The Mystery of the Poisoned Dish of Mushrooms

Ernest Bramah

Table of Contents

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Some time during November of a recent year, newspaper readers who are in the habit of being attracted by curious items of quite negligible importance might have followed the account of the tragedy of a St. Abbots schoolboy which appeared in the Press under the headings, "Fatal Dish of Mushrooms," "Are Toadstools Distinguishable?" or some similarly alluring title.

The facts relating to the death of Charlie Winpole were simple and straightforward and the jury sworn to the business of investigating the cause had no hesitation in bringing in a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence. The witnesses who had anything really material to contribute were only two in number, Mrs. Dupreen and Robert Wilberforce Slark, M. D. A couple of hours would easily have disposed of every detail of an inquiry that was generally admitted to have been a pure formality, had not the contention of an interested person delayed the inevitable conclusion by forcing the necessity of an adjournment.

Irene Dupreen testified that she was the widow of a physician and lived at Hazlehurst, Chesset Avenue, St. Abbots, with her brother. The deceased was their nephew, an only child and an orphan, and was aged twelve. He was a ward of Chancery and the Court had appointed her as guardian, with an adequate provision for the expenses of his bringing up and education. That allowance would, of course, cease with her nephew's death.

Coming to the particulars of the case, Mrs. Dupreen explained that for a few days the boy had been suffering from a rather severe cold. She had not thought it necessary to call in a doctor, recognising it as a mild form of influenza. She had kept him from school and restricted him to his bedroom. On the previous Wednesday, the day before his death, he was quite convalescent, with a good pulse and a normal temperature, but as the weather was cold she decided still to keep him in bed as a measure of precaution. He had a fair appetite, but did not care for the lunch they had, and so she had asked him, before going out in the afternoon, if there was anything that he would especially fancy for his dinner. He had thereupon expressed a partiality for mushrooms, of which he was always very fond.

"I laughed and pulled his ear," continued the witness, much affected at her recollection, "and asked him if that was his idea of a suitable dish for an invalid. But I didn't think that it really mattered in the least then, so I went to several shops about them. They all said that mushrooms were over, but finally I found a few at Lackington's, the greengrocer in Park Road. I bought only half−a−pound; no one but Charlie among us cared for them and I thought that they were already very dry and rather dear."

The connection between the mushrooms and the unfortunate boy's death seemed inevitable. When Mrs. Dupreen went upstairs after dinner she found Charlie apparently asleep and breathing soundly. She quietly removed the

tray and without disturbing him turned out the gas and closed the door. In the middle of the night she was suddenly and startlingly awakened by something. For a moment she remained confused, listening. Then a curious sound coming from the direction of the boy's bedroom drew her there. On opening the door she was horrified to see her nephew lying on the floor in a convulsed attitude. His eyes were open and widely dilated; one hand clutched some bed−clothes which he had dragged down with him, and the other still grasped the empty water−bottle that had been by his side. She called loudly for help and her brother and then the servant appeared. She sent the latter to a medicine cabinet for mustard leaves and told her brother to get in the nearest available doctor. She had already lifted Charlie on to the bed again. Before the doctor arrived, which was in about half−an−hour, the boy was dead.

In answer to a question the witness stated that she had not seen her nephew between the time she removed the tray and when she found him ill. The only other person who had seen him within a few hours of his death had been her brother, Philip Loudham, who had taken up Charlie's dinner. When he came down again he had made the remark: "The youngster seems lively enough now."

Dr. Slark was the next witness. His evidence was to the effect that about three−fifteen on the Thursday morning he was hurriedly called to Hazlehurst by a gentleman whom he now knew to be Mr. Philip Loudham. He understood that the case was one of convulsions and went provided for that contingency, but on his arrival he found the patient already dead. From his own examination and from what he was told he had no hesitation in diagnosing the case as one of agaric poisoning. He saw no reason to suspect any of the food except the mushrooms, and all the symptoms pointed to bhurine, the deadly principle of Amanita Bhuroides, or the Black Cap, as it was popularly called, from its fancied resemblance to the head−dress assumed by a judge in passing death sentence, coupled with its sinister and well−merited reputation. It was always fatal.

Continuing his evidence, Dr. Slark explained that only after maturity did the Black Cap develop its distinctive appearance. Up to that stage it had many of the characteristics of *Agaricus campestris,* or common mushroom. It was true that the gills were paler than one would expect to find, and there were other slight differences of a technical kind, but all might easily be overlooked in the superficial glance of the gatherer. The whole subject of edible and noxious fungi was a difficult one and at present very imperfectly understood. He, personally, very much doubted if true mushrooms were ever responsible for the cases of poisoning which one occasionally saw attributed to them. Under scientific examination he was satisfied that all would resolve themselves into poisoning by one or other of the many noxious fungi that could easily be mistaken for the edible varieties. It was possible to prepare an artificial bed, plant it with proper spawn and be rewarded by a crop of mushroom−like growth of undoubted virulence. On the other hand, the injurious constituents of many poisonous fungi passed off in the process of cooking. There was no handy way of discriminating between the good and the bad except by the absolute identification of species. The salt test and the silver−spoon test were all nonsense and the sooner they were forgotten the better. Apparent mushrooms that were found in woods or growing in the vicinity of trees or hedges should always be regarded with the utmost suspicion.

Dr. Slark's evidence concluded the case so far as the subpoenaed witnesses were concerned, but before addressing the jury the coroner announced that another person had expressed a desire to be heard. There was no reason why they should not accept any evidence that was tendered, and as the applicant's name had been mentioned in the case it was only right that he should have the opportunity of replying publicly.

Mr. Lackington thereupon entered the witness−box and was sworn. He stated that he was a fruiterer and greengrocer, carrying on a business in Park Road, St. Abbots. He remembered Mrs. Dupreen coming to his shop two days before. The basket of mushrooms from which she was supplied consisted of a small lot of about six pounds, brought in by a farmer from a neighbouring village, with whom he had frequent dealings. All had been disposed of and in no other case had illness resulted. It was a serious matter to him as a tradesman to have his name associated with a case of this kind. That was why he had come forward. Not only with regard to mushrooms, but as a general result, people would become shy of dealing with him if it was stated that he sold

unwholesome goods.

The coroner, intervening at this point, remarked that he might as well say that he would direct the jury that, in the event of their finding the deceased to have died from the effects of the mushrooms or anything contained among them, there was no evidence other than that the occurrence was one of pure mischance.

Mr. Lackington expressed his thanks for the assurance, but said that a bad impression would still remain. He had been in business in St. Abbots for twenty−seven years and during that time he had handled some tons of mushrooms without a single complaint before. He admitted, in answer to the interrogation, that he had not actually examined every mushroom of the half−pound sold to Mrs. Dupreen, but he weighed them, and he was confident that if a toadstool had been among them he would have detected it. Might it not be a cooking utensil that was the cause?

Dr. Slark shook his head and was understood to say that he could not accept the suggestion.

Continuing, Mr. Lackington then asked whether it was not possible that the deceased, doubtless an inquiring, adventurous boy and as mischievous as most of his kind, feeling quite well again and being confined to the house, had got up in his aunt's absence and taken something that would explain this sad affair? They had heard of a medicine cabinet. What about tablets of trional or veronal or something of that sort that might perhaps look like sweets? It was all very well for Dr. Slark to laugh, but this matter was a serious one for the witness.

Dr. Slark apologised for smiling he had not laughed−and gravely remarked that the matter was a serious one for all concerned in the inquiry. He admitted that the reference to trional and veronal in this connection had, for the moment, caused him to forget the surroundings. He would suggest that in the circumstances perhaps the coroner would think it desirable to order a more detailed examination of the body to be made.

After some further discussion the coroner, while remarking that in most cases an analysis was quite unnecessary, decided that in view of what had transpired it would be more satisfactory to have a complete autopsy carried out. The inquest was accordingly adjourned.

A week later most of those who had taken part in the first inquiry assembled again in the room of the St. Abbots Town Hall which did duty for the Coroner's Court. Only one witness was heard and his evidence was brief and conclusive.

Dr. Herbert Ingpenny, consulting pathologist to St. Martin's Hospital, stated that he had made an examination of the contents of the stomach and viscera of the deceased. He found evidence of the presence of the poison bhurine in sufficient quantity to account for the boy's death, and the symptoms, as described by Dr. Slark and Mrs. Dupreen in the course of the previous hearing, were consistent with bhurine poisoning. Bhurine did not occur naturally except as a constituent of Amanita Bhuroides. One−fifth of a grain would be fatal to an adult; in other words, a single fungus in the dish might poison three people. A child, especially if experiencing the effects of a weakening illness, would be even more susceptible. No other harmful substance was present.

Dr. Ingpenny concluded by saying that he endorsed his colleague's general remarks on the subject of mushrooms and other fungi, and the jury, after a plain direction from the coroner, forthwith brought in a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence.

It was a foregone conclusion with anyone who knew the facts or had followed the evidence. Yet five days later Philip Loudham was arrested suddenly and charged with the astounding crime of having murdered his nephew.

It is at this point that Max Carrados makes his first appearance in the Winpole tragedy.

A few days after the arrest, being in a particularly urbane frame of mind himself, and having several hours with no demands on them that could not be fitly transferred to his subordinates, Mr. Carlyle looked round for some social entertainment and with a benevolent condescension very opportunely remembered the existence of his niece living at Groat's Heath.

"Elsie will be delighted," he assented to the suggestion. "She is rather out of the world up there, I imagine. Now if I get there at four, put in a couple of hours."

Mrs. Bellmark was certainly pleased, but she appeared to be still more surprised, and behind that lay an effervescence of excitement that even to Mr. Carlyle's complacent self−esteem seemed out of proportion to the occasion. The reason could not be long withheld.

"Did you meet anyone, Uncle Louis?" was almost her first inquiry. "Did I meet anyone?" repeated Mr. Carlyle with his usual precision. "Um, no, I cannot say that I met anyone particular. Of course "

"I've had a visitor and he's coming back again for tea. Guess who it is? But you never will. Mr. Carrados."

"Max Carrados!" exclaimed her uncle in astonishment. "You don't say so. Why, bless my soul, Elsie, I'd almost forgotten that you knew him. It seems years ago What on earth is Max doing in Groat's Heath?"

"That is the extraordinary thing about it," replied Mrs. Bellmark. "He said that he had come up here to look for mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?"

"Yes; that was what he said. He asked me if I knew of any woods about here that he could go into and I told him of the one down Stonecut Lane."

"But don't you know, my dear child," exclaimed Mr. Carlyle, "that mushrooms growing in woods or even near trees are always to be regarded with suspicion? They may look like mushrooms, but they are probably poisonous."

"I didn't know," admitted Mrs. Bellmark; "but if they are, I imagine Mr. Carrados will know."

"It scarcely sounds like it going to a wood, you know. As it happens, I have been looking up the subject lately. But, in any case, you say that he is coming back here?"

"He asked me if he might call on his way home for a cup of tea, and of course I said, 'Of course.'"

"Of course," also said Mr. Carlyle. "Motoring, I suppose."

"Yes, a big grey car. He had Mr. Parkinson with him."

Mr. Caryle was slightly puzzled, as he frequently was by his friend's proceedings, but it was not his custom to dwell on any topic that involved an admission of inadequacy. The subject of Carrados and his eccentric quest was therefore dismissed until the sound of a formidable motor car dominating the atmosphere of the quiet suburban road was almost immediately followed by the entrance of the blind amateur. With a knowing look towards his niece Carlyle had taken up a position at the farther end of the room, where he remained in almost breathless silence.

Carrados acknowledged the hostess's smiling greeting and then nodded familiarly in the direction of the playful guest.

"Well, Louis," he remarked, "we've caught each other."

Mrs. Bellmark was perceptibly startled, but rippled musically at the failure of the conspiracy.

"Extraordinary," admitted Mr. Carlyle, coming forward.

"Not so very," was the dry reply. "Your friendly little maid" to Mrs. Bellmark "mentioned your visitor as she brought me in."

"Is it a fact, Max," demanded Mr. Carlyle, "that you have been to −− er Stonecut Wood to get mushrooms?"

"Mrs. Bellmark told you?"

"Yes. And did you succeed?"

"Parkinson found something that he assured me looked just like mushrooms."

Mr. Carlyle bestowed a triumphant glance on his niece.

"I. should very much like to see these so−called mushrooms. Do you know, it may be rather a good thing for you that I met you."

"It is always a good thing for me to meet you," replied Carrados. "You shall see them. They are in the car. Perhaps I shall be able to take you back to town?"

"If you are going very soon. No, no, Elsie " in response to Mrs. Bellmark's protesting "Oh !" "I don't want to influence Max, but I really must tear myself away the moment after tea. I still have to clear up some work on a rather important case I am just completing. It is quite appropriate to the occasion, too. Do you know all about the Winpole business, Max?"

"No," admitted Carrados, without any appreciable show of interest. "Do you, Louis?"

"Yes," responded Mr. Carlyle with crisp assurance, "yes, I think that I may claim I do. In fact it was I who obtained the evidence that induced the authorities to take up the case against Loudham."

"Oh, do tell us all about it," exclaimed Elsie. "I have only seen something in the indicator.

Mr. Carlyle shook his head, hemmed and looked wise, and then gave in.

"But not a word of this outside, Elsie," he stipulated. "Some of the evidence won't be given until next week and it might be serious."

"Not a syllable," assented the lady. "How exciting! Go on."

"Well, you know, of course, that the coroner's jury very rightly, according to the evidence before them brought in a verdict of accidental death. In the circumstances it was a reflection on the business methods or the care or the knowledge or whatever one may decide of the man who sold the mushrooms, a greengrocer called Lackington. I have seen Lackington, and with a rather remarkable per tinacity in the face of the evidence he insists that he could not have made this fatal blunder−that in weighing so small a quantity as half−a−pound, at any rate, he would at once have spotted anything that wasn't quite all right."

"But the doctor said, Uncle Louis "

"Yes, my dear Elsie, we know what the doctor said, but, rightly or wrongly, Lackington backs his experience and practical knowledge against theoretical generalities. In ordinary circumstances nothing more would have come of it, but it happens that Lackington has for a lodger a young man on the staff of the local paper, and for a neighbour a pharmaceutical chemist. These three men talked things over more than once Lackington restive under the damage that had been done to his reputation, the journalist stimulating and keen for a newspaper sensation, the chemist contributing his quota of practical knowledge. At the end of a few days a fabric of circumstance had been woven which might be serious or innocent according to the further development of the suggestion and the manner in which it could be met. These were the chief points of the attack:

"Mrs. Dupreen's allowance for the care and maintenance of Charlie Winpole ceased with his death, as she had told the jury. What she did not mention was that the deceased boy would have come into an inheritance of some fifteen thousand pounds at age and that this fortune now fell in equal shares to the lot of his two nearest relatives Mrs. Dupreen and her brother, Philip.

"Mrs. Dupreen was by no means in easy circumstances. Philip Loudham was equally poor and had no assured income. He had tried several forms of business and now, at about thirty−five, was spending his time chiefly in writing poems and painting watercolours, none of which brought him any money so far as one could learn.

"Philip Loudham, it was admitted, took up the food round which the tragedy centred.

"Philip Loudham was shown to be in debt and urgently in need of money. There was supposed to be a lady in the case I hope I need say no more, Elsie."

"Who is she?" asked Mrs. Bellmark with poignant interest.

"We do not know yet. A married woman, it is rumoured, I regret to say. It scarcely matters certainly not to you, Elsie. To continue:

"Mrs. Dupreen got back from her shopping in the afternoon before her nephew's death at about three o'clock. In less than half−an−hour Loudham left the house and going to the station took a return ticket to Euston. He went by the 3:41 and was back in St. Abbots at 5:43. That would give him barely an hour in town for whatever business he transacted. What was that business?

"The chemist next door supplied the information that although bhurine only occurs in nature in this one form, it can be isolated from the other constituents of the fungus and dealt with like any other liquid poison. But it was a very exceptional commodity, having no commercial uses and probably not half−a−dozen retail chemists in London had it on their shelves. He himself had never stocked it and never been asked for it.

"With this suggestive but by no means convincing evidence," continued Mr. Carlyle, "the young journalist went to the editor of The Morning Indicator, to which he acted as St. Abbots correspondent, and asked him whether he cared to take up the inquiry as a 'scoop.' The local trio had carried it as far as they were able. The editor of the Indicator decided to look into it and asked me to go on with the case. This is how my connection with it arose."

"Oh, that's how newspapers get to know things?" commented Mrs. Bellmark. "I often wondered."

"It is one way," assented her uncle.

"An American development," contributed Carrados. "It is a little overdone there."

"It must be awful," said the hostess. "And the police methods! In the plays that come from the States " The entrance of the friendly hand−maiden, bringing tea, was responsible for the platitudinous wave. The conversation, in deference to Mr. Carlyle's scruples, marked time until the door closed on her departure.

"My first business," continued the inquiry agent, after making himself useful at the table, "was naturally to discover among the chemists in London whether a sale of bhurine coincided with Philip Loudham's hasty visit. If this line failed, the very foundation of the edifice of hypothetical guilt gave way; if it succeeded . . . Well, it did succeed. In a street off Caistor Square, Tottenham Court Road Trenion Street we found a man called Lightcraft, who at once remembered making such a sale. As bhurine is a specified poison, the transaction would have to be entered, and Lightcraft's book contained this unassailable piece of evidence. On Wednesday, the sixth of this month, a man signing his name as 'J. D. Williams,' and giving '25 Chalcott Place' as the address, purchased four drachms of bhurine. Lightcraft fixed the time as about half−past four. I went to 25 Chalcott Place and found it to be a small boarding−house. No one of the name of Williams was known there."

If Mr. Caryle's tone of finality went for anything, Philip Loudham was as good as pinioned. Mrs. Bellmark supplied the expected note of admiration.

"Just fancy!" was the form it took.

"Under the Act the purchaser must be known to the chemist?" suggested Carrados.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Carlyle; "and there our friend Lightcraft may have let himself in for a little trouble. But, as he says−and we must admit that there is something in it−who is to define what 'known to' actually means? A hundred people are known to him as regular or occasional customers and he has never heard their names; a score of names and addresses represent to him regular or occasional customers whom he has never seen. This 'J. D. Williams' came in wi(h an easy air and appeared at all events to know Lightcraft. The face seemed not unfamiliar and Lightcraft was perhaps a little too facile in assuming that he did know him. Well, well, Max, I can understand the circumstances. Competition is keen−especially against the private chemist and one may give offence and lose a customer. We must all live."

"Except Charlie Winpole," occurred to Max Carrados, but he left the retort unspoken. "Did you happen to come across any inquiry for bhurine at other shops?" he asked instead.

"No," replied Carlyle, "no, I did not. It would have been an indication then, of course, but after finding the actual place the others would have no significance. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Only don't you think that he was rather lucky to get it first shot if our St. Abbots authority was right?"

"Yes, yes; perhaps he was. But that is of no interest to us now. The great thing is that a peculiarly sinister and deliberate murder is brought home to its perpetrator. When you consider the circumstances, upon my soul, I don't know that I have ever unmasked a more ingenious and cold−blooded ruffian."

"Then he has confessed, uncle?"

"Confessed, my dear Elsie," said Mr. Carlyle, with a tolerant smile, "no, he has not confessed−men of that type never do. On the contrary, he asserted his outraged innocence with a considerable show of indignation. What else was he to do? Then he was asked to account for his movements between 4.15 and 5 o'clock on that afternoon. Egad, the fellow was so cocksure of the safety of his plans that he hadn't even taken the trouble to think that out.. First he denied that he had been away from St. Abbots at all. Then he remembered. He had run down to town in the afternoon for a few things. What things? Well, chiefly stationery. Where had he bought it? At a shop in

Oxford Street; he did not know the name. Would he be able to point it out? He thought so. Could he identify the attendant? No, he could not remember him in the least. Had he the bill? No, he never kept small bills. How much was the amount? About three or four shillings. And the return fare to Euston was three−and−eightpence. Was it not rather an extravagant journey? He could only say that he did so. Three or four shillings' worth of stationery would be a moderate parcel. Did he have it sent? No, he took it with him. Three or four shillings' worth of stationery in his pocket? No, it was in a parcel. Too large to go in his pocket? Yes. Two independent witnesses would testify that he carried no parcel. They were townsmen of St. Abbots who had travelled. down in the same carriage with him. Did he still persist that he had been engaged in buying stationery? Then he declined to say anything further about the best thing he could do."

"And Lightcraft identifies him?"

"Um, well, not quite so positively as we might wish. You see, a fortnight has elapsed. The man who bought the poison wore a moustache −− put on, of course but Lightcraft will say that there is a resemblance and the type of the two men the same."

"I foresee that Mr. Lightcraft's accommodating memory for faces will come in for rather severe handling in cross−examination," said Carrados, as though he rather enjoyed the prospect.

"It will balance Mr. Philip Loudham's unfortunate forgetfulness for localities, Max," rejoined Mr. Carlyle, delivering the thrust with his own inimitable aplomb.

Carrados rose with smiling acquiescence to the shrewdness of the riposte.

"I will be quite generous, Mrs. Bellmark," he observed. "I will take him away now, with the memory of that lingering in your ears all my crushing retorts unspoken."

"Five−thirty, egad!" exclaimed Mr. Carlyle, displaying his imposing gold watch. "We must or, at all events, I must. You can think of them in the car, Max."

"I do hope you won't come to blows," murmured the lady. Then she added: "When will the real trial come on, Uncle Louis?"

"The Sessions? Oh, early in January."

"I must remember to look out for it." Possibly she had some faint idea of Uncle Louis taking a leading part in the proceedings. At any rate Mr. Carlyle looked pleased, but when adieux had been taken and the door was closed Mrs. Bellmark was left wondering what the enigma of Max Carrados's departing smile had been.

Before they had covered many furlongs Mr. Carlyle suddenly remembered the suspected mushrooms and demanded to see them. A very moderate collection was produced for his inspection. He turned them over sceptically.

"The gills are too pale for true mushrooms, Max," he declared sapiently. "Don't take any risk. Let me drop them out of the window?"

"No." Carrados's hand quietly arrested the threatened action. "No; I have a use for them, Louis, but it is not culinary. You are quite right; they are rank poison. I only want to study them for.

" a case I am interested in."

"A case! You don't mean to say that there is another mushroom poisoner going?"

"No; it is the same."

"But but you said "

"That I did not know all about it? Quite true. Nor do I yet. But I know rather more than I did then."

"Do you mean that Scotland Yard "

"No, Louis." Mr. Carrados appeared to find something rather amusing in the situation. "I am for the other side."

"The other side! And you let me babble out the whole case for the prosecution! Well, really, Max!"

"But you are out of it now? The Public Prosecutor has taken it up?"

"True, true. But, for all that, I feel devilishly bad."

"Then I will give you all the whole case for the defence and so we shall be quits. In fact I am relying on you to help me with it."

"With the defence? I−after supplying the evidence that the Public Prosecutor is acting on?"

"Why not? You don't want to hang Philip Loudham specially if he happens to be innocent do you?"

"I don't want to hang anyone," protested Mr. Carlyle. "At least not as a private individual."

"Quite so. Well, suppose you and I between ourselves find out the actual facts of the case and decide what is to be done. The more usual course is for the prosecution to exaggerate all that tells against the accused and to contradict everything in his favour; for the defence to advance fictitious evidence of innocence and to lie roundly on everything that endangers his client; while on both sides witnesses are piled up to bemuse the jury into accepting the desired version. That does not always make fQr impartiality or for justice. . . . Now you and I are two reasonable men, Louis "

"I hope so," admitted Mr. Carlyle. "I hope so."

"You can give away the case for the prosecution and I will expose the weakness of the defence, so, between us, we may arrive at the truth."

"It strikes me as a deuced irregular proceeding. But I am curious to hear the defence all the same."

"You are welcome to all of it that there yet is. An alibi, of course."

"Ah!" commented Mr. Carlyle with expression.

"So recently as yesterday a lady came hurriedly, and with a certain amount of secrecy, to see me. She came on the strength of the introduction afforded by a mutual acquaintanceship with Fromow, the Greek professor. When we were alone she asked me, besought me, in fact, to tell her what to do. A few hours before Mrs. Dupreen had rushed across London to her with the tale of young Loudham's arrest. Then out came the whole story. This woman well, her name is Guestling, Louis lives a little way down in Surrey and is married. Her husband, according to her own account and I have certainly heard a hint about it elsewhere−leads her a studiedly

outrageous existence; an admired silken−mannered gentleman in society, a tolerable polecat at home, one infers. About a year ago Mrs. Guestling made the acquaintance of Loudham, who was staying in that neighbourhood painting his pretty unsaleable country lanes and golden sunsets. The inevitable, or, to accept the lady's protestations, half the inevitable, followed. Guestling, who adds an insatiable jealousy to his other domestic virtues, vetoed the new acquaintance and thenceforward the two met hurriedly and furtively in town. Had either of them any money they might have snatched their destinies from the hands of Fate and gone off together, but she has nothing and he has nothing and both, I suppose, are poor weak mortals when it comes to doing anything courageous and outright in this censorious world. So they drifted, drifting but not yet wholly wrecked."

"A formidable incentive for a weak and desperate man to secure a fortune by hook or crook, Max," said Carlyle drily.

"That is the motive that I wish to make you a present of. But, as you will insist on your side, it is also a motive for a weak and foolish couple to steal every brief opportunity of a secret meeting. On Wednesday, the sixth, the lady was returning home from a visit to some friends in the Midlands. She saw in the occasion an opportunity and on the morning of the sixth a message appeared in the personal column of The Daily Telegraph their usual channel of communication −− making an assignation. That much can be established by the irrefutable evidence of the newspaper. Philip Loudham kept the appointment and for half−an−hour this miserably happy pair sat holding each other's hands in a dreary deserted waiting−room of Bishop's Road Station. That half−hour was from 4.14 to 4.45. Then Loudham saw Mrs. Guestling into Praed Street Station for Victoria, returned to Euston and just caught the 5.7 St. Abbots."

"Can this be corroborated especially as regards the precise time they were together?"

"Not a word of it. They chose the waiting−room at Bishop's Road for seclusion and apparently they got it. Not a soul even looked in while they were there."

"Then, by Jupiter, Max," exclaimed Mr. Carlyle with emotion, "you have hanged your client!"

Carrados could not restrain a smile at his friend's tragic note of triumph.

"Well, let us examine the rope," he said with his usual imperturbability.

"Here it is." It was a trivial enough shred of evidence that the inquiry agent took from his pocket−book and put into the expectant hand; in point of fact, the salmon−coloured ticket of a "London General" motor omnibus.

"Royal Oak−the stage nearest Paddington to Tottenham Court Road −− the point nearest Trenion Street," he added significantly.

"Yes," acquiesced Carrados, taking it.

"The man who bought the bhurine dropped that ticket on the floor of the shop. He left the door open and Lightcraft followed him to close it. That is how he came to pick the ticket up, and he remembers that it was not there before. Then he threw it into a wastepaper basket underneath the counter, and that is where we found it when I called on him."

"Mr Lightcraft's memory fascinates me, Louis;" was the blind man's unruffled comment. "Let us drop in and have a chat with him?"

"Do you really think that there is anything more to be got in that quarter?" queried Carlyle dubiously. "I have turned him inside out, you may be sure."

"True; but we approach Mr. Lightcraft from different angles. You were looking for evidence to prove young Loudham guilty. I am looking for evidence to prove him innocent."

"Very well, Max," acquiesced his companion. "Only don't blame me if it turns out as deuced awkward for your man as Mrs. G. has done. Shall I tell you what a counsel may be expected to put to the jury as the explanation of that lady's evidence?"

"No, thanks," said Carrados half sleepily from his corner. "I know. I told her so."

"Oh, very well. I needn't inform you, then," and debarred of that satisfaction Mr. Carlyle withdrew himself into his own corner, where he nursed an indulgent annoyance against the occasional perversity of Max Carrados until the stopping of the car and the variegated attractions displayed in a shop window told him where they were.

Mr. Lightcraft made no pretence of being glad to see his visitors. For some time he declined to open his mouth at all on the subject that had brought them there, repeating with parrot−like obstinacy to every remark on their part, "The matter is sub judice. I am unable to say anything further," until Mr. Carlyle longed to box his ears and bring him to his senses. The ears happened to be rather prominent, for they glowed with sensitiveness, and the chemist was otherwise a lank and pallid man, whose transparent ivory skin and well−defined moustache gave him something of the appearance of a waxwork.

"At all events," interposed Carrados, when his friend turned from the maddening reiteration in despair, "you don't mind telling me a few things about bhurine apart from this particular connection?"

"I am very busy," and Mr. Lightcraft, with his back towards the shop, did something superfluous among the bottles on a shelf.

"I imagine that the time of Mr. Max Carrados, of whom even you may possibly have heard, is as valuable as yours, my good friend," put in Mr. Carlyle with scandalised dignity.

"Mr. Carrados?" Lightcraft turned and regarded the blind man with interest. "I did not know. But you must recognise the unenviable position in which I am put by this gentleman's interference."

"It is his profession, you know," said Carrados mildly, "and, in any case, it would certainly have been someone. Why not help me to get you out of the position?"

"How is that possible?"

"If the case against Philip Loudham breaks down and he is discharged at the next hearing you would not be called upon further."

"That would certainly be a mitigation. But why should it break down?"

"Suppose you let me try the taste of bhurine," suggested Carrados. "You have some left?"

"Max, Max!" cried Mr. Carlyle's warning voice, "aren't you aware that the stuff is a deadly poison? One−fifth of a grain "

"Mr. Lightcraft will know how to administer it." Apparently Mr. Lightcraft did. He filled a graduated measure with cold water, dipped a slender glass rod into a bottle that was not kept on the shelves, and with it stirred the water. Then into another vessel of water he dropped a single spot of the dilution.

"One in a hundred and twenty−five thousand, Mr. Carrados," he said, offering him the mixture.

Carrados just touched the liquid with his lips, considered the impression and then wiped his mouth.

"Now for the smell."

The unstoppered bottle was handed to him and he took in its exhalation.

"Stewed mushrooms!" was his comment. "What is it used for, Mr. Lightcraft?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"But your customer must have stated an application."

The pallid chemist flushed a little at the recollection of that incident.

"Yes," he conceded. "There is a good deal about the whole business that is still a mystery to me. The man came in shortly after I had lit up and nodded familiarly as he said: 'Good−evening, Mr. Lightcraft.' I naturally assumed that he was someone whom I could not quite place. 'I want another half−pound of nitre,' he said, and I served him. Had he bought nitre before, I have since tried to recall and I cannot. It is a common enough article and I sell it every day. I have a poor memory for faces I am willing to admit. It has hampered me in business many a time. We chatted about nothing in particular as I did up the parcel. After he had paid and turned to go he looked back again. 'By the way, do you happen to have any bhurine?' he inquired. Unfortunately I had a few ounces. 'Of course you know its nature?' I cautioned him. 'May I ask what you require it for?' He nodded and held up the parcel of nitre he had in his hand. 'The same thing,' he replied, 'taxidermy.' Then I supplied him with half−an−ounce."

"As a matter of fact, is it used in taxidermy?"

"It does not seem to be. I have made inquiry and no one knows of it. Nitre is largely used, and some of the dangerous poisons arsenic and mercuric chloride, for instance but not this. No, it was a subterfuge."

"Now the poison book, if you please."

Mr. Lightcraft produced it without demur and the blind man ran his finger along the indicated line.

"Yes; this is quite satisfactory. Is it a fact, Mr. Lightcraft, that not half−a−dozen chemists in London stock this particular substance? We are told that"

"I can quite believe it. I certainly don't know of another."

"Strangely enough, your customer of the sixth seems to have come straight here. Do you issue a price−list?"

"Only a localised one of certain photographic goods. Bhurine is not included."

"You can suggest no reason why Mr. Phillip Laudham should be inspired to presume that he would be able to procure this unusual drug from you? You have never corresponded with him nor come across his name or address before?"

"No. As far as I can recollect, I know nothing whatever of him."

"Then as yet you must assume that it was pure chance. By the way, Mr. Lightcraft, how does it come that you stock this rare poison, which has no commercial use and for which there is no demand?"

The chemist permitted himself to smile at the blunt terms of the inquiry.

"In the ordinary way I don't stock it," he replied. "This is a small quantity which I had over from my own use."

"Your own use? Oh, then it has a use after all?"

"No, scarcely that. Some time ago it leaked out in a corner of the photographic world that a great revolution in colour photography was on the point of realisation by the use of bhurine in one of the processes. I, among others, at once took it up. Unfortunately it was another instance of a discovery that is correct in theory breaking down in practice. Nothing came of it."

"Dear, dear me," said Carrados softly, with sympathetic understanding in his voice; "what a pity. You are interested in photography, Mr. Lightcraft?"

"It is the hobby of my life, sir. Of course most chemists dabble in it as a part of their business, but I devote all my spare time to experimenting. Colour photography in particular."

"Colour photography; yes. It has a great future. This bhurine process I suppose it would have been of considerable financial value if it had worked?"

Mr. Lightcraft laughed quietly and rubbed his hands together. For the moment he had forgotten Loudham and the annoying case and lived in his enthusiasm.

"I should rather say it would, Mr. Carrados," he replied. "It would have been the most epoch−marking thing since Gaudin produced the first dry plate in '54. Consider it−the elaborate processes of Dyndale, Eiloff and Jupp reduced to the simplicity of a single contact print giving the entire range of chromatic variation. Financially it will scarcely bear thinking about by artificial light."

"Was it widely taken up?" asked Carrados.

"The bhurine idea?"

"Yes. You spoke of the secret leaking out. Were many in the know?"

"Not at all. The group of initiates was only a small one and I should imagine that, on reflection, every man kept it to himself. It certainly never became public. Then when the theory was definitely exploded, of course no one took any further interest in it."

"Were all who were working on the same lines known to you, Mr. Lightcraft?"

"Well, yes; more or less I suppose they would be," said the chemist thoughtfully. "You see, the man who stumbled on the formula was a member of the Iris a society of those interested in this subject, of which I was the secretary and I don't think it ever got beyond the committee."

"How long ago was this?"

"A year eighteen months. It led to unpleasantness and broke up the society."

"Suppose it happened to come to your knowledge that one of the original circle was quietly pursuing his experiments on the same lines with bhurine what should you infer from it?"

Mr. Lightcraft considered. Then he regarded Carrados with a sharp, almost a startled, glance and then he fell to biting his nails in perplexed uncertainty.

"It would depend on who it was," he replied.

"Was there by any chance one who was unknown to you by sight but whose address you were familiar with?"

"Paulden!" exclaimed Mr. Lightcraft. "Paulden, by heaven! I do believe you're right. He was the ablest of the lot and he never came to the meetings a corresponding member. Southem, the original man who struck the idea, knew Paulden and told him of it. Southem was an impractical genius who would never be able to make anything work. Paulden yes, Paulden it was who finally persuaded Southem that there was nothing in it. He sent a report to the same effect to be read at one of the meetings. So Paulden is taking up bhurine again "

"Where does he live?" inquired Carrados.

"Ivor House, Wilmington Lane, Enstead. As secretary I have written there a score of times."

"It is on the Great Western−Paddington," commented the blind man. "Still, can you get out the addresses of the others in the know, Mr. Lightcraft?"

"Certainly, certainly. I have the book of membership. But I am convinced now that Paulden was the man. I believe that I did actually see him once some years ago, but he has grown a moustache since."

"If you had been convinced of that a few days ago it would have saved us some awkwardness," volunteered Mr. Carlyle with a little dignified asperity.

"When you came before, Mr. Carlyle, you were so convinced yourself of it being Mr. Loudham that you wouldn't hear of me thinking of anyone else," retorted the chemist. "You will bear me out so that I never positively identified him as my customer. Now here is the book. Southem, Potter's Bar. Voynich, Islington. Crawford, Streatham Hill. Brown, Southampton Row. Vickers, Clapham Common. Tidey, Fulham. All those I knew quite well−associated with them week after week. Williams I didn't know so closely. He is dead. Bigwood has gone to Canada. I don't think anyone else was in the bhurine craze as we called it afterwards."

"But now? What would you call it now?" queried Carrados.

"Now? Well, I hope that you will get me out of having to turn up at court and that sort of thing, Mr. Carrados. If Paulden is going on experimenting with bhurine again on the sly I shall want all my spare time to do the same myself!"

A few hours later the two investigators rang the bell of a substantial detached house in Enstead, the little country town twenty miles out in Berkshire, and asked to see Mr. Paulden.

"It is no good taking Lightcraft to identify the man," Carrados had decided. "If Paulden denied it, our friend's obliging record in that line would put him out of court."

"I maintain an open mind on the subject," Carlyle had replied. "Lightcraft is admittedly a very bending reed, but there is no reason why he should not have been right before and wrong to−day."

They were shown into a ceremonial reception−room to wait. Mr. Carlyle diagnosed snug circumstances and the tastes of an indoors, comfort−loving man in the surroundings.

The door opened, but it was to admit a middle−aged matronly lady with good−humour and domestic capability proclaimed by every detail of her smiling face and easy manner.

"You wished to see my husband?" she asked with friendly courtesy.

"Mr. Paulden? Yes, we should like to," replied Carlyle, with his most responsive urbanity. "It is a matter that need not occupy more than a few minutes."

"He is very busy just now. If it has to do with the election" a local contest was at its height−"he is not interested in politics and scarcely ever votes." Her manner was not curious, but merely reflected a business−like desire to save trouble all round.

"Very sensible too, very sensible indeed," almost warbled Mr. Carlyle with instinctive cajolery. "After all," he continued, mendaciously appropriating as his own an aphorism at which he had laughed heartily a few days before in the theatre, "after all, what does an election do but change the colour of the necktie of the man who picks our pockets? No, no, Mrs. Paulden, it is merely a−um−quite personal matter."

The lady looked from one to the other with smiling amiability.

"Some little mystery," her expression seemed to say. "All right; I don't mind, only perhaps I could help you if I knew."

"Mr. Paulden is in his dark−room now," was what she actually did say. "I am afraid, I am really afraid that I shan't be able to persuade him to come out unless I can take a definite message."

"One understands the difficulty of tempting an enthusiast from his work," suggested Carrados, speaking for the first time. "Would it be permissible to take us to the door of the dark−room, Mrs. Paulden, and let us speak to your husband through it?"

"We can try that way," she acquiesced readily, "if it is really so important."

"I think so," he replied.

The dark−room lay across the hall. Mrs. Paulden conducted them to the door, waited a moment and then knocked quietly.

"Yes?" sang out a voice, rather irritably one might judge, from inside.

"Two gentlemen have called to see you about something, Lance "

"I cannot see anyone when I am in here," interrupted the voice with rising sharpness. "You know that, Clara "

"Yes, dear," she said soothingly; "but listen. They are at the door here and if you can spare the time just to come and speak you will know without much trouble if their business is as important as they think."

"Wait a minute," came the reply after a moment's pause, and then they heard someone approach the door from the other side.

It was a little difficult to know exactly how it happened in the obscure light of the corner of the hall. Carrados had stepped nearer to the door to speak. Possibly he trod on Mr. Carlyle's toe, for there was a confused movement; certainly he put out his hand hastily to recover himself. The next moment the door of the dark−room jerked open, the light was let in and the warm odours of a mixed and vitiated atmosphere rolled out. Secure in the well−ordered discipline of his excellent household, Mr. Paulden had neglected the precaution of locking himself in.

"Confound it all," shouted the incensed experimenter in a towering rage, "confound it all, you've spoiled the whole thing now!"

"Dear me," apologised Carrados penitently, "I am so sorry. I think it must have been my fault, do you know. Does it really matter?"

"Matter!" stormed Mr. Paulden, recklessly flinging open the door fully now to come face to face with his disturbers−"matter letting a flood of light into a darkroom in the middle of a delicate experiment!"

"Surely it was very little," persisted Carrados.

"Pshaw," snarled the angry gentleman; "it was enough. You know the difference between light and dark, I suppose?" Mr. Carlyle suddenly found himself holding his breath, wondering how on earth Max had conjured that opportune challenge to the surface.

"No," was the mild and deprecating reply the appeal *ad misericordiam* that had never failed him yet "no, unfortunately I don't, for I am blind. That is why I am so awkward."

Out of the shocked silence Mrs. Paulden gave a little croon of pity. The moment before she had been speechless with indignation on her husband's behalf. Paulden felt as though he had struck a suffering animal. He stammered an apology and turned away to close the unfortunate door. Then he began to walk slowly down the hall.

"You wished to see me about something?" he remarked, with matter−of−fact civility. "Perhaps we had better go in here." He indicated the reception room where they had waited and followed them in. The admirable Mrs. Paulden gave no indication of wishing to join the party.

Carrados came to the point at once.

"Mr. Carlyle," he said, indicating his friend, "has recently been acting for the prosecution in a case of alleged poisoning that the Public Prosecutor has now taken up. I am interested in the defence. Both sides are thus before you, Mr. Paulden."

"How does this concern me?" asked Paulden with obvious surprise.

"You are experimenting with bhurine. The victim of this alleged crime undoubtedly lost his life by bhurine poisoning. Do you mind telling us when and where you acquired your stock of this scarce substance?"

"I have had "

"No a moment, Mr. Paulden, before you reply," struck in Carrados with arresting hand. "You must understand that nothing so grotesque as to connect you with a crime is contemplated. But a man is under arrest and the chief point against him is the half−ounce of bhurine that Lightcraft of Trenion Street sold td someone at half−past five last Wednesday fortnight. Before you commit yourself to any statement that it may possibly be difficult to recede from, you should realise that this inquiry will be pushed to the very end."

"How do you know that I am using bhurine?"

"That," parried Carrados, "is a blind man's secret."

"Oh, well. And you say that someone has been arrested through this fact?"

"Yes. Possibly you have read something of the St. Abbots mushroom poisoning case?"

"I have no interest in the sensational ephemera of the Press. Very well; it was I who bought the bhurine from Lightcraft that Wednesday afternoon. I gave a false name and address, I must admit. I had a sufficient private reason for so doing."

"This knocks what is vulgarly termed 'the stuffing' out of the case for the prosecution," observed Carlyle, who had been taking a note. "It may also involve you in some trouble yourself, Mr. Paulden."

"I don't think that you need regard that very seriously in the circumstances," said Carrados reassuringly.

"They must find some scapegoat, you know," persisted Mr. Carlyle. "Loudham will raise Cain over it."

"I don't think so. Loudham, as the prosecution will roundly tell him, has only himself to thank for not giving a satisfactory account of his movements. Loudham will be lectured, Lightcraft will be fined the minimum, and Mr. Paulden will, I imagine, be told not to do it again."

The man before them laughed bitterly.

"There will be no occasion to do it again," he remarked. "Do you know anything of the circumstances?"

"Lightcraft told us something connected with colour photography. You distrust Mr. Lightcraft, I infer?"

Mr. Paulden came down to the heart−easing medium of the street.

"I've had some once, thanks," was what he said with terse expression. "Let me tell you. About eighteen months ago I was on the edge of a great discovery in colour photography. It was my discovery, whatever you may have heard. Bhurine was the medium, and not being then so cautious or suspicious as I have reason to be now, and finding it difficult really impossible to procure this substance casually, I sent in an order to Lightcraft to procure me a stock. Unfortunately, in a moment of enthusiasm I had hinted at the anticipated results to a man who was then my friend a weakling called Southem. Comparing notes with Lightcraft they put two and two together and in a trice most of the secret boiled over.

"If you have ever been within an ace of a monumental discovery you will understand the torment of anxiety and self−reproach that possessed me. For months the result must have trembled in the balance, but even as it evaded me, so it evaded the others. And at last I was able to spread conviction that the bhurine process was a failure. I breathed again.

"You don't want to hear of the various things that conspired to baffle me. I proceeded with extreme caution and therefore slowly. About two weeks ago I had another foretaste of success and immediately on it a veritable disaster. By some diabolical mischance I contrived to upset my stock bottle of bhurine. It rolled down, smashed to atoms on a developing dish filled with another chemical, and the precious lot was irretrievably lost. To arrest the experiments at that stage for a day was to lose a month. In one place and one alone could I hope to replenish the stock temporarily at such short notice and to do it openly after my last experience filled me with dismay.

Well, you know what happened, and now, I suppose, it will all come out."

* * * * *

A week after his arrest Philip Loudham and his sister were sitting together in the drawing−room at Hazlehurst, nervous and expectant. Loudham had been discharged scarcely six hours before, with such vindication of his character as the frigid intimation that there was no evidence against him afforded. On his arrival home he had found a letter from Max Carrados a name with which he was now familiar awaiting him. There had been other notes and telegrams messages of sympathy and congratulation, but the man who had brought about his liberation did not include these conventionalities. He merely stated that he proposed calling upon Mr. Loudham at nine o'clock that evening and that he hoped it would be convenient for him and all other members of the household to be at home.

"He can scarcely be coming to be thanked," speculated Loudham, breaking the silence that had fallen on them as the hour approached. "I should have called on him myself to−morrow."

Mrs. Dupreen assented absent−mindedly. Both were dressed in black, and both at that moment had the same thought: that they were dreaming this.

"I suppose you won't go on living here, Irene?" continued the brother, speaking to make the minutes seem tolerable.

This at least had the effect of bringing Mrs. Dupreen back into the present with a rush.

"Of course not," she replied almost sharply and looking at him direct. "Why should I, now?"

"Oh, all right," he agreed. "I didn't suppose you would." Then, as the front−door bell was heard to ring: "Thank heaven!"

"Won't you go to meet him in the hall and bring him in?" suggested Mrs. Dupreen. "He is blind, you know."

Carrados was carrying a small leather case which he allowed Loudham to relieve him of, together with his hat and gloves. The introduction to Mrs. Dupreen was made, the blind man put in touch with a chair, and then Philip Loudham began to rattle off the acknowledgment of gratitude of which he had been framing and rejecting openings for the last half−hour.

"I'm afraid it's no good attempting to thank you for the extraordinary service that you've rendered me, Mr. Carrados," he began, "and, above all, I appreciate the fact that, owing to you, it has been possible to keep Mrs. Guestling's name entirely out of the case. Of course you know all about that, and my sister knows, so it isn't worth while beating about the bush. Well, now that I shall have something like a decent income of my own, I shall urge Kitty−Mrs. Guestling−to apply for the divorce that she is richly entitled to, and when that is all settled we shall marry at once and try to forget the experiences on both sides that have led up to it. I hope," he added tamely, "that you don't consider us really much to blame?"

Carrados shook his head in mild deprecation.

"That is an ethical point that has lain outside the scope of my inquiry," he replied. "You would hardly imagine that I should disturb you at such a time merely to claim your thanks. Has it occurred to you why I should have come?"

Brother and sister exchanged looks and by their silence gave reply.

"We have still to find who poisoned Charlie Winpole."

Loudham stared at their guest in frank bewilderment. Mrs. Dupreen almost closed her eyes. When she spoke it was in a pained whisper.

"Is there anything more to be gained by pursuing that idea, Mr. Carrados?" she asked pleadingly. "We have passed through a week of anguish, coming upon a week of grief and great distress. Surely all has been done that can be done?"

"But you would have justice for your nephew if there has been foul play?" Mrs. Dupreen made a weary gesture of resignation. It was Loudham who took up the question.

"Do you really mean, Mr. Carrados, that there is any doubt about the cause?"

"Will you give me my case, please? Thank you." He opened it and produced a small paper bag. "Now a newspaper, if you will." He opened the bag and poured out the contents. "You remember stating at the inquest, Mrs. Dupreen, that the mushrooms you bought looked rather dry? They were dry, there is no doubt, for they had then been gathered four days. Here are some more under precisely the same conditions. They looked, in point of fact, like these?"

"Yes," admitted the lady, beginning to regard Carrados with a new and curious interest.

"Dr. Slark further stated that the only fungus containing the poison bhurine the Amanita called the Black Cap, and also by the country folk the Devil's Scent Bottle did not assume its forbidding appearance until maturity. He was wrong in one sense there, for experiment proved that if the Black Cap is gathered in its young and deceptive stage and kept, it assumes precisely the same appearance as it withers as if it was ripening naturally. You observe." He opened a a second bag and, shaking out the contents, displayed another little heap by the side of the first. "Gathered four days ago," he explained.

"Why, they are as black as ink," commented Loudham. "And the, phew! aroma!"

"One would hardly have got through without you seeing it, Mrs. Dupreen?"

"I certainly hardly think so," she admitted.

"With due allowance for Lackington's biased opinion I also think that his claim might be allowed. Finally, it is incredible that whoever peeled the mushrooms should have passed one of these. Who was the cook on that occasion, Mrs. Dupreen?"

"My maid Hilda. She does all the cooking."

"The one who admitted me?"

"Yes; she is the only servant I have, Mr. Carrados."

"I should like to have her in, if you don't mind."

"Certainly, if you wish it. She is"−Mrs. Dupreen felt that she must put in a favourable word before this inexorable man pronounced judgment "she is a very good, straightforward girl."

"So much the better."

"I will " Mrs. Dupreen rose and began to cross the room. "Ring for her? Thank you," and whatever her intention had been the lady rang the bell.

"Yes, ma'am?"

A neat, modest−mannered girl, simple and nervous, with a face as full, as clear and as honest as an English apple. "A pity," thought Mrs. Dupreen, "that this confident, suspicious man cannot see her now."

"Come in, Hilda. This gentleman wants to ask you something."

"Yes, ma' am." The round, blue eyes went appealingly to Carrados, fell upon the fungi spread out before her, and then circled the room with an instinct of escape.

"You remember the night poor Charlie died, Hilda," said Carrados in his suavest tones, "you cooked some mushrooms for his supper, didn't you?"

"No, sir," came the glib reply.

"'No,' Hilda!" exclaimed Mrs. Dupreen in wonderment. "You mean 'yes,' surely, child. Of course you cooked them. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, ma'am," dutifully replied Hilda.

"That is all right," said the blind man reassuringly. "Nervous witnesses very often answer at random at first. You have nothing to be afraid of, my good girl, if you will tell the truth. I suppose you know a mushroom when you see it?"

"Yes, sir," was the rather hesitating reply.

"There was nothing like this among them?" He held up one of the poisonous sort.

"No, sir; indeed there wasn't, sir. I should have known then."

"You would have known then? You were not called at the inquest, Hilda?"

"No, sir."

"If you had been, what would you have told them about these mushrooms that you cooked?"

"I I don't know, sir."

"Come, come, Hilda. What could you have told them something that we do not know? The truth, girl, if you want to save yourself?" Then with a sudden, terrible directness the question cleft her trembling, guilt−stricken little brain: "Where did you get the other mushrooms from that you put with those that your mistress brought?"

The eyes that had been mostly riveted to the floor leapt to Carrados for a single frightened glance, from Carrados to her mistress, to Philip Loudham, and to the floor again. In a moment her face changed and she was in a burst of sobbing.

"Oho, oho, oho!" she wailed. "I didn't know; I didn't know. I meant no harm; indeed I didn't, ma'am."

"Hilda! Hilda!" exclaimed Mrs. Dupreen in bewilderment. "What is it you're saying? What have you done?"

"It was his own fault. Oho, oho, oho!" Every word was punctuated by a gasp. "He always was a little pig and making himself ill with food. You know he was, ma'am, although you were so fond of him. I'm sure I'm not to blame."

"But what was it? What have you done?" besought her mistress. "It was after you went out on that afternoon. He put on his things and slipped down into the kitchen without the master knowing. He said what you were getting for his dinner, ma'am, and that you never got enough of them. Then he told me not to tell about his being down, because he'd seen some white things from his bedroom window growing by the hedge at the bottom of the garden and he was going to get them. He brought in four or five and said they were mushrooms and asked me to cook them with the others and not say anything because you'd say too many were not good for him. And I didn't know any difference. Indeed I'm telling you the truth, ma'am."

"Oh, Hilda, Hilda!" was torn reproachfully from Mrs. Dupreen. "You know what we've gone through. Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I was afraid. I was afraid of what they'd do. And no one ever guessed until I thought I was safe. Indeed I meant no harm to anyone, but I was afraid that they'd punish me instead." Carrados had risen and was picking up his things.

"Yes," he said, half musing to himself, "I knew it must exist: the one explanation that accounts for everything and cannot be assailed. We have reached the bed−rock of truth at last."