

## Chapter 1

### *Candle-Light*

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The view from the narrow window was dreary and inexpressibly lonely. Miles of neglected park-land stretched in an unbroken plain to the horizon and the sea beyond. On all sides it was the same.

The grey-green stretches were hayed once a year, perhaps, but otherwise uncropped save by the herd of heavy-shouldered black cattle who wandered about them, their huge forms immense and grotesque in the fast-thickening twilight.

In the centre of this desolation, standing in a thousand acres of its own land, was the mansion, Black Dudley; a great grey building, bare and ugly as a fortress. No creepers hid its nakedness, and the long narrow windows were dark-curtained and uninviting.

The man in the old-fashioned bedroom turned away from the window and went on with his dressing.

‘Gloomy old place,’ he remarked to his reflection in the mirror. ‘Thank God it’s not mine.’

He tweaked his black tie deftly as he spoke, and stood back to survey the effect. George Abbershaw, although his appearance did not indicate it, was a minor celebrity.

He was a smallish man, chubby and solemn, with a choirboy expression and a head of ridiculous bright-red curls which gave him a somewhat fantastic appearance. He was fastidiously tidy in his dress and there was an air of precision in everything he did or said which betrayed an amazingly orderly mind. Apart from this, however, there was nothing about him to suggest that he was particularly distinguished or even mildly interesting, yet in a small and exclusive circle of learned men Dr George Abbershaw was an important person.

His book on pathology, treated with special reference to fatal wounds and the means of ascertaining their probable causes, was a standard work, and in view of his many services to the police in the past his name was well known and his opinion respected at the Yard.

At the moment he was on holiday, and the unusual care which he took over his toilet suggested that he had not come down to Black Dudley solely for the sake of recuperating in the Suffolk air.

Much to his own secret surprise and perplexity, he had fallen in love. He recognized the symptoms at once and made no attempt at self-deception, but with his usual methodical thoroughness set himself to remove the disturbing emotion by one or other of the only two methods known to mankind – disillusionment or marriage. For that reason, therefore, when Wyatt Petrie had begged him to join a week-end party at his uncle’s house in the country, he had been persuaded to accept by the promise that Margaret Oliphant should also be of the party.

Wyatt had managed it, and she was in the house.

George Abbershaw sighed, and let his thoughts run on idly about his young host. A queer chap, Wyatt: Oxford turned out a lot of interesting young men with bees in their bonnets. Wyatt was a good lad, one of the best. He was profoundly grateful to Wyatt. Good Lord, what a profile she had, and there was brain there too, not empty prettiness. If only . . . ! He pulled himself together and mentally rebuked himself.

This problem must be attacked like any other, decently and in order. He must talk to her; get to know her better, find out what she liked, what she thought about. With his mind still on these things the booming of the dinner gong surprised him, and he hurried down the low-stepped Tudor staircase as nearly flurried as he had ever been in his life.

However bleak and forbidding was Black Dudley’s exterior, the rooms within were none the less magnificent. Even here there were the same signs of neglect that were so evident in the Park, but there was a certain dusty majesty about the dark-panelled walls with the oil-paintings hanging in their fast-blackening frames, and in the heavy, dark-oak furniture, elaborately carved and utterly devoid of polish, that was very impressive and pleasing.

The place had not been modernized at all. There were still candles in the iron sconces in the hall, and the soft light sent great shadows, like enormous ghostly hands, creeping up to the oak-beamed ceiling.

George sniffed as he ran down the staircase. The air was faintly clammy and the tallow smelt a little.

‘Damp!’ said he to himself. ‘These old places need a lot of looking after . . . shouldn’t think the sanitary system was any too good. Very nice, but I’m glad it’s not mine.’

The dining-hall might have made him change his mind. All down one side of the long, low room was a row of stained-glass windows. In a great open fireplace a couple of faggots blazed whole, and on the long refectory table, which ran nearly the entire length of the flagged floor, eight seven-branched candlesticks held the only light. There were portraits on the walls, strangely differing in style, as the artists of the varying periods followed the fashions set by the masters of their time, but each face bearing a curious likeness to the next – the same straight noses, the same long thin lips, and above all, the same slightly rebellious expression.

Most of the party had already assembled when Abbershaw came in, and it struck him as incongruous to hear the babble of bright young conversation in this great tomb of a house with its faintly musty air and curiously archaic atmosphere.

As he caught sight of a gleam of copper-coloured hair on the other side of the table, however, he instantly forgot any sinister dampness or anything at all mysterious or unpleasant about the house.

Meggie Oliphant was one of those modern young women who manage to be fashionable without being ordinary in any way. She was a tall, slender youngster with a clean-cut white face, which was more interesting than pretty, and dark-brown eyes, slightly almond-shaped, which turned into slits of brilliance when she laughed. Her hair was her chief beauty, copper-coloured and very sleek; she wore it cut in a severe ‘John’ bob, a straight thick fringe across her forehead.

George Abbershaw’s prosaic mind quivered on the verge of poetry when he looked at her. To him she was exquisite. He found they were seated next to each other at table, and he blessed Wyatt for his thoughtfulness.

He glanced up the table at him now and thought what a good fellow he was. The candle-light caught his clever, thoughtful face for an instant, and immediately the young scientist was struck by the resemblance to the portraits on the wall. There was the same straight nose, the same wide thin-lipped mouth.

Wyatt Petrie looked what he was, a scholar of the new type. There was a little careful disarrangement in his dress, his brown hair was not quite so sleek as his guests’, but he was obviously a cultured, fastidious man: every shadow on his face, every line and crease of his clothes indicated as much in a subtle and elusive way.

Abbershaw regarded him thoughtfully and, to a certain degree, affectionately. He had the admiration for him that one first-rate scholar always has for another out of his own line. Idly he reviewed the other man’s record. Head of a great public school, a First in Classics at Oxford, a recognized position as a minor poet, and above all a good fellow. He was a rich man, Abbershaw knew, but his tastes were simple and his charities many. He was a man with an urge, a man who took life, with its problems and its pleasures, very seriously. So far as the other man knew he had never betrayed the least interest in women in general or in one woman in particular. A month ago Abbershaw would have admired him for this attribute as much as for any other. Today, with Meggie at his side, he was not so sure that he did not pity him.

From the nephew, his glance passed slowly round to the uncle, Colonel Gordon Coombe, host of the week-end.

He sat at the head of the table, and Abbershaw glanced curiously at this old invalid who liked the society of young people so much that he persuaded his nephew to bring a houseful of young folk down to the gloomy old mansion at least half a dozen times a year.

He was a little man who sat huddled in his high-backed chair as if his backbone was not strong enough to support his frame upright. His crop of faded yellow hair was now almost white, and stood up like a hedge above a narrow forehead. But by far the most striking thing about him was the flesh-coloured plate with which clever doctors had repaired a war-mutilated face which must otherwise have been a horror too terrible to think

upon. From where he sat, perhaps some fourteen feet away, Abbershaw could only just detect it, so skilfully was it fashioned. It was shaped roughly like a one-sided half-mask and covered almost all the top right-hand side of his face, and through it the Colonel's grey-green eyes peered out shrewd and interested at the tableful of chattering young people.

George looked away hastily. For a moment his curiosity had overcome his sense of delicacy, and a wave of embarrassment passed over him as he realized that the little grey-green eyes had rested upon him for an instant and had found him eyeing the plate.

He turned to Meggie with a faint twinge of unwanted colour in his round cherubic face, and was a little disconcerted to find her looking at him, a hint of a smile on her lips and a curious brightness in her intelligent, dark-brown eyes. Just for a moment he had the uncomfortable impression that she was laughing at him.

He looked at her suspiciously, but she was no longer smiling, and when she spoke there was no amusement or superiority in her tone.

'Isn't it a marvellous house?' she said.

He nodded.

'Wonderful,' he agreed. 'Very old, I should say. But it's very lonely,' he added, his practical nature coming out in spite of himself.

'Probably most inconvenient . . . I'm glad it's not mine.'

The girl laughed softly.

'Unromantic soul,' she said.

Abbershaw looked at her and reddened and coughed and changed the conversation.

'I say,' he said, under the cover of the general prattle all around them, 'do you know who everyone is? I only recognize Wyatt and young Michael Prenderby over there. Who are the others? I arrived too late to be introduced.'

The girl shook her head.

'I don't know many myself,' she murmured. 'That's Anne Edgeware sitting next to Wyatt – she's rather pretty, don't you think? She's a Stage-cum-Society person; you must have heard of her.'

Abbershaw glanced across the table, where a striking young woman in a pseudo-Victorian frock and side curls sat talking vivaciously to the young man at her side. Some of her conversation floated across the table to him. He turned away again.

'I don't think she's particularly pretty,' he said with cheerful inconsequentialness. 'Who's the lad?' 'That boy with black hair talking to her? That's Martin. I don't know his other name, he was only introduced to me in the hall. He's just a stray young man, I think.' She paused and looked round the table. 'You know Michael, you say. The little round shy girl next him is Jeanne, his fiancée; perhaps you've met her.'

George shook his head.

'No,' he said, 'but I've wanted to; I take a personal interest in Michael' – he glanced at the fair, sharp-featured young man as he spoke – 'he's only just qualified as an M.D., you know, but he'll go far. Nice chap, too . . . Who is the young prize-fighter on the girl's left?'

Meggie shook her sleek bronze head at him reprovingly as she followed his glance to the young giant a little higher up the table. 'You mustn't say that,' she whispered. 'He's our star turn this party. That's Chris Kennedy, the Cambridge rugger blue.'

'Is it?' said Abbershaw with growing respect. 'Fine-looking man.'

Meggie glanced at him sharply, and again the faint smile appeared on her lips and the brightness in her dark eyes. For all his psychology, his theorizing, and the seriousness with which he took himself, there was very little of George Abbershaw's mind that was not apparent to her, but for all that the light in her eyes was a happy one and the smile on her lips unusually tender.

'That,' she said suddenly, following the direction of his gaze and answering his unspoken thought, 'that's a lunatic.'

George turned to her gravely.

'Really?' he said.

She had the grace to become a little confused.

‘His name is Albert Campion,’ she said. ‘He came down in Anne Edgeware’s car, and the first thing he did when he was introduced to me was to show me a conjuring trick with a two-headed penny – he’s quite inoffensive, just a silly ass.’

Abbershaw nodded and stared covertly at the fresh-faced young man with the tow-coloured hair and the foolish, pale-blue eyes behind tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, and wondered where he had seen him before.

The slightly receding chin and mouth so unnecessarily full of teeth was distinctly familiar. ‘Albert Campion?’ he repeated under his breath. ‘Albert Campion? Campion? Campion?’ But still his memory would not serve him, and he gave up calling on it and once more his inquisitive glance flickered round the table.

Since the uncomfortable little moment ten minutes ago when the Colonel had observed him scrutinizing his face, he had been careful to avoid the head of the table, but now his attention was caught by a man who sat next to his host, and for an instant he stared unashamedly.

The man was a foreigner, so much was evident at a glance; but that in itself was not sufficient to interest him so particularly.

The man was an arresting type. He was white-haired, very small and delicately made, with long graceful hands which he used a great deal in his conversation, making gestures, swaying his long, pale fingers gracefully, easily.

Under the sleek white hair which waved straight back from a high forehead his face was grey, vivacious, and peculiarly wicked.

George could think of no other word to describe the thin-lipped mouth that became one-sided and O-shaped in speech, the long thin nose, and more particularly the deep-set, round, black eyes which glistened and twinkled under enormous shaggy grey brows.

George touched Meggie’s arm.

‘Who is that?’ he said.

The girl looked up and then dropped her eyes hurriedly.

‘I don’t know,’ she murmured, ‘save that his name is Gideon or something, and he is a guest of the Colonel’s – nothing to do with our crowd.’

‘Weird-looking man,’ said Abbershaw.

‘Terrible!’ she said, so softly and with such earnestness that he glanced at her sharply and found her face quite grave.

She laughed as she saw his expression.

‘I’m a fool,’ she said. ‘I didn’t realize what an impression the man had made on me until I spoke. But he looks a wicked type, doesn’t he? His friend, too, is rather startling, don’t you think – the man sitting opposite to him?’

The repetition of the word ‘wicked’, the epithet which had arisen in his own mind, surprised Abbershaw, and he glanced covertly up the table again.

The man seated opposite Gideon, on the other side of the Colonel, was striking enough indeed.

He was a foreigner, grossly fat, and heavily jowled, and there was something absurdly familiar about him. Suddenly it dawned upon George what it was. The man was the living image of the little busts of Beethoven which are sold at music shops. There were the same heavy-lidded eyes, the same broad nose, and to cap it all the same shock of hair, worn long and brushed straight back from the amazingly high forehead.

‘Isn’t it queer?’ murmured Meggie’s voice at his side. ‘See – he has no expression at all.’

As soon as she had spoken George realized that it was true. Although he had been watching the man for the last few minutes he had not seen the least change in the heavy red face; not a muscle seemed to have moved, nor the eyelids to have flickered; and although he had been talking to the Colonel at the time, his lips seemed to have moved independently of the rest of his features. It was as if one watched a statue speak.

‘I think his name is Dawlish – Benjamin Dawlish,’ said the girl. ‘We were introduced just before dinner.’

Abbershaw nodded, and the conversation drifted on to other things, but all the time he was conscious of something faintly disturbing in the back of his mind, something which hung over his thoughts like a black shadow vaguely ugly and uncomfortable.

It was a new experience for him, but he recognized it immediately. For the first time in his life he had a presentiment – a vague, unaccountable apprehension of trouble ahead.

He glanced at Meggie dubiously.

Love played all sorts of tricks with a man's brains. It was very bewildering.

The next moment he had pulled himself together, telling himself soberly not to be a fool. But wriggle and twist as he might, always the black shadow sat behind his thoughts, and he was glad of the candle-light and the bright conversation and the laughter of the dinner-table.