

The Four Corners of the World



A. E. W. Mason

**THE FOUR CORNERS
OF THE WORLD**

BY

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THE CLOCK

I

Mr. Twiss was a great walker, and it was his habit, after his day's work was done, to walk from his pleasant office in the Adelphi to his home at Hampstead. On an afternoon he was detained to a later hour than usual by one of his clients, a Captain Brayton, over some matter of a mortgage. Mr. Twiss looked at his office clock.

"You are going west, I suppose?" he said. "I wonder if you would walk with me as far as Piccadilly? It will not be very much out of your way, and I have a reason for wishing your company."

"By all means," replied Captain Brayton, and the two men set forth.

Mr. Twiss, however, seemed in a difficulty as to how he should broach his subject, and for a while the pair walked in silence. They, indeed, reached Pall Mall, and were walking down that broad thoroughfare, before a word of any importance was uttered. And even then it was chance which furnished the occasion. A young man of Captain Brayton's age came down from the steps of a club and walked towards them. As he passed beneath a street lamp, Mr. Twiss noticed his face, and ever so slightly started with surprise. At almost the same moment, the young man swerved across the road at a run, as though suddenly he remembered a very pressing appointment. The two men walked on again for a few paces, and then Captain Brayton observed: "There is a screw loose there, I am afraid."

Mr. Twiss shook his head.

"I am sorry to hear you say so," he replied. "It was, indeed, about Archie

Cranfield that I was anxious to speak to you. I promised his father that I would be something more than Archie's mere man of affairs, if I were allowed, and I confess that I am troubled by him. You know him well?"

Captain Brayton nodded his head.

"Perhaps I should say that I did know him well," he returned. "We were at the same school, we passed through Chatham together, but since he has relinquished actual service we have seen very little of one another." Here he hesitated, but eventually made up his mind to continue in a guarded fashion. "Also, I am bound to admit that there has been cause for disagreement. We quarrelled."

Mr. Twiss was disappointed. "Then you can tell me nothing of him recently?" he asked, and Captain Brayton shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing but what all the little world of his acquaintances already knows. He has grown solitary, forbidding in his manner, and, what is most noticeable, sly--extraordinarily sly. While he is speaking with you, he will smile at some secret thought of his; the affairs of the world have lost their interest for him; he hardly listens and seldom speaks. He is concerned with some private matter, and he hides it cunningly. That is the character, at all events, which his friends give of him."

They had now reached the corner of St. James's Street, and as they turned up the hill, Mr. Twiss took up the tale.

"I am not surprised at what you tell me. It is a great pity, for we both remember him ambitious and a good soldier. I am inclined to blame the house in the country for the change in him."

Captain Brayton, however, did not agree.

"It goes deeper than that," he said. "Men who live alone in the country may show furtive ways in towns, no doubt. But why does he live alone in the country? No, that will not do"; and at the top of St. James's Street the two men parted.

Mr. Twiss walked up Bond Street, and the memory of that house in the country in which Archie Cranfield chose to bury himself kept him company. Mr. Twiss had travelled down into the eastern counties to see it for himself one Saturday afternoon when Cranfield was away from home, and a walk of

six miles from the station had taken him to its door. It stood upon the borders of Essex and Suffolk, a small Elizabethan house backed upon the Stour, a place of black beams and low ceilings and great fireplaces. It had been buttressed behind, where the ground ran down to the river-bank, and hardly a window was on a level with its neighbour. A picturesque place enough, but Mr. Twiss was a lover of towns and of paved footways and illuminated streets. He imagined it on such an evening as this, dark, and the rain dripping cheerlessly from the trees. He imagined its inmate crouching over the fire with his sly smile upon his face, and of a sudden the picture took on a sinister look, and a strong sense of discomfort made Mr. Twiss cast an uneasy glance behind him. He had in his pocket a letter of instructions from Archie Cranfield, bidding him buy the house outright with its furniture, since it had now all come into the market.

It was a week after this when next Captain Brayton came to Mr. Twiss's office, and, their business done, he spoke of his own accord of Archie Cranfield.

"I am going to stay with him," he said. "He wrote to me on the night of the day when we passed him in Pall Mall. He told me that he would make up a small bachelor party. I am very glad, for, to tell the truth, our quarrel was a sufficiently serious one, and here, it seems, is the end to it."

Mr. Twiss was delighted, and shook his client warmly by the hand.

"You shall bring me news of Archie Cranfield," he said--"better news than I have," he added, with a sudden gravity upon his face. For in making the arrangements for the purchase of the house, he had come into contact with various neighbours of Archie Cranfield, and from all of them he had had but one report. Cranfield had a bad name in those parts. There were no particular facts given to account for his reputation. It was all elusive and vague, an impression conveyed by Archie Cranfield himself, by something strange and sly in his demeanour. He would sit chuckling in a sort of triumph, to which no one had the clue, or, on the other hand, he fell into deep silences like a man with a trouble on his mind.

"Be sure you come to see me when you return," said Mr. Twiss, and Captain Brayton replied heartily: "Surely I will." But he never did. For in a few days the newspapers were busy with the strange enigma of his death.

II

The first hint of this enigma was conveyed to Mr. Twiss late one night at his private address. It came in the shape of a telegram from Archie Cranfield, which seemed to the agitated solicitor rather a cry of distress than a message sent across the wires.

"Come at once. I am in terrible need.--Cranfield."

There were no trains at so late an hour by which Mr. Twiss could reach his client; he must needs wait until the morning. He travelled, however, by the first train from Liverpool Street. Although the newspapers were set out upon the bookstall, not one of them contained a word of anything amiss at Archie Cranfield's house, and Mr. Twiss began to breathe more freely. It was too early for a cab to be in waiting at the station, and Mr. Twiss set out to walk the six miles. It was a fine, clear morning of November; but for the want of leaves and birds, and the dull look of the countryside, Mr. Twiss might have believed the season to be June. His spirits rose as he walked, his blood warmed to a comfortable glow, and by the time he came to the gates of the house, Cranfield's summons had become a trifling thing. As he walked up to the door, however, his mood changed, for every blind in the house was drawn. The door was opened before he could touch the bell, and it was opened by Cranfield himself. His face was pale and disordered, his manner that of a man at his wits' end.

"What has happened?" asked Mr. Twiss as he entered the hall.

"A terrible thing!" replied Cranfield. "It's Brayton. Have you breakfasted? I suppose not. Come, and I will tell you while you eat."

He walked up and down the room while Mr. Twiss ate his breakfast, and gradually, by question and by answer, the story took shape. Corroboration was easy and was secured. There was no real dispute about the facts; they were simple and clear.

There were two other visitors in the house besides Captain Brayton, one a barrister named Henry Chalmers, and the second, William Linfield, a man about town as the phrase goes. Both men stood in much the same relationship

to Archie Cranfield as Captain Brayton did--that is to say, they were old friends who had seen little of their host of late, and were somewhat surprised to receive his invitation after so long an interval. They had accepted it in the same spirit as Brayton, and the three men arrived together on Wednesday evening. On Thursday the party of four shot over some turnip fields and a few clumps of wood which belonged to the house, and played a game of bridge in the evening. In the opinion of all, Brayton was never in better spirits. On Friday the four men shot again and returned to the house as darkness was coming on. They took tea in the smoking-room, and after tea Brayton declared his intention to write some letters before dinner. He went upstairs to his room for that purpose.

The other three men remained in the smoking-room. Of that there was no doubt. Both Chalmers and Linfield were emphatic upon the point. Chalmers, in particular, said:

"We sat talking on a well-worn theme, I in a chair on one side of the fireplace, Archie Cranfield in another opposite to me, and Linfield sitting on the edge of the billiard-table between us. How the subject cropped up I cannot remember, but I found myself arguing that most men hid their real selves all their lives even from their most intimate friends, that there were secret chambers in a man's consciousness wherein he lived a different life from that which the world saw and knew, and that it was only by some rare mistake the portals of that chamber were ever passed by any other man. Linfield would not hear of it. If this hidden man were the real man, he held, in some way or another the reality would triumph, and some vague suspicion of the truth would in the end be felt by all his intimates. I upheld my view by instances from the courts of law, Linfield his by the aid of a generous imagination, while Cranfield looked from one to the other of us with his sly, mocking smile. I turned to him, indeed, in some heat.

"Well, since you appear to know, Cranfield, tell me which of us is right,' and his pipe fell from his fingers and broke upon the hearth. He stood up, with his face grown white and his lips drawn back from his teeth in a kind of snarl.

"What do you mean by that?' he asked; and before I could answer, the door was thrown violently open, and Cranfield's man-servant burst into the room. He mastered himself enough to say:

"May I speak to you, sir?"

"Cranfield went outside the door with him. He could not have moved six paces from the door, for though he closed it behind him, we heard the sound of his voice and of his servant's speaking in low tones. Moreover, there was no appreciable moment of time between the cessation of the voices and Cranfield's reappearance in the room. He came back to the fireplace and said very quietly:

"I have something terrible to tell you. Brayton has shot himself."

"He then glanced from Linfield's face to mine, and sat down in a chair heavily. Then he crouched over the fire shivering. Both Linfield and myself were too shocked by the news to say a word for a moment or two. Then Linfield asked:

"But is he dead?"

"Humphreys says so,' Cranfield returned. 'I have telephoned to the police and to the doctor.'

"But we had better go upstairs ourselves and see,' said I. And we did."

Thus Chalmers. Humphreys, the man-servant, gave the following account:

"The bell rang from Captain Brayton's room at half-past five. I answered it at once myself, and Captain Brayton asked me at what hour the post left. I replied that we sent the letters from the house to the post-office in the village at six. He then asked me to return at that hour and fetch those of his which would be ready. I returned precisely at six, and I saw Captain Brayton lying in a heap upon the rug in front of the fire. He was dead, and he held a revolver tightly clenched in his hand. As I stepped over him, I smelt that something was burning. He had shot himself through the heart, and his clothes were singed, as if he had held the revolver close to his side."

These stories were repeated at the inquest, and at this particular point in Humphreys' evidence the coroner asked a question:

"Did you recognise the revolver?"

"Not until Captain Brayton's hand was unclenched."

"But then you did?"

"Yes," said Humphreys.

The coroner pointed to the table on which a revolver lay.

"Is that the weapon?"

Humphreys took it up and looked at the handle, on which two initials were engraved--"A. C."

"Yes," said the man. "I recognised it as Mr. Cranfield's. He kept it in a drawer by his bedside."

No revolver was found amongst Captain Brayton's possessions.

It became clear that, while the three men were talking in the billiard-room, Captain Brayton had gone to Cranfield's room, taken his revolver, and killed himself with it. No evidence, however, was produced which supplied a reason for Brayton's suicide. His affairs were in good order, his means sufficient, his prospects of advancement in his career sound. Nor was there a suggestion of any private unhappiness. The tragedy, therefore, was entered in that list of mysteries which are held insoluble.

"I might," said Chalmers, "perhaps resume the argument which Humphreys interrupted in the billiard-room, with a better instance than any which I induced--the instance of Captain Brayton."

III

"You won't go?" Archie Cranfield pleaded with Mr. Twiss. "Linfield and Chalmers leave to-day. If you go too, I shall be entirely alone."

"But why should you stay?" the lawyer returned.

"Surely you hardly propose to remain through the winter in this house?"

"No, but I must stay on for a few days; I have to make arrangements before I can go," said Cranfield; and seeing that he was in earnest in his intention to go, Mr. Twiss was persuaded. He stayed on, and recognised, in consequence, that the death of Captain Brayton had amongst its consequences one which he had not expected. The feeling in the neighbourhood changed towards Archie Cranfield. It cannot be said that he became popular--he wore too sad and

joyless an air--but sympathy was shown to him in many acts of courtesy and in a greater charity of language.

A retired admiral, of a strong political complexion, who had been one of the foremost to dislike Archie Cranfield, called, indeed, to offer his condolences. Archie Cranfield did not see him, but Mr. Twiss walked down the drive with him to the gate.

"It's hard on Cranfield," said the admiral. "We all admit it. It wasn't fair of Brayton to take his host's revolver. But for the accident that Cranfield was in the billiard-room with Linfield and Chalmers, the affair might have taken on quite an ugly look. We all feel that in the neighbourhood, and we shall make it up to Cranfield. Just tell him that, Mr. Twiss, if you will."

"It is very kind of you all, I am sure," replied Mr. Twiss, "but I think Cranfield will not continue to live here. The death of Captain Brayton has been too much of a shock for him."

Mr. Twiss said "Good-bye" to the admiral at the gate, and returned to the house. He was not easy in his mind, and as he walked round the lawn under the great trees, he cried to himself:

"It is lucky, indeed, that Archie Cranfield was in the billiard-room with Linfield and Chalmers; otherwise, Heaven knows what I might have been brought to believe myself."

The two men had quarrelled; Brayton himself had imparted that piece of knowledge to Mr. Twiss. Then there was the queer change in Archie Cranfield's character, which had made for him enemies of strangers, and strangers of his friends--the slyness, the love of solitude, the indifference to the world, the furtive smile as of a man conscious of secret powers, the whole indescribable uncanniness of him. Mr. Twiss marshalled his impressions and stopped in the avenue.

"I should have had no just grounds for any suspicion," he concluded, "but I cannot say that I should not have suspected," and slowly he went on to the door.

He walked through the house into the billiard-room, and so became the witness of an incident which caused him an extraordinary disquiet. The room was empty. Mr. Twiss lit his pipe and took down a book from one, of the

shelves. A bright fire glowed upon the hearth, and drawing up a chair to the fender, he settled down to read. But the day was dull, and the fireplace stood at the dark end of the room. Mr. Twiss carried his book over to the window, which was a bay window with a broad seat. Now, the curtains were hung at the embrasure of the window, so that, when they were drawn, they shut the bay off altogether from the room, and when they were open, as now, they still concealed the corners of the window-seats. It was in one of these corners that Mr. Twiss took his seat, and there he read quietly for the space of five minutes.

At the end of that time he heard the latch of the door click, and looking out from his position behind the curtain, he saw the door slowly open. Archie Cranfield came through the doorway into the room, and shut the door behind him. Then he stood for a while by the door, very still, but breathing heavily. Mr. Twiss was on the point of coming forward and announcing his presence, but there was something so strange and secret in Cranfield's behaviour that, in spite of certain twinges of conscience, he remained hidden in his seat. He did more than remain hidden. He made a chink between the curtain and the wall, and watched. He saw Cranfield move swiftly over to the fireplace, seize a little old-fashioned clock in a case of satinwood which stood upon the mantelshelf, raise it in the air, and dash it with an ungovernable fury on to the stone hearth. Having done this unaccountable thing, Cranfield dropped into the chair which Mr. Twiss had drawn up. He covered his face with his hands and suddenly began to sob and wail in the most dreadful fashion, rocking his body from side to side in a very paroxysm of grief. Mr. Twiss was at his wits' end to know what to do. He felt that to catch a man sobbing would be to earn his undying resentment. Yet the sound was so horrible, and produced in him so sharp a discomfort and distress, that, on the other hand, he could hardly keep still. The paroxysm passed, however, almost as quickly as it had come, and Cranfield, springing to his feet, rang the bell. Humphreys answered it.

"I have knocked the clock off the mantelshelf with my elbow, Humphreys," he said. "I am afraid that it is broken, and the glass might cut somebody's hand. Would you mind clearing the pieces away?"

He went out of the room, and Humphreys went off for a dustpan. Mr. Twiss was able to escape from the billiard-room unnoticed. But it was a long time before he recovered from the uneasiness which the incident aroused in him.

Four days later the two men left the house together. The servants had been paid off. Humphreys had gone with the luggage to London by an earlier train. Mr. Twiss and Archie Cranfield were the last to go. Cranfield turned the key in the lock of the front door as they stood upon the steps.

"I shall never see the inside of that house again," he said with a gusty violence.

"Will you allow me to get rid of it for you?" asked Mr. Twiss; and for a moment Cranfield looked at him with knotted brows, blowing the while into the wards of the key.

"No," he said at length, and, running down to the stream at the back of the house, he tossed the key into the water. "No," he repeated sharply; "let the house rot empty as it stands. The rats shall have their will of it, and the sooner the better."

He walked quickly to the gate, with Mr. Twiss at his heels, and as they covered the six miles to the railway station, very little was said between them.

IV

Time ran on, and Mr. Twiss was a busy man. The old house by the Stour began to vanish from his memory amongst the mists and the veils of rain which so often enshrouded it. Even the enigma of Captain Brayton's death was ceasing to perplex him, when the whole affair was revived in the most startling fashion. A labourer, making a short cut to his work one summer morning, passed through the grounds of Cranfield's closed and shuttered house. His way led him round the back of the building, and as he came to that corner where the great brick buttresses kept the house from slipping down into the river, he saw below him, at the edge of the water, a man sleeping. The man's back was turned towards him; he was lying half upon his side, half upon his face. The labourer, wondering who it was, went down to the river-bank, and the first thing he noticed was a revolver lying upon the grass, its black barrel and handle shining in the morning sunlight. The labourer turned the sleeper over on his back. There was some blood upon the left breast of his

waistcoat. The sleeper was dead, and from the rigidity of the body had been dead for some hours. The labourer ran back to the village with the astounding news that he had found Mr. Cranfield shot through the heart at the back of his own empty house. People at first jumped naturally to the belief that murder had been done. The more judicious, however, shook their heads. Not a door nor a window was open in the house. When the locks were forced, it was seen that the dust lay deep on floor and chair and table, and nowhere was there any mark of a hand or a foot. Outside the house, too, in the long neglected grass, there were but two sets of footsteps visible, one set leading round the house--the marks made by the labourer on his way to his work--the other set leading directly to the spot where Archie Cranfield's body was found lying. Rumours, each contradicting the other, flew from cottage to cottage, and the men gathered about the police-station and in the street waiting for the next. In an hour or two, however, the mystery was at an end. It leaked out that upon Archie Cranfield's body a paper had been discovered, signed in his hand and by his name, with these words:

"I have shot myself with the same revolver with which I murdered Captain Brayton."

The statement created some stir when it was read out in the billiard-room, where the coroner held his inquest. But the coroner who presided now was the man who had held the court when Captain Brayton had been shot. He was quite clear in his recollection of that case.

"Mr. Cranfield's alibi on that occasion," he said, "was incontrovertible. Mr. Cranfield was with two friends in this very room when Captain Brayton shot himself in his bedroom. There can be no doubt of that." And under his direction the jury returned a verdict of "Suicide while of unsound mind."

Mr. Twiss attended the inquest and the funeral. But though he welcomed the verdict, at the bottom of his mind he was uneasy. He remembered vividly that extraordinary moment when he had seen Cranfield creep into the billiard-room, lift the little clock in its case of satinwood high above his head, and dash it down upon the hearth in a wild gust of fury. He recollected how the fury had given way to despair--if it were despair and not remorse. He saw again Archie Cranfield dropping into the chair, holding his head and rocking his body in a paroxysm of sobs. The sound of his wailing rang horribly once

more in the ears of Mr. Twiss. He was not satisfied.

"What should take Cranfield back to that deserted house, there to end his life, if not remorse," he asked himself--"remorse for some evil done there"?

Over that question for some days he shook his head, finding it waiting for him at his fireside and lurking for him at the corner of the roads, as he took his daily walk between Hampstead and his office. It began to poison his life, a life of sane and customary ways, with eerie suggestions. There was an oppression upon his heart of which he could not rid it. On the outskirts of his pleasant world dim horrors loomed; he seemed to walk upon a frail crust, fearful of what lay beneath. The sly smile, the furtive triumph, the apparent consciousness of secret power--did they point to some corruption of the soul in Cranfield, of which none knew but he himself?

"At all events, he paid for it," Mr. Twiss would insist, and from that reflection drew, after all, but little comfort. The riddle began even to invade his business hours, and take a seat within his private office, silently clamouring for his attention. So that it was with a veritable relief that he heard one morning from his clerk that a man called Humphreys wished particularly to see him.

"Show him in," cried Mr. Twiss, and for his own ear he added: "Now I shall know."

Humphreys entered the room with a letter in his hand. He laid the letter on the office table. Mr. Twiss saw at a glance that it was addressed in Archie Cranfield's hand. He flung himself upon it and snatched it up. It was sealed by Cranfield's seal. It was addressed to himself, with a note upon the left-hand corner of the envelope:

"To be delivered after my death."

Mr. Twiss turned sternly to the man.

"Why did you not bring it before?"

"Mr. Cranfield told me to wait a month," Humphreys replied.

Mr. Twiss took a turn across the room with the letter in his hand.

"Then you knew," he cried, "that your master meant to kill himself? You knew, and remained silent?"

"No, sir, I did not know," Humphreys replied firmly. "Mr. Cranfield gave me the letter, saying that he had a long railway journey in front of him. He was smiling when he gave it me. I can remember the words with which he gave it: 'They offer you an insurance ticket at the booking-office, when they sell you your travelling ticket, so there is always, I suppose, a little risk. And it is of the utmost importance to me that, in the event of my death, this should reach Mr. Twiss.' He spoke so lightly that I could not have guessed what was on his mind, nor, do I think, sir, could you."

Mr. Twiss dismissed the man and summoned his clerk. "I shall not be in to anyone this afternoon," he said. He broke the seal and drew some closely written sheets of note-paper from the envelope. He spread the sheets in front of him with a trembling hand.

"Heaven knows in what spirit and with what knowledge I shall rise from my reading," he thought; and looking out of his pleasant window upon the barges swinging down the river on the tide, he was in half a mind to fling the sheets of paper into the fire. "But I shall be plagued with that question all my life," he added, and he bent his head over his desk and read.

V

"My dear Friend,--I am writing down for you the facts. I am not offering any explanation, for I have none to give. You will probably rise up, after reading this letter, quite incredulous, and with the conviction in your mind that you have been reading the extravagancies of a madman. And I wish with all my heart that you could be right. But you are not. I have come to the end to-day. I am writing the last words I ever shall write, and therefore I am not likely to write a lie.

"You will remember the little manor-house on the borders of Essex, for you were always opposed to my purchase of it. You were like the British jury, my friend. Your conclusion was sound, but your reason for it very far from the mark. You disliked it for its isolation and the melancholy of its dripping trees, and I know not what other town-bred reasonings. I will give you a more solid cause. Picture to yourself the billiard-room and how it was furnished when I first took the house--the raised settee against the wall, the deep leather chairs

by the fire, the high fender, and on the mantelshelf--what?--a little old-fashioned clock in a case of satinwood. You probably never noticed it. I did from the first evenings which I passed in the house. For I spent those evenings alone, smoking my pipe by the fire. It had a queer trick. For a while it would tick almost imperceptibly, and then, without reason, quite suddenly, the noise would become loud and hollow, as though the pendulum in its swing struck against the wooden case. To anyone sitting alone for hours in the room, as I did, this tick had the queerest effect. The clock almost became endowed with human qualities. At one time it seemed to wish to attract one's attention, at another time to avoid it. For more than once, disturbed by the louder knocking, I rose and moved the clock. At once the knocking would cease, to begin again when I had settled afresh to my book, in a kind of tentative, secret way, as though it would accustom my ears to the sound, and so pass unnoticed. And often it did so pass, until one knock louder and more insistent than the rest would drag me in annoyance on to my feet once more. In a week, however, I got used to it, and then followed the strange incident which set in motion that chain of events of which tomorrow will see the end.

"It happened that a couple of my neighbours were calling on me. One of them you have met--Admiral Palkin, a prolix old gentleman, with a habit of saying nothing at remarkable length. The other was a Mr. Stiles, a country gentleman who had a thought of putting up for that division of the county. I led these two gentlemen into the billiard-room, and composed myself to listen while the admiral monologued. But the clock seemed to me to tick louder than ever, until, with one sharp and almost metallic thump, the sound ceased altogether. At exactly the same moment. Admiral Palkin stopped dead in the middle of a sentence. It was nothing of any consequence that he was saying, but I remember the words at which he stopped. 'I have often----' he said, and then he broke off, not with any abrupt start, or for any lack of words, but just as if he had completed all that he had meant to say. I looked at him across the fireplace, but his face wore its usual expression of complacent calm. He was in no way put out. Nor did it seem that any new train of thought had flashed into his mind and diverted it. I turned my eyes from him to Mr. Stiles. Mr. Stiles seemed actually to be unaware that the admiral had stopped talking at all. Admiral Palkin, you will remember, was a person of consequence in the district, and Mr. Stiles, who would subsequently need his

vote and influence and motorcar, had thought fit to assume an air of great deference. From the beginning he had leaned towards the admiral, his elbow upon his knee, his chin propped upon his hand, and his head now and again nodding a thoughtful assent to the admiral's nothings. In this attitude he still remained, not surprised, not even patiently waiting for the renewal of wisdom, but simply attentive.

"Nor did I move, for I was amused. The two men looked just like a couple of wax figures in Madame Tussaud's, fixed in a stiff attitude and condemned so to remain until the building should take fire and the wax run. I sat watching them for minutes, and still neither moved nor spoke. I never saw in my life a couple of people so entirely ridiculous. I tried hard to keep my countenance--for to laugh at these great little men in my own house would not only be bad manners, but would certainly do for me in the neighbourhood--but I could not help it. I began to smile, and the smile became a laugh. Yet not a muscle on the faces of my visitors changed. Not a frown overshadowed the admiral's complacency; not a glance diverted the admiring eyes of Mr. Stiles. And then the clock began to tick again, and, to my infinite astonishment, at the very same moment the admiral continued.

"--said to myself in my lighter moments---- And pray, sir, at what are you laughing?"

"Mr. Stiles turned with an angry glance towards me. Admiral Palkin had resumed his conversation, apparently unaware that there had been any interval at all. My laughter, on the other hand, had extended beyond the interval, had played an accompaniment to the words just spoken. I made my excuses as well as I could, but I recognised that they were deemed insufficient. The two gentlemen left my house with the coldest farewells you can imagine.

"The same extraordinary incident was repeated with other visitors, but I was on my guard against any injudicious merriment. Moreover, I had no longer any desire to laugh. I was too perplexed. My visitors never seemed to notice that there had been a lengthy interval or indeed any interval at all, while I, for my part, hesitated to ask them what had so completely hypnotised them.

"The next development took place when I was alone in the room. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. I had been out shooting a covert close to the house,

and a few minutes after I had rung the bell, I remembered that I had forgotten some instructions which I had meant to give to the keeper. So I got up at once, thinking to catch him in the gun-room before he went home. As I rose from my chair, the clock, which had been ticking loudly--though, as I have said, it was rather a hollow, booming sound, as though the pendulum struck the wood of the case, than a mere ticking of the clock-work--ceased its noise with the abruptness to which I was growing used. I went out of the room into the hall, and I saw Humphreys with the tea-tray in his hands in the hall. He was turned towards the billiard-room door, but to my astonishment he was not moving. He was poised with one foot in the air, as though he had been struck, as the saying is, with a step half taken. You have seen, no doubt, instantaneous photographs of people in the act of walking. Well, Humphreys was exactly like one of those photographs. He had just the same stiff, ungainly look. I should have spoken to him, but I was anxious to catch my keeper before he went away. So I took no notice of him. I crossed the hall quickly and went out by the front door, leaving it open. The gun-room was really a small building of corrugated iron, standing apart at the back of the house. I went to it and tried the door. It was locked. I called aloud: 'Martin! Martin!'

"But I received no answer. I ran round the house again, thinking that he might just have started home, but I saw no signs of him. There were some outhouses which it was his business to look after, and I visited them, opening the door of each of them and calling him by name. Then I went down the drive to the gate, thinking that I might perhaps catch a glimpse of him upon the road, but again I was disappointed. I then returned to the house, shut the front door, and there in the hall still stood Humphreys in his ridiculous attitude with the tea-tray in his hands. I passed him and went back into the billiard-room. He took no notice of me whatever. I looked at the clock upon the mantelshelf, and I saw that I had been away just fourteen minutes. For fourteen minutes Humphreys had been standing on one leg in the hall. It seemed as incredible as it was ludicrous. Yet there was the clock to bear me out. I sat down on my chair with my hands trembling, my mind in a maze. The strangest thought had come to me, and while I revolved it in my mind, the clock resumed its ticking, the door opened, and Humphreys appeared with the tea-tray in his hand.

"You have been a long time, Humphreys,' I said, and the man looked at me quickly. My voice was shaking with excitement, my face, no doubt, had a disordered look.

"I prepared the tea at once, sir,' he answered.

"It is twenty minutes by the clock since I rang the bell,' I said.

"Humphreys placed the tea on a small table at my side and then looked at the clock. An expression of surprise came over his face. He compared it with the dial of his own watch.

"The clock wants regulating, sir,' he said. 'I set it by the kitchen clock this morning, and it has gained fourteen minutes.'

"I whipped my own watch out of my pocket and stared at it. Humphreys was quite right; the clock upon the mantelshelf had gained fourteen minutes upon all our watches. Yes, but it had gained those fourteen minutes in a second, and that was the least part of the marvel. I myself had had the benefit of those fourteen minutes. I had snatched them, as it were, from Time itself. I had looked at my watch when I rang the bell. It had marked five minutes to five. I had remained yet another four minutes in the room before I had remembered my forgotten instructions to the keeper. I had then gone out. I had visited the gun-room and the outhouses, I had walked to the front gate, I had returned. I had taken fourteen minutes over my search--I could not have taken less--and here were the hands of my watch now still pointing towards five, still short of the hour. Indeed, as I replaced my watch in my pocket, the clock in the hall outside struck five.

"As you passed through the hall, Humphreys, you saw no one, I suppose?' I said.

"Humphreys raised his eyebrows with a look of perplexity. 'No, sir, I saw no one,' he returned, 'but it seemed to me that the front door banged. I think it must have been left open.'

"Very likely,' said I. 'That will do,' and Humphreys went out of the room.

"Imagine my feelings. Time is relative, it is a condition of our senses, it is nothing more--that we know. But its relation to me was different from its relation to others. The clock had given me fourteen minutes, which it denied to all the world besides. Fourteen full minutes for me, yet they passed for

others in less than the fraction of a second. And not once only had it made me this gift, but many times. The admiral's pause, unnoticed by Mr. Stiles, was now explained to me. He had not paused; he had gone straight on with his flow of talk, and Mr. Stiles had gone straight on listening. But between two of Admiral Palkin's words. Time had stood still for me. Similarly, Humphreys had not poised himself upon one ridiculous leg in the hall. He had taken a step in the usual way, but while his leg was raised, fourteen minutes were given to me. I had walked through the hall, I had walked back through the hall, yet Humphreys had not seen me. He could not have seen me, for there had been no interval of time for him to use his eyes. I had gone and come quicker than any flash, for even a flash is appreciable as some fraction of a second.

"I asked you to imagine my feelings. Only with those which I first experienced would you, from your sane and comfortable outlook upon life, have any sympathy, for at the beginning I was shocked. I had more than an inclination then to dash that clock upon the hearth and deny myself its bizarre and unnatural gift. Would that I had done so! But the inclination was passed, and was succeeded by an incredible lightness of spirit. I had a gift which raised me above kings, which fanned into a flame every spark of vanity within me. I had so much more of time than any other man. I amused myself by making plans to use it, and thereupon I suffered a disappointment. For there was so little one could do in fourteen minutes, and the more I realised how little there was which I could do in my own private special stretch of time, the more I wanted to do, the more completely I wished to live in it, the more I wished to pluck power and advantage from it. Thus I began to look forward to the sudden cessation of the ticking of the clock; I began to wait for it, to live for it, and when it came, I could make no use of it. I gained fourteen minutes now and then, but I lost more and more of the hours which I shared with other men. They lost their salt for me. I became tortured with the waste of those minutes of my own. I had the power; what I wanted now was to employ it. The desire became an obsession occupying my thoughts, harassing my dreams.

"I was in this mood when I passed Brayton and yourself one evening in Pall Mall. I wrote to him that night, and I swear to you upon my conscience that I had no thought in writing but to put an end to an old disagreement, and re-

establish, if possible, an old friendship. I wrote in a sudden revulsion of feeling. The waste of my days was brought home to me. I recognised that the great gift was no more than a perpetual injury. I proposed to gather my acquaintances about me, discard my ambition for some striking illustration of my power, and take up once more the threads of customary life. Yet my determination lasted no longer than the time it took me to write the letter and run out with it to the post. I regretted its despatch even as I heard it fall to the bottom of the pillar-box.

"Of my quarrel with Brayton I need not write at length. It sprang from a rancorous jealousy. We had been friends and class-mates in the beginning. But as step by step he rose just a little above me, the friendship I had turned to gall and anger. I was never more than the second, he always the first. Had I been fourth or fifth, I think I should not have minded; but there was so little to separate us in merit or advancement. Yet there was always that little, and I dreaded the moment when he should take a bound and leave me far behind. The jealousy grew to a real hatred, made still more bitter to me by the knowledge that Brayton himself was unaware of it, and need not have been troubled had he been aware.

"After I left the Army and lost sight of him, the flame burnt low. I believed it was extinguished when I invited him to stay with me; but he had not been an hour in the house when it blazed up within me. His success, the confidence which it had given him, his easy friendliness with strangers, the talk of him as a coming man, bit into my soul. The very sound of his footstep sickened me. I was in this mood when the clock began to boom louder and louder in the billiard-room. Chalmers and Linfield were talking. I did not listen to them. My heart beat louder and louder within my breast, keeping pace with the clock. I knew that in a moment or two the sound would cease, and the doors of my private kingdom would be open for me to pass through. I sat back in my chair waiting while the devilish inspiration had birth and grew strong. Here was the great chance to use the power I had--the only chance which had ever come to me. Brayton was writing letters in his room. The room was in a wing of the house. The sound of a shot would not be heard. There would be an end of his success; there would be for me such a triumphant use of my great privilege as I had never dreamed of. The clock suddenly ceased. I slipped from the room and went upstairs. I was quite leisurely. I had time. I