

passed and repassed before newly open windows. The magic of spring, which had already coaxed scattered clusters of snowdrops from the sodden earth, seemed to be waking the winter-bound house itself to life; and, as the car slowed down at the side door and Sir Aylmer became infected with the bustle and stir of preparation, he sighed and sat with his gaze bent on the quickening house long after the footman had withdrawn the rugs and pushed forward the wheeled chair.

"I'm not going in yet," he said in a deep, measured voice of habitual authority. "Bring the garden chair and tell Benson that I want him to take me round the place before lunch."

The footman touched his cap and withdrew, to return a moment later with a muscular, professionally cheerful male attendant pulling a bathchair. Towering over his shoulder, Sir Aylmer laboriously climbed down from the car and lowered himself heavily into the chair, which creaked and sank under his weight. Unobserved by him, the two servants exchanged humorously rueful glances: their master's periodical visits to the gardens were conducted in the spirit of a captain's Sunday inspection of his ship; an unswept leaf on the close-cropped lawns, a weed squeezing its way through the tightly-packed red gravel were signals for a kindling eye, for deepened furrows from nose to mouth, for a rolling thunder of rebuke. His mood was not likely to be made less critical by his son's fast approaching return.

"Is it to-day you're expecting Mr. Deryk home, sir?" Benson began conversationally, as they drew away from the house and headed for the stables.

Sir Aylmer hesitated appreciably before replying. His long pauses and slow delivery always suggested that he was trying to make up his mind whether a question was worth answering and whether his reply, with one word so long separated from another, gave away anything that anyone could use. He did not suspect his associates unduly, but, as his habit or pose was never to say a thing twice