristocratic natures, not just a title.'

'Oh, I know. And that time we stayed at Alderley was so wonderful. I'll never forget it. Even now, when they visit, I can't believe I'm actually talking to the Earl and Countess of Burford. They treat me just as though I were, well, one of them.'

'That's precisely what I mean. And Geraldine's a lovely girl, such a live wire. So interesting, all she had to tell me about those terrible murders they had there. I do hope she'll be happy

with that young man.’ She gave a sigh. ‘It must be lovely at Alderley now. I wonder what they’re all doing at this moment. Keeping very busy I’m sure.’

* * *

The August sun beat upon the half-drawn curtains of the mellow, oak-panelled room. Through the open French windows wafted the smell of roses and the faint hum of bees. In a large, well-worn black leather easy chair an untidy-looking man with wispy grey hair, a pink complexion and a straggly moustache whistled softly and not unmusically as his chest rose and fell rhythmically. The *Times* crossword puzzle, half finished, was open on his lap. George Henry Aylwin Saunders, twelfth Earl of Burford, was enjoying his usual post-prandial snooze. It was a peaceful scene.

It did not long remain so, as the double doors were thrown open and a girl breezed into the room. She was in her mid-twenties, petite, red-haired, with a tip-tilted nose and deceptively innocent large hazel eyes. She seemed to ooze energy. ‘Hello, Daddy,’ she said loudly.

Lord Burford awoke suddenly and blinked pale blue eyes several times before focusing on the speaker. He gave a grunt. ‘Oh. You’ve arrived.’

Lady Geraldine Saunders looked hurt. ‘What happened to “My darling daughter! You’re home at last! It’s been so long!”’

‘It seems about three hours. How’s London?’

‘Big. Noisy. But fun.’

‘It’s the noisiness – and the smelliness – that always strikes me most these days. Which is why I go up as little as possible.’

Is that *Peepshow*?' He pointed incredulously to a garishly coloured magazine she was holding.

'Yes. A little present for you.'

She held it out to him. Lord Burford took it gingerly and gazed at it with distaste. 'Why the deuce did you bring me this? It's an appallin' rag.'

'There's something in it that will interest you.'

The Earl read the caption to the picture on the cover: "Shirley Temple: America's Little Sweetheart." You surely don't— ?

'No, no – page twelve.'

The Earl reluctantly flicked through the pages and opened the magazine out. Then his eyes bulged. 'Good gad!'

A banner headline, across two pages, read:

IS ALDERLEY CURSED?

The rest of the pages consisted mainly of photographs, but there was a small block of text. The Earl read it.

Twelve months ago this week two sensational murders were committed at Alderley, the 17th-Century Westshire home of the Earl and Countess of Burford. Amazingly, less than six months later, another, completely unconnected murder took place. Involving, among others, a government minister, film stars, American millionaires, European aristocracy, foreign diplomats and an Olympic athlete, with the murder weapons valuable firearms from Lord Burford's world-famous collection, these crimes have led many people to ask if an ancient gypsy's curse is still exerting its malign influence

over the beautiful, stately home, and if this could lead to further tragedies. See the following pages for the full astounding story.

The Earl looked up. ‘This – this is preposterous!’

‘I know.’

‘It’s absolute nonsense! It’s ridiculous! It’s – it’s—’ He groped for words.

‘How about balderdash? That’s a good strong word.’

‘Claptrap,’ said the Earl defiantly.

‘Yes, claptrap’s good, too.’

‘This business about a curse, I mean. The eighth Earl turfed some gypsies off his land and one old woman swore at him a bit and told him he’d regret it.’

‘And within twelve months he and his younger son were both dead.’

‘The Earl had apoplexy – probably what they’d call a stroke today – and the boy most likely got pneumonia. There wasn’t anything mysterious about it. Since then there’s been nothin’ out of the ordinary. Most of my ancestors died peacefully, usually at a ripe old age.’

‘You don’t have to convince me, Daddy. I’m not scared of any gypsy’s curse.’

‘And those murders didn’t involve the family. The people just happened to be here. I shall complain to the editor.’

‘I don’t honestly think you’ve got any grounds. The story *has* appeared in a couple of books, after all.’

Lord Burford turned the page to reveal a page of text

broken into many short paragraphs and headed THE ALDERLEY MURDERS: FULL STORY. ‘You’ve read this?’

‘Skimmed through it. Nothing that wasn’t in the papers at the time. They seem to have got the facts right, and they don’t libel anybody, so we’ll just have to grin and bear it.’

‘Bear it I may. Grin I will not.’

‘The pictures aren’t bad.’

‘Didn’t look at ’em.’ He turned back the page. ‘My word, they’ve really gone to town. That’s your mother and me when she opened the County Show last month. Nice photo of you.’

‘It’s the one that was in *The Tatler*.’

‘Oh yes. But they’ve put you in a line with all these other girls. “Beauties Involved in Murder.” You, Jane Clifton, Anilese de la Roche, Laura Lorenzo, the little Dove – and Mabel Turner, for heaven’s sake! This picture of her must be twenty years old, at least.’

‘That “involved in” is a bit rich. You’d think they’d have had the decency to distinguish between the victims, the criminals and the innocent bystanders.’

‘Well, *you* weren’t a bystander, either time. You were gettin’ mixed up in the investigations.’

Gerry nodded, a wistful expression on her face. ‘You know, in spite of all the horrible things that happened, it was fun, wasn’t it – looking back?’

‘I look back as infrequently as I can. Reckon those weekends put twenty years on my life.’

‘There’s even a photo of Chief Inspector Wilkins – see.’

‘Oh yes. “The Man Who Solved Both Cases.” Looking as

bewildered as ever. He came up trumps, though. Er, did you just get the one copy of this?’

‘Two. Mummy’s got the other.’

‘Oh, you’ve shown her. How did she take it?’

‘As you’d expect: phlegmatically.’

‘Good. I was just thinkin’, rubbish as it all is, might be a good idea to get a few more copies. I can think of quite a few people who’d like to see it – some of the others who were here, apart from anybody else.’

‘OK, I’ll get another half dozen.’

‘Better make it a dozen. So, what you doin’ here? Row with the boyfriend?’

‘Of course not! And he’s my fiancé, not just my boyfriend; remember?’

‘Thought you youngsters preferred these new-fangled terms. Anyway, why are you home?’

‘I explained in my telegram. He’s had to go away on family business. You know there was a death in his family – which is why we had to postpone the wedding. Well, it’s led to a lot of legal and financial complications and he’s had to go and help sort it all out. It was going to be lonely until he got back and I wanted a break.’

‘Why didn’t you go with him?’

‘I felt I’d be in the way.’

‘Lor, you’ve got sensitive all of a sudden. Anyway, it’s nice to have you home, sweetheart. Place seems pretty empty sometimes, without you.’

Gerry looked surprised and pleased. ‘Why, thank you

Daddy. Anyway, I'm going to have a shower.' She started towards the door, then stopped and turned round. 'Oh, while I remember, I saw Great Aunt Florrie last week. She sent her love to you both.'

'Oh, good. Your mother and I called to see her for a couple of hours back in the spring. How is she?'

'Perky as ever. Apart from my wedding, all she wanted me to talk about was the murders – much to Miss Mackenzie's disapproval. I filled her in on all the undercover stuff that never came out publicly. I think I'll send her a copy of *Peepshow*. I'm sure she'll enjoy making Mackenzie read it to her.'

'Suppose I ought to read it – just to make quite sure they have got their facts right.'

'Oh, absolutely,' Gerry said.

She went out. The Earl buried his head in *Peepshow*.

Chapter Four

‘Then there’s Gregory,’ said Florrie. ‘He’s certain to come when he learns he’s in the will. Don’t suppose his wife will bother, though. She’s never been here.’

‘That’s Alexandra, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Don’t think it’s much of a marriage. She’s very politically ambitious, and I imagine the fact Gregory’s not exactly had a dazzling career has been a disappointment to her.’

‘But he’s very respected as an MP, isn’t he?’

‘I believe so. I can’t trust him, though. Maybe just because he’s a politician. I don’t believe a word one of them says. Frankly, I’d never be surprised to learn...’

She tailed off.

‘To learn what, dear?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ said Florrie.

* * *

‘Greggy, darling, I saw an absolutely too divine dress in Bond Street today.’

Gregory Carstairs, MP, who was pouring himself a gin and tonic at the time, gave a grunt. His companion, a sinuous

dark-haired girl with pouting, scarlet lips, who was lounging artistically back on the sofa, displaying very long and shapely legs, clad in black stockings of the purest silk, went on: 'It's chiffon, the palest shade of blue, with these delicious little pleats...' She prattled away, but Gregory wasn't listening. He gazed out of the window over the roofs of St. John's Wood to the famous Father Time weather vane of Lord's Cricket Ground, just a few hundred yards away. Useful, at least in the summer. If anybody should happen to see him in the neighbourhood, it provided the perfect excuse. Watching cricket was something nobody objected to a Member of Parliament doing; it was almost expected.

He was a heavily built man of about fifty with closely cropped grizzled hair, a florid complexion, the beginnings of a double chin and a neatly trimmed moustache, which he fondly believed gave him a military appearance. He always refused to talk about his war experiences, leading many people to assume he must have had a good record. In fact, he had been rejected because of flat feet, and had spent the whole of 1914 to 1918 in a Whitehall office.

He turned round and surveyed the chicly furnished, ultra-modern sitting-room of the flat, with its sharp angles and chromium fittings. 'Strewth, but this place was costing him a fortune. How long would he be able to keep it up? Or Poppy, for that matter? He was going to have to do something about it. But what? Poppy was such a clinger. And she wouldn't forgive easily if he just dumped her. He had to keep her sweet. It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for that damned letter he'd

written her. What a fool he'd been! Tipsy at the time, of course, and in those days he'd been really smitten by her, but that was no excuse. He had to get out of this entanglement soon. But how?

'...and it was only ten pounds – well, guineas, actually. It would really suit me.'

Gregory dragged himself back. 'I'm sure you'd look absolutely breathtaking in it, my sweet. We must certainly think about getting it for you, er, sometime.'

'Sometime?' There was a suspicious edge to her voice.

'Yes, Christmas perhaps.'

'*Christmas?*' This time the voice was an octave higher. 'But that's months and months away. And this is a summer dress!'

'But you've got dozens of summer dresses. And look so perfectly ravishing in all of them.'

Poppy gazed at him, a disconcertingly acute and appraising expression in her large violet eyes. 'Greggy, you're not getting hard up, are you?'

'Good lord, no! Whatever gave you that idea?'

'You haven't bought me anything nice for weeks and weeks.'

'Well, I am a bit short of the ready just now. But it's just a temporary thing. Hold up in funds, lots of expenses, have to take the old woman to Monte later this month, as I explained.'

'You've never taken *me* to Monte Carlo.'

'I know, my sweet, and I'd like nothing better, believe me. But we did have that weekend in Brighton a month ago.'

'That was no fun, not with you peering over your shoulder all the time, in a blue funk in case someone recognised you.'

‘Well, I do have to be careful, sweetheart. I mean if we were seen together, it would cause the most awful scandal in my constituency. I’ve explained what a provincial backwater it is, and how narrow-minded they are there. Any hint of what they’d call impropriety could cost me my seat. Do you know what my majority was last time?’

‘Five hundred and sixty-eight,’ Poppy said in a bored voice.

‘Oh. Then you can see how easily I could be kicked out.’

‘Would it really matter if you were? You seem totally fed up with it half the time, and there’s all these late-night sittings and asking questions you know the answers to already and having to write letters to all those silly little constituents. And you’re never going to get into the Government, are you? You’re always going to be a back-bencher.’

‘I say, that’s a bit below the belt. Besides, it’s not true. One of the Whips was only saying to me a month ago that the Prime Minister’s always got me very much in mind.’ He straightened his shoulders and unconsciously straightened his tie. ‘Anyway, it’s a matter of duty. Family’s got a long history of public service. Men from my background have a responsibility to serve this country.’ He took hold of the lapel of his jacket with one hand and gazed out over the rooftops. His voice took on a more resonant tone. ‘I often think, when I gaze at a view such as this, and look down at the people going peaceably, freely and unafraid about their business, how greatly blessed we are to live in a land like ours.’

He turned round and addressed her earnestly. ‘Across a mere twenty-six miles of water, storm clouds are gathering and

tyranny is raising its vile head. Yet how often we in Britain tend to take our blessings for granted. It has been wisely said that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. Such vigilance is the duty of us all, but particularly of those happy few of us called to serve in the front line of liberty's defence, in the Mother of Parliaments. We—'

Poppy raised her hand to her mouth and ostentatiously stifled a yawn. Gregory gave a blink and came back to earth. 'Well, you do see, don't you?'

'But do you really enjoy it, Greggory – all this defending liberty? Wouldn't you rather be spending your time with me?' The tone was wheedling.

'Well, of course I would, precious. You know that.'

'Then why don't you chuck it in? After all, you've done nearly twenty years of public service. You could get your divorce and never have to worry about who saw us. And it's not as though the salary is up to much. You told me once it only made up a teeny bit of what you earned.'

'Yes, but you don't understand. I'm on the Board of six companies, five of whom only want me because it looks good to have an MP on their letter heads. I'm an adviser to two business associations, simply because the idiots believe I can influence Government policy, or at least know what it's going to be. Then there's the odd bit of journalism. I'd lose all that if I gave up my seat. Besides, what would I do outside politics?'

Poppy gave a pout. 'So I suppose that means you'll be going off to your dreary old constituency more and more, does it?'

'Fraid so: make a few speeches, shake a few hands, kiss a few

babies. And don't worry – I mean the sort that guzzle milk, not the kind that quaff champers.' Gregory gave a forced chuckle.

'Will *she* be going with you?'

'Alex? Yes. She's dam' good at that sort of thing, I will say that. Worth a good few hundred votes.'

'I could do all that sort of thing.'

Gregory tried unsuccessfully to imagine Poppy earnestly discussing child welfare or old age pensions with the wife of his constituency party Chairman. But he wasn't forced to make a response, because she changed the subject.

'So, when you going next?'

'Tomorrow, actually.'

'How long for?'

'Rest of the week.'

'Oh, Greggy!'

'Frightfully sorry. But it can't be helped.'

Poppy gave a sigh. 'What about next week?'

'Not sure. Monday and Tuesday I've got speaking engagements. I'll phone you sometime Tuesday. Perhaps we can arrange something for Wednesday or later in the week.'

'I won't budge an inch from the phone, darling,' said Poppy.

Chapter Five

‘Timothy will come, I’m sure,’ Florrie said. ‘I think he’d want to, but he’d come even if he didn’t. Always does the right thing, does Timothy.’

‘Such a distinguished-looking man, I always think. And a very clever barrister, I believe.’

‘Oh, Timothy’s all right. Terrible stick, though. How he came to have such a flibbertigibbet daughter as Penny I’ll never know. She’s a pretty little baggage, with no thought in her head apart from finding a husband.’

‘So sad her mother dying as young as she did.’

‘Yes. Can’t have been easy for Timothy, bringing up a girl on his own. Still, he always seems completely in control of every situation.’

* * *

‘Thank you, Mr Jackson,’ said Timothy Saunders. ‘I have no further questions. I’m sure his lordship and the jury will now know just how much weight to attach to your evidence.’

He sat down, as Jackson, looking decidedly shaken, hurriedly left the witness box. A cross-examination by one of the sharpest

forensic minds of the English bar left few people unscathed.

Timothy's face showed no expression. It hardly ever did. He felt no pleasure at having demolished one of the opposition's most important witnesses: just the quiet satisfaction of a professional at a job well done. He gathered his papers together as the judge announced the end of the day's proceedings. His junior counsel gave him a sideways glance. It had been a ruthless performance, one that made him feel slightly uncomfortable. But undeniably effective. 'Nearly over, do you think?' he asked quietly.

Timothy nodded shortly. 'We can expect an offer in the morning.'

He was a slim man of no more than average height, with small, regular features, a neatly trimmed toothbrush moustache, a pale complexion and thinning light brown hair, concealed now under his barrister's wig. A man who would never be noticed in a crowd, whom most people would have difficulty in describing, even after spending half an hour in his company. He recognised that it was probably the constant experience of being unnoticed and ignored when young that had driven him relentlessly on in his determination to make an impact of some kind on the world.

He strode rapidly back to his chambers. It was only four thirty. Time for a full three hours' work on the opinion he was preparing for Hargraves & Hargraves. Not that there was any urgency. He could go home now. But the house would be empty, apart from the servants, tucked away in their quarters. Penelope would certainly be out. What would he do? Read a

law book? He sometimes envied those men who had some all-consuming interest or hobby – gardening or golf or, like his distant relative, Lord Burford, gun-collecting. But he had never left time for things like that. And now he was surely not far away from achieving his life-long ambition: elevation to the Bench, leading, in all probability one day, to the position of Lord Chief Justice, and the opportunity not merely to practise law but actually to influence it, to change it. He knew that that was what his fellow lawyers expected. Even if none of them liked him very much, they all held him in the highest respect. And what was more important than respect?

Arriving back at his chambers, he sent his clerk home, poured himself a small glass of very dry sherry and sat down at his desk. He took out the case containing his pince-nez, thoroughly polished them with a clean linen handkerchief and put them on. He refolded the handkerchief and replaced it in his pocket, then opened his brief case, took out the papers – and saw It. His stomach gave a lurch. For a while he had managed to forget about It – this thing that clouded all his horizons, that threatened to shatter all his hopes for the future.

The Photograph.

Against his better judgement, he had to obey the impulse to look at it again. It was like the urge constantly to exert pressure on a painful tooth, just to see if it still hurt. His eyes gave the slightest flicker and his lips tightened momentarily – the closest he would ever come to wincing – and he hurriedly put it back in his case. He could not leave it in the office safe, as his clerk knew the combination, while Penelope knew that of the one at

home. So he had been carrying it round with him. He ought really to deposit it at his bank. But then he would not be able to indulge the lacerating, but to him very necessary, urge constantly to stare at it, searching for some minute indication as to where or who... He knew when, but there was no clue, obviously, as to why. Was it a prelude to blackmail? If so, why was the demand delayed? Or was some enemy, someone he had destroyed in court, just playing with him, waiting to release it to the gutter press the moment his advancement was announced? The first he could put up with. And he would pay, unquestionably – provided he could think of some method to be sure he got the negative and all prints back; easier said than done, but it ought not to be beyond his wit. He just wished the demand would come tomorrow, so he knew where he was. But it was entirely out of his hands. And thinking about it at this time would serve absolutely no purpose.

With the strength of will and concentration that made him such a formidable lawyer, he thrust all thought of it from his mind, got out the Hargraves papers and commenced writing in a quick, neat hand. Every few seconds his eyelid twitched irritatingly, but Timothy ignored it.