

the matter for himself ; he was on his way to St. Vincent.

“ Surely common-sense would assert that, having gone so far, he would assure himself first, whether the man was an impostor or not, before he resorted to crime, in order to rid himself of him. Moreover, the witnesses who saw him leave his own club at twenty minutes past eleven were quite independent and very emphatic.

“ Another theory is that the Collins’ gang tried to blackmail Philip Le Cheminant or William Collins whichever we like to call him—and that it was one of them who murdered him out of spite, when he refused to submit to the blackmailing process.

“ Against that theory, however, there are two unanswerable arguments—firstly, the weapon used, which certainly was not one that would commend itself to the average British middle-class man on murder intent—a razor or knife would be more in his line ; secondly, there is no doubt whatever that the murderer wore evening dress and an opera hat, a costume not likely to have been worn by any member of the Collins’ family, or their friends. We may, therefore, dismiss that theory also with equal certainty.”

And he surveyed placidly the row of fine knots in his bit of string.

“ But then, according to you, who was the man in evening dress, and who but Harold Le Cheminant had any interest in getting rid of the claimant ? ” I asked at last.

"Who, indeed?" he replied with a chuckle "who but the man who was as wax in the hands of that impostor."

"Whom do you mean?" I gasped.

"Let us take things from the beginning," he said, with ever-growing excitement, "and take the one thing which is absolutely beyond dispute, and that is the authenticity of the *papers*—the marriage certificate of Lucie Legrand, etc.—as against the authenticity of the *man*. Let us admit that the real Philip Le Cheminant was a refugee at St. Vincent, that he found out about his parentage and determined to go to England. He writes to his uncle, then sails for Europe, lands at Havre, and arrives in Paris."

"Why, Paris?" I asked.

"Because you, like the police and like the public, have persistently shut your eyes to an event which, to my mind has bearing upon the whole of this mysterious case, and that is the original murder committed in Paris a year ago, also in a cab, also with a stiletto—which that time was *not* found—in fact, in the self-same manner as this murder a week ago."

"Well, that crime was never brought home to its perpetrator any more than this one will be. But my contention is, that the man who committed that murder a year ago, repeated this crime last week—that the man who was murdered in Paris was the real Philip Le Cheminant, whilst the man who was murdered in London was some friend

to whom he had confided his story, and probably his papers, and who then hit upon the bold plan of assuming the personality of the Martinique creole, heir to an English peerage."

"But what in the world makes you imagine such a preposterous thing?" I gasped.

"One tiny unanswerable fact," he replied quietly. "William Collins, the impostor, when he came to London, called upon a solicitor, and deposited with him the valuable papers, *after that* he obtained his interview with Lord Tremarn. Then mark what happens. Without any question, immediately after that interview, and, therefore, without even having seen the papers of identification, Lord Tremarn accepts the claimant as his newly-found nephew.

"And why?"

"Only because that claimant has a tremendous hold over the Earl, which makes the old man as wax in his hands, and it is only logical to conclude that that hold was none other than that Lord Tremarn had met his real nephew in Paris, and had killed him, sooner than to see him supplant his beloved heir, Harold.

"I followed up the subsequent history of that Paris crime, and found that the Paris police had never established the identity of the murdered man. Being a stranger, and moneyless, he had apparently lodged in one of those innumerable ill-famed little hotels that abound in Paris, the proprietors of which

have very good cause to shun the police, and therefore would not even venture so far as to go and identify the body when it lay in the Morgue.

“But William Collins knew who the murdered man was; no doubt he lodged at the same hotel, and could lay his hands on the all-important papers. I imagine that the two young men originally met in St. Vincent, or perhaps on board ship. He assumed the personality of the deceased, crossed over to England, and confronted Lord Tremarn with the threat to bring the murder home to him if he ventured to dispute his claim.

“Think of it all, and you will see that I am right. When Lord Tremarn first heard from his brother Arthur’s son, he went to Paris in order to assure himself of the validity of his claim. Seeing that there was no doubt of that, he assumed a friendly attitude towards the young man, and one evening took him out for a drive in a cab and murdered him on the way.

“Then came Nemesis in the shape of William Collins, whom he dared not denounce, lest his crime be brought home to him. How could he come forward and say: ‘I know that this man is an impostor, as I happened to have murdered my nephew myself’?

“No; he preferred to temporise, and bide his time until, perhaps, chance would give him his opportunity. It took a year in coming.

The yoke had become too heavy. 'It must be he or I!' he said to himself that very night. Apparently he was on the best of terms with his tormentor, but in his heart of hearts he had always meant to be even with him at the last.

"Everything favoured him; the foggy night, even the dispute between Harold and the impostor at the club. Can you not picture him meeting William Collins outside the theatre, hearing from him the story of the quarrel, and then saying, 'Come with me to Harold's; I'll soon make the young jackanapes apologise to you'?"

"Mind you, a year had passed by since the original crime. William Collins, no doubt, never thought he had anything to fear from the old man. He got into the cab with him, and thus this remarkable story has closed, and Harold Le Cheminant is once more heir to the Earldom of Tremarn.

"Think it all over, and bear in mind that Lord Tremarn *never* made the slightest attempt to prove the rights or wrongs of the impostor's claim. On this base your own conclusions, and then see if they do not inevitably lead you to admit mine as the only possible solution of this double mystery."

He was gone, leaving me bewildered and amazed, staring at my *Daily Telegraph*, where, side by side with a long recapitulation of the mysterious claimant of the Earldom there was the following brief announcement:

"We regret to say that the condition of Lord Tremarn is decidedly worse to-day, and that but little hope is entertained of his recovery. Mr. Harold Le Cheminant has been his uncle's constant and devoted companion during the noble Earl's illness."

VIII

THE FATE OF THE *ARTEMIS*

CHAPTER I

"WELL, I'm——!" was my inelegant mental comment upon the news in that morning's paper.

"So are most people," rejoined the man in the corner, with that eerie way he had of reading my thoughts. "The *Artemis* has come home, having safely delivered her dangerous cargo, and Captain Jutland's explanations only serve to deepen the mystery."

"Then you admit there is one in this case?" I said.

"Only to the public. Not to me. But I do admit that the puzzle is a hard one. Do you remember the earlier details of the case? It was towards the end of 1903. Negotiations between Russia and Japan were just reaching a point of uncomfortable tension, and the man in the street guessed that war in the Far East was imminent.

"Messrs. Mills and Co. had just completed an order for a number of their celebrated quick-firing guns for the Russian Government, and these—according to the terms of the contract—were to be delivered at Port Arthur on or about 1st February, 1904. Effectively, then, on 1st December last, the *Artemis*, under

the command of Captain Jutland, sailed from Goole, with her valuable cargo on board, and with orders to proceed along as fast as possible, in view of the probable outbreak of hostilities.

"Less than two hours after she had started, Messrs. Mills received intimation from the highest official quarters, that in all probability before the *Artemis* could reach Port Arthur, and in view of coming eventualities, the submarine mines would have been laid at the entrance to the harbour. A secret plan of the port was therefore sent to the firm for Captain Jutland's use, showing the only way through which he could possibly hope to navigate the *Artemis* safely into the harbour, and without which she would inevitably come in contact with one of those terrible engines of wholesale destruction, which have since worked such awful havoc in this war.

"But *there* was the trouble. This official intimation, together with the plan, reached Messrs. Mills just two hours too late; it is a way peculiar to many official intimations. Fortunately, however, the *Artemis* was to touch at Portsmouth on private business of the firm's, and, therefore, it only meant finding a trustworthy messenger to meet Captain Jutland there, and to hand him over that all-important plan.

"Of course, there was no time to be lost, but, above all, some one of extreme trustworthiness must be found for so important a

mission. You must remember that the great European Power in question is beset by many foes in the shape of her own disaffected children, who desire her downfall even more keenly than does her Asiatic opponent. Also in times like these, when every method is fair which gives one adversary an advantage over the other, we must remember that our plucky little allies of the Far East are past masters in that art which is politely known as secret intelligence.

"All this, you see, made it an absolute necessity to keep the mission to Captain Jutland a profound secret. I need not impress upon you the fact, I think, that it is not expedient for the plans of an important harbour to fall under prying eyes.

"Finally, the choice fell on Captain Markham, R.N.R., lately of the mercantile marine, and at the time in the employ of our own Secret Intelligence Department, to which he has rendered frequent and valuable services. This choice was determined also mainly through the fact that Captain Markham's wife had relatives living in Portsmouth, and that, therefore, his journey thither could easily be supposed to have an unofficial and quite ordinary character—especially if he took his wife with him, which he did.

"Captain and Mrs. Markham left Waterloo for Portsmouth at ten minutes past twelve on Wednesday, 2nd December, the secret plan lying safely concealed at the bottom of Mrs. Markham's jewel-case.

"As the *Artemis* would not touch at Portsmouth until the following morning, Captain Markham thought it best not to spend the night at an hotel, but to go into rooms; his choice fell on a place, highly recommended by his wife's relations, and which was situated in a quiet street on the Southsea side of the town. There he and his wife stayed the night, pending the arrival of the *Artemis*.

"But at twelve o'clock on the following morning the police were hastily called in by Mrs. Bowden, the landlady of 49, Gastle Street, where the Markhams had been staying. Captain Markham had been found lying half-insensible, gagged and bound, on the floor of the sitting-room, his hands and feet tightly pinioned, and a woollen comforter wound closely round his mouth and neck; whilst Mrs. Markham's jewel-case, containing valuable jewellery and the secret plans of Port Arthur, had disappeared."

CHAPTER II

"MIND you," continued the man in the corner, after he had assured himself of my undivided attention, "all these details were unknown to the public at first. I have merely co-ordinated them, and told them to you in the actual sequence in which they occurred, so that you may be able to understand the subsequent events.

"At the time—that is to say, on 3rd December, 1903—the evening papers only contained an account of what was then called 'the mysterious outrage at Gastle Street, Portsmouth.' A private gentleman was presumably assaulted and robbed in broad daylight, and inside a highly respectable house in a busy part of the city.

"Mrs. Bowden, the landlady, was, as you may imagine, most excited and indignant. Her house and herself had been grossly insulted by this abominable outrage, and she did her level best to throw what light she could on this mysterious occurrence.

"The story she told the police was indeed extraordinary, and as she repeated it to all her friends, and subsequently to one or two journalists, it roused public excitement to its highest pitch.

"What she related at great length to the

detective in charge of the case, was briefly this :

" Captain and Mrs. Markham, it appears, arrived at 49, Gastle Street, on Wednesday afternoon, 2nd December, and Mrs. Bowden accommodated them with a sitting-room and bedroom, both on the ground floor. In the evening Mrs. Markham went out to dine with her brother, a Mr. Paulton, who is a well-known Portsmouth resident, but Captain Markham stayed in and had dinner alone in his sitting-room.

" According to Mrs. Bowden's version of the story, at about nine o'clock a stranger called to see Captain Markham. This stranger was obviously a foreigner, for he spoke broken English. Unfortunately, the hall at 49, Gastle Street, was very dark, and, moreover, the foreigner was attired in a magnificent fur coat, the collar of which hid the lower part of his face. All Mrs. Bowden could see of him was that he was very tall, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles.

" ' He was so very peremptory in his manner,' continued Mrs. Bowden, ' that I had to show him in at once. The Captain seemed surprised to see him—in fact, he looked decidedly annoyed, I might say; but just as I was closing the door I heard the stranger laugh, and say quite pleasantly : " You gave me the slip, my friend, but you see I have found you out all right " ' "

" Mrs. Bowden, after the manner of her class, seems to have made vigorous efforts

to hear what went on in the sitting-room after that," continued the man in the corner, "but she was not successful. Later on, however, the Captain rang and ordered whiskies and sodas. Both gentlemen were then sitting by the fire, looking quite friendly.

" 'I took a look round the room,' explained the worthy landlady, 'and took particular notice that the jewel-case was on the table, with the lid open. Captain Markham, as soon he saw me, closed it very quickly.'

"The stranger seems to have gone away at about half-past ten, and subsequently again Mrs. Markham came home accompanied by her brother, Mr. Paulton. The next morning she went out at a quarter past eleven o'clock, and about half an hour later the mysterious stranger called again.

"This time he pushed his way straight into the sitting-room; but the very next moment he uttered a cry of intense horror and astonishment, and rushed back into the hall, gesticulating wildly, and shrieking: 'A robbery!—a murder!—I go for the police!' And before Mrs. Bowden could stop him, or even could realise what had occurred, he had dashed out of the house.

" 'I called to Meggie,' continued Mrs. Bowden, 'I was so frightened, I didn't dare go into the parlour alone. But she was more frightened than I was, and we stood trembling in the hall waiting for the police. At last I began to have my suspicions, and I got

Meggie to run out into the street and see if she could bring in a policeman.'

"When the police at last arrived upon the scene, they pushed open the sitting-room door, and there found Captain Markham in a most helpless condition, his hands tied behind his back, and himself half-choked by the scarf over his mouth. As soon as he recovered his breath, he explained that he had no idea who his assailant was; he was standing with his back to the door, when he was suddenly dealt a blow on the head from behind, and he remembered nothing more.

"In the meantime Mrs. Markham had come home, and of course was horrified beyond measure at the outrage which had been committed. She declared that her jewel-case was in the sitting-room when she went out in the morning—a fact confirmed by Captain Markham himself.

"But here, at once, the police were seriously puzzled. Mrs. Bowden, of course, told her story of the foreigner—a story which was corroborated by her daughter, Meggie. Captain Markham, pressed by the police, and by his wife, admitted that a friend had visited him the evening before.

"'He is an old friend I met years ago abroad, who happened to be in Portsmouth yesterday, and quite accidentally caught sight of me as I drove up to this door, and naturally came in to see me,' was the Captain's somewhat lame explanation.

"Nothing more was to be got out of him

that day ; he was still feeling very bewildered he said, and certainly he looked very ill. Mrs. Markham then put the whole matter in the hands of the police.

“ Captain Markham had given a description of ‘ the old friend he had met years ago abroad.’ This description vaguely coincided with that given by Mrs. Bowden of the mysterious foreigner. But the Captain’s replies to the cross-questionings of the detectives in charge of the case were always singularly reticent and lame. ‘ I had lost sight of him for nearly twenty years,’ he explained, ‘ and do not know what his present abode and occupation might be. When I knew him years ago, he was a man of independent means, without a fixed abode, and a great traveller. I believe that he is a German by nationality, but I don’t think that I ever knew this as a fact. His name was Johann Schmidt.’

“ I may as well tell you here, at once, that the mysterious foreigner managed to make good his escape. He was traced as far as the South Western Railway Station, where he was seen to rush through the barrier, just in time to catch the express up to town. At Waterloo he was lost sight of in the crowd.

“ The police were keenly on the alert ; no trace of the missing jewels had as yet been found. Then it was that, gradually, the story of the secret plan of Port Arthur reached the ears of the general public. Who first told it, and to whom, it is difficult to

conjecture, but you know what a way things of that sort have of leaking out.

"The secret of Captain Markham's mission had of necessity been known to several people, and a secret shared by many soon ceases to be one at all; anyway, within a week of the so-called 'Portsmouth outrage,' it began to be loudly whispered that the robbery of Mrs. Markham's jewels was only a mask that covered the deliberate theft of the plans of Port Arthur.

"And then the inevitable happened. Already Captain Markham's strange attitude had been severely commented upon, and now the public, backed by the crowd of amateur detectives who read penny novelettes and form conclusions of their own, had made up its mind that Captain Markham was a party to the theft—that he was either the tool or the accomplice of the mysterious foreigner and that, in fact, he had been either bribed or terrorised into giving up the plan of Port Arthur to an enemy of the Russian government. The crime was all the more heinous as by this act of treachery a British ship, manned by a British crew, had been sent to certain destruction.

"What rendered the whole case doubly mysterious was that Messrs Mills. and Co. seemed to take the matter with complete indifference. They refused to be interviewed, or to give any information about the *Artemis* at all, and seemed callously willing to await events.

"The public was furious; the newspapers stormed; every one felt that the *Artemis* should be stopped at any cost at her next port of call, and not allowed to continue her perilous journey

"And yet the days went by; the public read with horror at Lloyds' that the *Artemis* had called at Malta, at Port Said, at Aden, and was now well on her way to the Far East. Feeling ran so high throughout England, that, if the mysterious stranger had been discovered by the police, no protection from them would have saved him from being lynched.

"As for Captain Markham, public opinion reserved its final judgment. A cloud hung over him, of that there was no doubt; many said openly that he had sold the secret plans of Port Arthur, either to the Japanese or to the Nihilists, either through fear or intimidation, if not through greed.

"Then the inevitable climax came: A certain Mr. Carleton constituted himself the spokesman of the general public; he met Captain Markham one day at one of the clubs in London. There were hot words between them. Mr. Carleton did not mince matters; he openly accused Captain Markham of that which public opinion had already whispered, and finally, completely losing his temper, he struck the Captain in the face, calling him every opprobrious name he could think of.

"But for the timely interference of friends, there would have been murder committed then and there; as it was, Captain Markham

was induced by his own friends to bring a criminal charge of slander and of assault against Mr. Carleton, as the only means of making the whole story public, and possibly vindicating his character.

CHAPTER III

"A CRIMINAL action for slander and assault is always an interesting one," continued the man in the corner, after a while, "as it always argues an unusual amount of personal animosity on the part of the plaintiff.

"In this case, of course, public interest was roused to its highest pitch. Practically, though Captain Markham was the prosecutor, he would stand before his fellow-citizens after this action either as an innocent man, or as one of the most dastardly scoundrels this nation has ever known.

"The case for the Captain was briefly stated by his counsel. For the defence Sir Arthur Inglewood, on behalf of Mr. Carleton, pleaded justification. With wonderful eloquence Sir Arthur related the whole story of the secret plan of Port Arthur confided to the honour of Captain Markham, and which involved the safety of the British ship and the lives of a whole British crew.

"The first witnesses called for the defence were Mrs. Bowden and her daughter, Meggie. Both related the story I have already told you. When they came to the point of having seen the jewel-case *open* on the table during that interview between Captain Markham and the mysterious stranger, there

was a regular murmur of indignation throughout the whole crowd, so much so, that the judge threatened to clear the court, for Sir Arthur argued this to be a proof that Captain Markham had been a willing accomplice in the theft of the secret plans, and had merely played the comedy of being assaulted, bound, and gagged.

"But there was more to come.

"It appears that on the morning of 2nd December—that is to say, before going to Portsmouth—Captain Markham, directly after breakfast, and while his wife was up in her own room, received a message which seemed greatly to disturb him. It was Jane Mason, the parlour-maid at the Markhams' town house, who told the story.

"A letter bearing no stamp had been dropped into the letter-box, she had taken it to her master, who, on reading it, became greatly agitated; he tore up the letter, stuffed it into his pocket and presently took up his hat and rushed out of the house.

"When the master was gone, continued Jane, 'I found a scrap of paper, which had fallen out of his pocket.'

"This scrap of paper Jane Mason had carefully put away. She was a shrewd girl, and scented some mystery. It was now produced in court, and the few fragmentary words were read out by Sir Arthur Inglewood, amidst boundless excitement:

"'. . . . if you lend a hand Port Arthur safely hold my tongue. . . .'

“ And at the end there were four letters in large capitals, ‘STOW.’

“ In view of all the evidence taken, there was momentous significance to be attached to those few words, of which only the last four letters seemed mysterious, but these probably were part of the confederate’s signature, who had—no one doubted it now—some hold upon Captain Markham, and had by a process of blackmail induced him to send the *Artemis* to her doom.

“ After that, according to a statement made by the head clerk of Messrs. Mills and Co., Captain Markham came round to the office begging that some one else should be sent to meet Captain Jutland at Portsmouth. ‘This,’ explained the head clerk, who had been subpoenaed for the defence, ‘was quite impossible at this eleventh hour, and, in the absence of the heads of the firm, I had on Mr. Mills’ behalf to hold Captain Markham to his promise.’

“ This closed the case for the defence, and in view of the lateness of the hour, counsels’ speeches were reserved for the following day. There was not a doubt in anybody’s mind that Captain Markham was guilty, and but for the presence of a large body of police, I assure you he would have been torn to pieces by the crowd.”

The man in the corner paused in his narrative and blinked at me over his bone-rimmed spectacles, like some lean and frowzy tom-cat, eager for a fight.

"Well?" I said eagerly.

"Well, surely you remember what happened the following day?" he replied, with a dry chuckle. "Personally, I don't think that there ever was quite so much sensation in any English court of law.

"It was crowded, of course, when counsel for the plaintiff rose to speak. He made, however, only a short statement, briefly and to the point; but this statement caused every one to look at his neighbour, wondering if he were awake or dreaming.

"Counsel began by saying that Messrs. Mills and Co., in view of the obvious conspiracy that had existed against the *Artemis*, had decided, in conjunction with Captain Markham himself, to say nothing about the safety of the ship until she was in port; but now counsel had much pleasure in informing the court and public that the *Artemis* had safely arrived at Port Arthur, had landed her guns, and was on her way home again by now. A cablegram *via* St. Petersburg had been received by Messrs. Mills and Co., from Captain Jutland that very morning.

"That cablegram was read by counsel in court, and was received with loud and prolonged cheering which could not be suppressed.

"With heroic fortitude—explained counsel—Captain Markham had borne the gross suspicions against his integrity, only hoping that news of the safety of the *Artemis* would reach England in time to allow him to vindicate his character. But until Captain Jutland

was safe in port, he had sworn to hold his tongue and to bear insult and violence, sooner than once more jeopardise the safety of the British ship by openly avowing that she carried the plans of the important port with her.

“ Well, you know the rest. The parties, at the suggestion of the judge, arranged the case amicably, and, Captain Markham being fully satisfied, Mr. Carlton was nominally ordered to come up for trial when called upon.

“ Captain Markham was the hero of the hour ; but presently, after the first excitement had subsided, sensible people began to ponder. Every one, of course, appreciated the fact that Messrs. Mills and Co., prompted by the highest authorities, had insisted on not jeopardising the safety of the *Artemis* by shouting on the housetops that she was carrying the plans of Port Arthur on board. Hostilities in the Far East were on the point of breaking out, and I need not insist, I think, on the obvious fact that silence in such matters and at such a time was absolutely imperative.

“ But what sensible people wanted to know was, what part had Captain Markham played in all this ?

“ In the evening of that memorable 2nd December, he was sitting amicably by the fire with the mysterious stranger, who was evidently blackmailing him, and with the jewel-case, which contained the plans of Port Arthur, open between them. What,

then, had caused Captain Markham to change his attitude? What dispelled the fear of the stranger? Was he really assaulted? Was the jewel-case really stolen?

"Captain Jutland, of the *Artemis*, has explained that he was only on shore for one hour at Portsmouth on the memorable morning of 3rd December, namely, between 10.30 and 11.30 a.m. On landing at the Hard from his gig, he was met by a gentleman, whom he did not know, and who, without a word of comment, handed him some papers, which proved to be plans of Port Arthur.

"Now, at that very hour Captain Markham was lying helpless in his bedroom, and the question now is, who abstracted the plans from the jewel-case, and then mysteriously handed them to Captain Jutland? Why was it not done openly? Why?—why? and, above all, by whom?—"

CHAPTER IV

"INDEED, why?" I retorted, for he had paused, and was peering at me through his bone-rimmed spectacles. "You must have a theory," I added, as I quietly handed him a beautiful bit of string across the table.

"Of course, I have a theory," he replied placidly; "nay, more, the only explanation of those mysterious events. But for this I must refer you to the scrap of paper found by Jane Mason, and containing the four fragmentary sentences which have puzzled every one, and which Captain Markham always refused to explain.

"Do you remember," he went on, as he began feverishly to construct knot upon knot on that piece of string, "the wreck of the *Ridstow* some twenty years ago? She was a pleasure boat belonging to Mr. Eyres, the great millionaire financier, and was supposed to have been wrecked in the South Seas, with nearly all hands. Five of her crew, however, were picked up by H.M.S. *Pomona*, on a bit of rocky island to which they had managed to swim.

"I looked up the files of the newspapers relating to the rescue of these five shipwrecked mariners, who told a most pitiable tale of the

loss of the yacht and their subsequent escape to, and sufferings on the island. Fire had broken out in the hull of the *Ridstow*, and all her crew were drowned, with the exception of three sailors, a Russian friend, or rather secretary, of Mr. Eyres, and a young petty officer named Markham.

"You see, the letters *STOW* had given me the clue. Clearly Markham, on receiving the message on the morning of 2nd December, was frightened, and when we analyse the fragments of that message and try to reconstruct the missing fragments, do we not get something like this :

" 'If you *lend a hand* in allowing the *Artemis* to reach *Port Arthur safely*, and to land her cargo there, I will no longer *hold my tongue* about the events which occurred on board the *Ridstow*.'

"Clearly the mysterious stranger had a great hold over Captain Markham, for every scrap of evidence, if you think it over, points to his having been *frightened*. Did he not beg the clerk to find some one else to meet Captain Jutland in Portsmouth? He did not wish to *lend a hand* in allowing the *Artemis* to reach *Port Arthur safely*.

"We must, therefore, take it that on board the *Ridstow* some such tragedy was enacted as, alas! is not of unfrequent occurrence. The tragedy of a mutiny, a wholesale murder, the robbery of the rich financier, the burning of the yacht. Markham, then barely twenty, was no doubt an unwilling, perhaps passive,

accomplice ; one can trace the hand of a cunning, daring Russian in the whole of this mysterious tragedy.

"Since then, Markham, through twenty years' faithful service of his country, had tried to redeem the passive crime of his early years. But then came the crisis: The cunning leader of that bygone tragedy no doubt kept a strong hand over his weaker accomplices.

"What happened to the other three we do not know, but we have seen how terrified Markham is of him, how he dare not resist him, and when the mysterious Russian—some Nihilist, no doubt, at war with his own Government—wishes to deal his country a terrible blow by possessing himself of the plan of her most important harbour, so that he might sell it to her enemies, Markham dare not say him nay.

"But mark what happens. Captain Markham terrorised, confronted with a past crime, threatened with exposure, is as wax in the hands of his unscrupulous tormentor. But beside him there is the saving presence of his wife."

"His wife?" I gasped.

"Yes, the woman! Did you think this was a crime without the inevitable woman! I sought her, and found her in Captain Markham's wife. To save her husband both from falling a victim to his implacable accomplice, and from committing another even more heinous crime, she suggests the comedy

which was so cleverly enacted in the morning of 3rd December.

"When the landlady and her daughter saw the jewel-case open on the table the evening before, Markham was playing the first act of the comedy invented by his wife. She had the plan safely in her own keeping by then. He pretended to agree to the Russian's demands, but showed him that he had not then the plan in his possession, promising, however, to deliver it up on the morrow.

"Then in the morning, Mrs. Markham helps to gag and strap her husband down; he pretends to lie unconscious, and she goes out carrying the jewel-case. Her brother, Mr. Paulton, of course helps them both; without him it would have been more difficult; as it is, he takes charge of the jewel-case, abstracts the plan and papers, and finally meets Captain Jutland at the Hard, and hands him over the plan of Port Arthur.

"Thus through the wits of a clever and devoted woman, not only are the *Artemis* and her British crew saved, but Captain Markham is effectually rid of the blackmailer, who otherwise would have poisoned his life, and probably out of revenge at being foiled, have ruined his victim altogether.

"To my mind, that was the neatest thing in the whole plan. The general public believed that Captain Markham (who obviously at the instigation of his wife had confided in Messrs. Mills and Co.) held his tongue as to the safety of the *Artemis* merely

out of heroism, in order not to run her into any further danger. Now, I maintain that this was the masterstroke of that clever woman's plan.

"By holding his tongue, by letting the public fear for the safety of the British crew and British ship, public feeling was stirred to such a pitch of excitement that the Russian now would never *dare* show himself. Not only—by denouncing Captain Markham now—would he never be even listened to for a moment, but, if he came forward at all, if he even showed himself, he would stand before the British public self-convicted as the man who had tried through the criminal process of blackmail to terrorise an Englishman into sending a British ship and thirty British sailors to certain annihilation.

"No ; I think we may take it for granted that the Russian will not dare to show his face in England again."

And the funny creature was gone before I could say another word.

IX

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF COUNT COLLINI

CHAPTER I

HE was very argumentative that morning ; whatever I said he invariably contradicted flatly and at once, and we both had finally succeeded in losing our temper.

The man in the corner was riding one of his favourite hobby-horses.

"It is *impossible* for any person to completely disappear in a civilised country," he said emphatically, "provided that person has either friends or enemies of means and substance, who are interested in finding his or her whereabouts."

"Impossible is a sweeping word," I rejoined.

"None too big for the argument," he concluded, as he surveyed with evident pride and pleasure a gigantic and complicated knot which his bony fingers had just fashioned.

"I think that, nevertheless, you should not use it," I said placidly. "It is not *impossible*, though it may be very difficult to disappear without leaving the slightest clue or trace behind you."

"Prove it," he said, with a snap of his thin lips.

"I can, quite easily."

"Now I know what is going on in your mind," said the uncanny creature, "you are thinking of that case last autumn."

"Well, I was," I admitted. "And you cannot deny that Count Collini has disappeared as effectually as if the sea had swallowed him up—many people think it did."

"Many idiots, you mean," he rejoined dryly. "Yes, I knew you would quote that case. It certainly was a curious one; all the more so, perhaps, as there was no inquest, no sensational police court proceedings, nothing dramatic, in fact, save that strange and wonderful disappearance.

"I don't know if you call to mind the whole plot of that weird drama. There was Thomas Checkfield, a retired biscuit baker of Reading, who died leaving a comfortable fortune, mostly invested in freehold property, and amounting to about £80,000, to his only child, Alice.

"At the time of her father's death, Alice Checkfield was just eighteen, and at school in Switzerland, where she had spent most of her life. Old Checkfield had been a widower ever since the birth of his daughter, and seems to have led a very lonely and eccentric life; leaving the girl at school abroad for years, only going very occasionally to see her, and seemingly having but little affection for her.

“The girl herself had not been home in England since she was eight years old, and even when old Checkfield was dying he would not allow the girl to be apprised of his impending death, and to be brought home to a house of loneliness and mourning.

“‘What’s the good of upsetting a young girl, not eighteen,’ he said to his friend, Mr. Turnour, ‘by letting her see all the sad paraphernalia of death? She hasn’t seen much of her old father anyway, and will soon get over her loss, with young company round her, to help her bear up.’

“But though Thomas Checkfield cared little enough for his daughter, when he died he left his entire fortune to her, amounting altogether to £80,000; and he appointed his friend, Reginald Turnour, to be her trustee and guardian until her marriage or until she should attain her majority.

“It was generally understood that the words ‘until her marriage’ were put in because it had all along been arranged that Alice should marry Hubert Turnour, Reginald’s younger brother.

“Hubert was old Checkfield’s godson, and if the old man had any affection for anybody it certainly was for Hubert. The latter had been a great deal in his godfather’s house, when he and Alice were both small children, and had called each other ‘hubby’ and ‘wifey’ in play, when they were still in the nursery. Later on, whenever old Checkfield went abroad to see his daughter, he always

took Hubert with him, and a boy and girl flirtation sprang up between the two young people; a flirtation which had old Checkfield's complete approval, and no doubt he looked upon their marriage as a *fait accompli*, merely desiring the elder Mr. Turnour to administer the girl's fortune until then.

"Hubert Turnour, at the time of the subsequent tragedy, was a good-looking young fellow, and by profession what is vaguely known as a 'commission agent.' He lived in London, where he had an office in a huge block of buildings close to Cannon Street Station.

"There is no doubt that at the time of old Checkfield's death, Alice looked upon herself as the young man's *fiancée*. When the girl reached her nineteenth year, it was at last decided that she should leave school and come to England. The question as to what should be done with her until her majority, or until she married Hubert, was a great puzzle to Mr. Turnour. He was a bachelor, who lived in comfortable furnished rooms in Reading, and he did not at all relish the idea of starting housekeeping for the sake of his young ward, whom he had not seen since she was out of the nursery, and whom he looked upon as an intolerable nuisance.

"Fortunately for him this vexed question was most satisfactorily and unexpectedly settled by Alice herself. She wrote to her guardian, from Geneva, that a Mrs. Brackenbury, the mother of her dearest schoolfellow

had asked her to come and live with them, at any rate for a time, as this would be a more becoming arrangement than that of a young girl sharing a bachelor's establishment.

"Mr. Turnour seems to have hesitated for some time: he was a conscientious sort of man, who took his duties of guardianship very seriously. What ultimately decided him, however, was that his brother Hubert added the weight of his eloquent letters of appeal to those of Alice herself. Hubert naturally was delighted at the idea of having his rich *fiancée* under his eye in London, and after a good deal of correspondence, Mr. Turnour finally gave his consent, and Alice Checkfield duly arrived from Switzerland in order to make a prolonged stay in Mrs. Brackenbury's house."

CHAPTER II

"ALL seems to have gone on happily and smoothly for a time in Mrs. Brackenbury's pretty house in Kensington," continued the man in the corner. "Hubert Turnour was a constant visitor there, and the two young people seem to have had all the freedom of an engaged couple.

"Alice Checkfield was in no sense of the word an attractive girl; she was not good-looking, and no effort on Mrs. Brackenbury's part could succeed in making her look stylish. Still, Hubert Turnour seemed quite satisfied, and the girl herself ready enough at first to continue the boy and girl flirtation as of old.

"Soon, however, as time went on, things began to change. Now that Alice had become mistress of a comfortable fortune, there were plenty of people ready to persuade her that a 'commission agent,' with but vague business prospects, was not half good enough for her, and that her £80,000 entitled her to more ambitious matrimonial hopes. Needless to say that in these counsels Mrs. Brackenbury was very much to the fore.

"She lived in Kensington, and had social ambitions, foremost among which was to see her daughter's bosom friend married to, at least, a baronet, if not a peer.

"A young girl's head is quickly turned. Within six months of her stay in London, Alice was giving Hubert Turnour the cold shoulder, and the young man had soon realised that she was trying to get out of her engagement.

"Scarcely had Alice reached her twentieth birthday, than she gave her erstwhile *fiancé* his formal *congé*.

"At first Hubert seems to have taken his discomfiture very much to heart. £80,000 were not likely to come his way again in a hurry. According to Mrs. Brackenbury's servants, there were one or two violent scenes between him and Alice, until finally Mrs. Brackenbury herself was forced to ask the young man to discontinue his visits.

"It was soon after that that Alice Checkfield first met Count Collini at one of the brilliant subscription dances given by the Italian colony in London, the winter before last. Mrs. Brackenbury was charmed with him, Alice Checkfield was enchanted! The Count, having danced with Alice half the evening, was allowed to pay his respects at the house in Kensington.

"He seemed to be extremely well off, for he was staying at the Carlton, and, after one or two calls on Mrs. Brackenbury, he began taking the ladies to theatres and concerts, always presenting them with the choicest and most expensive flowers, and paying them various other equally costly attentions.

"Mrs. and Miss Brackenbury welcomed the Count with open arms (figuratively speaking). Alice was shy, but apparently over head and ears in love at first sight.

"At first Mrs. Brackenbury did her best to keep this new acquaintanceship a secret from Hubert Turnour. I suppose that the old matchmaker feared another unpleasant scene. But the inevitable soon happened. Hubert, contrite, perhaps still hopeful, called at the house one day, when the Count was there, and, according to the story subsequently told by Miss Brackenbury herself, there was a violent scene between him and Alice. As soon as the fascinating foreigner had gone, Hubert reproached his *fiancée* for her fickleness in no measured language, and there was a good deal of evidence to prove that he then and there swore to be even with the man who had supplanted him in her affections. There was nothing to do then but for Mrs. Brackenbury to 'burn her boats.' She peremptorily ordered Hubert out of her house, and admitted that Count Collini was a suitor, favoured by herself, for the hand of Alice Checkfield.

"You see, I am bound to give you all these details of the situation," continued the man in the corner, with his bland smile, "so that you may better form a judgment as to the subsequent fate of Count Collini. From the description which Mrs. Brackenbury herself subsequently gave to the police, the Count was then in the prime of life; of a dark olive

complexion, dark eyes, extremely black hair and moustache. He had a very slight limp, owing to an accident he had had in early youth, which made his walk and general carriage unusual and distinctly noticeable. His was certainly not a personality that could pass unperceived in a crowd.

“Hubert Turnour, furious and heartsick, wrote letter after letter to his brother, to ask him to interfere on his behalf; this Mr. Turnour did, to the best of his ability, but he had to deal with an ambitious match-maker and with a girl in love, and it is small wonder that he signally failed. Alice Checkfield by now had become deeply enamoured of her Count, his gallantries flattered her vanity, his title and the accounts he gave of his riches and his estates in Italy fascinated her, and she declared that she would marry him, either with or without her guardian’s consent, either at once, or as soon as she had attained her majority, and was mistress of herself and of her fortune.

“Mr. Turnour did all he could to prevent this absurd marriage. Being a sensible, middle-class Britisher, he had no respect for foreign titles, and little belief in foreign wealth. He wrote the most urgent letters to Alice, warning her against a man whom he firmly believed to be an impostor; finally, he flatly refused to give his consent to the marriage.

“Thus a few months went by. The Count had been away in Italy all through the winter

and spring, and returned to London for the season, apparently more enamoured with the Reading biscuit baker's daughter than ever. Alice Checkfield was then within nine months of her twenty-first birthday, and determined to marry the Count. She openly defied her guardian.

" 'Nothing,' she wrote to him, 'would ever induce me to marry Hubert.'

" I suppose it was this which finally induced Mr. Turnour to give up all opposition to the marriage. Seeing that his brother's chances were absolutely *nil*, and that Alice was within nine months of her majority, he no doubt thought all further argument useless, and with great reluctance finally gave his consent.

" The marriage, owing to the difference of religion, was to be performed before a registrar, and was finally fixed to take place on 22nd October, 1903, which was just a week after Alice's twenty-first birthday.

" Of course the question of Alice's fortune immediately cropped up: she desired her money in cash, as her husband was taking her over to live in Italy, where she desired to make all further investments. She, therefore, asked Mr. Turnour to dispose of her freehold property for her. There again Mr. Turnour hesitated, and argued, but once he had given his consent to the marriage, all opposition was useless, more especially as Mrs. Brackenbury's solicitors had drawn up a very satisfactory marriage settlement, which the Count himself had suggested, by which

Alice was to retain sole use and control of her own private fortune.

"The marriage was then duly performed before a registrar on that 22nd of October, and Alice Checkfield could henceforth style herself Countess Collini. The young couple were to start for Italy almost directly, but meant to spend a day or two at Dover quietly together. There were, however, one or two tiresome legal formalities to go through. Mr. Turnour had, by Alice's desire, handed over the sum of £80,000 in notes to her solicitor, Mr. R. W. Stanford. Mr. Stanford had gone down to Reading two days before the marriage, had received the money from Mr. Turnour, and then called upon the new Countess, and formally handed her over her fortune in Bank of England notes.

"Then it was necessary, in view of immediate and future arrangements, to change the English money into foreign, which the Count and his young wife did themselves that afternoon.

"At 5 o'clock p.m. they started for Dover, accompanied by Mrs. Brackenbury, who desired to see the last of her young friend, prior to the latter's departure for abroad. The Count had engaged a magnificent suite of rooms at the Lord Warden Hotel, and thither the party proceeded.

"So far, you see," added the man in the corner, "the story is of the utmost simplicity. You might even call it commonplace. A foreign Count, an ambitious matchmaker,

and a credulous girl; these form the ingredients of many a domestic drama, that culminates at the police courts. But at this point this particular drama becomes more complicated, and, if you remember, ends in one of the strangest mysteries that has ever baffled the detective forces on both sides of the Channel."

CHAPTER III

THE man in the corner paused in his narrative. I could see that he was coming to the palpitating part of the story, for his fingers fidgeted incessantly with that bit of string.

“Hubert Turnour, as you may imagine,” he continued after a while, “did not take his final discomfiture very quietly. He was a very violent-tempered young man, and it was certainly enough to make any one cross. According to Mrs. Brackenbury’s servants he used most threatening language in reference to Count Collini; and on one occasion was with difficulty prevented from personally assaulting the Count in the hall of Mrs. Brackenbury’s pretty Kensington house.

“Count Collini finally had to threaten Hubert Turnour with the police court: this seemed to have calmed the young man’s nerves somewhat, for he kept quite quiet after that, ceased to call on Mrs. Brackenbury, and subsequently sent the future Countess a wedding present.

“When the Count and Countess Collini, accompanied by Mrs. Brackenbury, arrived at the Lord Warden, Alice found a letter awaiting her there. It was from Hubert Turnour. In it he begged for forgiveness for all the annoyance he had caused her,

hoped that she would always look upon him as a friend, and finally expressed a strong desire to see her once more before her departure for abroad, saying that he would be in Dover either this same day or the next, and would give himself the pleasure of calling upon her and her husband.

“Effectively at about eight o’clock, when the wedding party was just sitting down to dinner, Hubert Turnour was announced. Every one was most cordial to him, agreeing to let bygones be bygones: the Count, especially, was most genial and pleasant towards his former rival, and insisted upon his staying and dining with them.

“Later on in the evening, Hubert Turnour took an affectionate leave of the ladies, Count Collini offering to walk back with him to the Grand Hotel, where he was staying. The two men went out together, and—well! you know the rest!—for that was the last the young Countess Collini ever saw of her husband. He disappeared as effectually, as completely, as if the sea had swallowed him up.

“‘And so it had,’ say the public,” continued the man in the corner, after a slight pause, “that delicious, short-sighted, irresponsible public is wondering, to this day, why Hubert Turnour was not hung for the murder of that Count Collini.”

“Well! and why wasn’t he?” I retorted.

“For the very simple reason,” he replied, “that in this country you cannot hang a man

for murder unless there is proof positive that a murder has been committed. Now, there was absolutely no proof that the Count was murdered at all. What happened was this : the Countess Collini and Mrs. Brackenbury became anxious as time went on and the Count did not return. One o'clock, then two in the morning, and their anxiety became positive alarm. At last, as Alice was verging on hysterics, Mrs. Brackenbury, in spite of the lateness of the hour, went round to the police station.

"It was, of course, too late to do anything in the middle of the night ; the constable on duty tried to reassure the unfortunate lady, and promised to send word round to the Lord Warden at the earliest possible opportunity in the morning.

"Mrs. Brackenbury went back with a heavy heart. No doubt Mr. Turnour's sensible letters from Reading recurred to her mind. She had already ascertained from the distracted bride that the Count had taken the strange precaution to keep in his own pocket-book the £80,000, now converted into French and Italian banknotes, and Mrs. Brackenbury feared not so much that he had met with some accident, but that he had absconded with the whole of his girl-wife's fortune.

"The next morning brought but scanty news. No one answering to the Count's description had met with an accident during the night, or been conveyed to a hospital,

and no one answering his description had crossed over to Calais or Ostend by the night boats. Moreover, Hubert Turnour, who presumably had last been in Count Collini's company, had left Dover for town by the boat train at 1.50 a.m.

"Then the search began in earnest after the missing man, and primarily Hubert Turnour was subjected to the closest and most searching cross-examination, by one of the most able men on our detective staff, Inspector Macpherson.

"Hubert Turnour's story was briefly this: He had strolled about on the parade with Count Collini for a while. It was a very blustery night, the wind blowing a regular gale, and the sea was rolling gigantic waves, which looked magnificent, as there was brilliant moonlight. 'Soon after ten o'clock,' he continued, 'the Count and I went back to the Grand Hotel, and we had whiskies and sodas up in my room, and a bit of a chat until past eleven o'clock. Then he said good-night and went off.'

"'You saw him down to the hall, of course?' asked the detective.

"'No, I did not,' replied Hubert Turnour. 'I had a few letters to write, and meant to catch the 1.50 a.m. back to town.'

"'How long were you in Dover altogether?' asked Macpherson carelessly.

"'Only a few hours. I came down in the afternoon.'

"'Strange, is it not, that you should have

taken a room with a private sitting-room at an expensive hotel, just for those few hours ?’

“ ‘Not at all. I originally meant to stay longer. And my expenses are nobody’s business, I take it,’ replied Hubert Turnour, with some show of temper. ‘Anyway,’ he added impatiently, after a while, ‘if you choose to disbelieve me, you can make inquiries at the hotel, and ascertain if I have told the truth.’

“ Undoubtedly he had spoken the truth ; at any rate, to that extent. Inquiries at the Grand Hotel went to prove that he had arrived there in the early part of the afternoon, had engaged a couple of rooms, and then gone out. Soon after ten o’clock in the evening he came in, accompanied by a gentleman, whose description, as given by three witnesses, *employés* of the hotel, who saw him, corresponded exactly with that of the Count.

“ Together the two gentlemen went up to Mr. Hubert Turnour’s rooms, and at half-past ten they ordered whisky to be taken up to them. But at this point all trace of Count Collini had completely vanished. The passengers arriving by the 10.49 boat train, and who had elected to spend the night in Dover, owing to the gale, had crowded up and filled the hall.

“ No one saw Count Collini leave the Grand Hotel. But Mr. Hubert Turnour came down into the hall at about half-past eleven.

He said he would be leaving by the 1.50 a.m. boat train for town, but would walk round to the station as he only had a small bag with him. He paid his account, then waited in the coffee-room until it was time to go.

“And there the matter has remained. Mrs. Brackenbury has spent half her own fortune in trying to trace the missing man. She has remained perfectly convinced that he slipped across the Channel, taking Alice Checkfield’s money with him. But, as you know, at all ports of call on the South Coast, detectives are perpetually on the watch. The Count was a man of peculiar appearance, and there is no doubt that no one answering to his description crossed over to France or Belgium that night. By the following morning the detectives on both sides of the Channel were on the alert. There is no disguise that would have held good. If the Count had tried to cross over, he would have been spotted either on board or on landing; and we may take it as an absolute and positive certainty that he did not cross the Channel.

“He remained in England, but in that case, where is he? You would be the first to admit that, with the whole of our detective staff at his heels, it seems incredible that a man of the Count’s singular appearance could hide himself so completely as to baffle detection. Moreover, the question at once arises, that if he did not cross over to France or Belgium, what in the world did he do

with the money? What was the use of disappearing and living the life of a hunted beast hiding for his life, with £80,000 worth of foreign money, which was practically useless to him?

"Now, I told you from the first," concluded the man in the corner, with a dry chuckle, "that this strange episode contained no sensational incident, nor dramatic inquest or criminal procedure. Merely the complete, total disappearance, one may almost call it extinction, of a striking-looking man, in the midst of our vaunted civilisation, and in spite of the untiring energy and constant watch of a whole staff of able men."

CHAPTER IV

"VERY well, then," I retorted in triumph, "that proves that Hubert Turnour murdered Count Collini out of revenge, not for greed of money, and probably threw the body of his victim, together with the foreign bank-notes, into the sea."

"But where? When? How?" he asked, smiling good-humouredly at me over his great bone-rimmed spectacles.

"Ah! that I don't know."

"No, I thought not," he rejoined placidly. "You had, I think, forgotten one incident, namely, that Hubert Turnour, accompanied by the Count, was in the former's room at the Grand Hotel drinking whisky at half-past ten o'clock. You must admit that, even though the hall of the hotel was very crowded later on, a man would nevertheless find it somewhat difficult to convey the body of his murdered enemy through a whole concourse of people."

"He did not murder the Count in the hotel," I argued. "The two men walked out again, when the hall was crowded, and they passed unnoticed. Hubert Turnour led the Count to a lonely part of the cliffs, then threw him into the sea."

"The nearest point at which the cliffs

might be called 'lonely' for purposes of a murder, is at least twenty minutes' walk from the Grand Hotel," he said, with a smile, "always supposing that the Count walked quickly and willingly to such a lonely spot at eleven o'clock at night, and with a man who had already, more than once, threatened his life. Mr. Hubert Turnour, remember, was seen in the hall of the hotel at half-past eleven, after which hour he only left the hotel to go to the station after 1 o'clock a.m.

"The hall was crowded by the passengers from the boat train a little after eleven. There was no time between that and half-past to lead even a willing enemy to the slaughter, throw him into the sea, and come back again, all in the space of five-and-twenty minutes."

"Then what is your explanation of that extraordinary disappearance?" I retorted, beginning to feel very cross about it all.

"A simple one," he rejoined quietly, as he once more began to fidget with his bit of string. "A very simple one indeed; namely, that Count Collini, at the present moment, is living comfortably in England, calmly awaiting a favourable opportunity of changing his foreign money back into English notes."

"But you say yourself that that is impossible, as the most able detectives in England are on the watch for him."

"They are on the watch for a certain Count Collini," he said drily, "who might disguise himself, perhaps, but whose hidden

identity would sooner or later be discovered by one of these intelligent human blood-hounds."

"Yes? Well?" I asked.

"Well, that Count Collini never existed. It was *his* personality that was the disguise. Now it is thrown off. The Count is not dead, he is not hiding, but has merely ceased to exist. There is no fear that he will ever come to life again. Mr. Turnour senior will see to that."

"Mr. Turnour!" I ejaculated.

"Why, yes," he rejoined excitedly; "do you mean to tell me you never saw through it all? The money lying in his hands; his brother about to wed the rich heiress; then Mrs. Brackenbury's matrimonial ambitions, Alice Checkfield's coldness to Hubert Turnour, the golden prize slipping away right out of the family for ever. Then the scheme was evolved by those two scoundrels, who deserve to be called geniuses in their criminal way. It could not be managed, except by collaboration, but as it was, the scheme was perfect in conception, and easy of execution.

"Remember that disguise *previous* to a crime is always fairly safe from detection, for then it has no suspicion to contend against, it merely deceives those who have no cause to be otherwise *but* deceived. Mrs. Brackenbury lived in London, Reginald Turnour in Reading; they did not know each other personally, nor did they know each other's friends, of course; whilst Alice Checkfield

had not seen her guardian since she was quite a child.

“Then the disguise was so perfect. I went down to Reading, some little time ago, and Reginald Turnour was pointed out to me : he is a Scotchman, with very light, sandy hair. That face clean shaved, made swarthy, the hair, eyebrows, and lashes dyed a jet black, would render him absolutely unrecognisable. Add to this the fact that a foreign accent completely changes the voice, and that the slight limp was a masterstroke of genius to hide the general carriage.

“Then the winter came round ; it was, perhaps, important that Mr. Turnour should not be absent too long from Reading, for fear of exciting suspicion there ; and the scoundrel played his part with marvellous skill. Can't you see him yourself leaving the Carlton Hotel, ostensibly going abroad, driving to Charing Cross, but only booking to Cannon Street.

“Then getting out at that crowded station and slipping round to his brother's office in one of those huge blocks of buildings where there is perpetual coming and going, and where any individual would easily pass unperceived.

“There, with the aid of a little soap and water, Mr. Turnour resumed his Scotch appearance, went on to Reading, and spent winter and spring there, only returning to London to make a formal proposal, as Count Collini, for Alice Checkfield's hand. Hubert

Turnour's office was undoubtedly the place where he changed his identity, from that of the British middle-class man, to the interesting personality of the Italian nobleman.

"He had, of course, to repeat the journey to Reading a day or two before his wedding, in order to hand over his ward's fortune to Mrs. Brackenbury's solicitor. Then there were the supposed rows between Hubert Turnour and his rival; the letters of warning from the guardian, for which Hubert no doubt journeyed down to Reading, in order to post them there: all this was dust thrown into the eyes of two credulous ladies.

"After that came the wedding, the meeting with Hubert Turnour, who, you see, was obliged to take a room in one of the big hotels, wherein, with more soap and water, the Italian Count could finally disappear. When the hall of the hotel was crowded, the sandy-haired Scotchman slipped out of it quite quietly: he was not remarkable, and no one specially noticed him. Since then the hue and cry has been after a dark Italian, who limps, and speaks broken English; and it has never struck any one that such a person never existed.

"Mr. Turnour is fairly safe by now; and we may take it for granted that he will not seek the acquaintanceship of the Brackenburys, whilst Alice Checkfield is no longer his ward. He will wait a year or two longer perhaps, then he and Hubert will begin quietly to re-convert their foreign money into

English notes—they will take frequent little trips abroad, and gradually change the money at the various *bureaux de change*, on the Continent.

“Think of it all—it is so simple—not even dramatic, only the work of a genius from first to last, worthy of a better cause, perhaps, but undoubtedly worthy of success.”

He was gone, leaving me quite bewildered. Yet the disappearance had always puzzled me, and now I felt that that animated scarecrow had found the true explanation of it after all.

X

THE AYRSHAM MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

"I HAVE never had a great opinion of our detective force here in England," said the man in the corner, in his funny, gentle, apologetic manner, "but the way that department mismanaged the affair at Ayrsham simply passes comprehension."

"Indeed?" I said, with all the quiet dignity I could command. "It is a pity they did not consult you in the matter, wasn't it?"

"It is a pity," he retorted with aggravating meekness, "that they do not use a little common sense. The case resembles that of Columbus' egg, and is every bit as simple."

"It was one evening last October, wasn't it? that two labourers, walking home from Ayrsham village, turned down a lane, which, it appears, is a short cut to the block of cottages some distance off, where they lodged."

"The night was very dark, and there was a nasty drizzle in the air. In the picturesque vernacular of the two labourers, 'You couldn't see your 'and before your eyes.' Suddenly

they stumbled over the body of a man lying right across the path.

“‘At first we thought ’e was drunk,’ explained one of them subsequently, ‘but when we took a look at ’im, we soon saw there was something very wrong. Me and my mate turned ’im over, and “foul play” we both says at once. Then we see that it was Old Man Newton. Poor chap, ’e was dead, and no mistake.’

“Old Man Newton, as he was universally called by his large circle of acquaintances, was very well known throughout the entire neighbourhood, most particularly at every inn and public bar for some miles around.

“He also kept a local sweet-stuff shop at Ayrsham. No wonder that the men were horrified at finding him in such a terrible condition; even in their uneducated minds there could be no doubt that the old man had been murdered, for his skull had been literally shattered by a fearful blow, dealt him from behind by some powerful assailant.

“Whilst the labourers were cogitating as to what they had better do next, they heard footsteps also turning into the lane, and the next moment Samuel Holder, a well-known inhabitant of Ayrsham, arrived upon the scene.

“‘Hello! is that you, Mat Newton?’ shouted Samuel, as he came near.

“‘Ay! ’tis Old Man Newton, right enough,’ replied one of the labourers, ‘but ’e won’t answer you no more.’

“ Samuel Holder seemed absolutely horrified when he saw the body of Old Man Newton ; he uttered various ejaculations, which the two labourers, however, did not take special notice of at the time.

“ Then the three men held a brief consultation together, with the result that one of them ran back to Ayrsham village to fetch the local police, whilst the two others remained in the lane to guard the body.

“ The mystery—for it seemed one from the first—created a great deal of sensation in Ayrsham and all round the neighbourhood, and much sympathy was felt for, and shown to Mary Newton, the murdered man’s only child, a young girl about two-or-three-and-twenty, who, moreover, was in ill-health.

“ True, Old Man Newton was not a satisfactory protector for a young girl. He was very much addicted to drink ; he neglected the little bit of local business he had ; and, moreover, had recently shamefully ill-treated his daughter, the neighbours testifying to the many and loud quarrels that occurred in the small back parlour behind the sweet-stuff shop.

“ A case of murder—the moment an element of mystery hovers around it—immediately excites the attention of the newspaper-reading public, who is always seeking for new sensations.

“ Very soon the history of Old Man Newton and of his daughter found its way into the London and provincial dailies, and the

Ayrsham murder became a topic of all-absorbing interest.

“It appears that Old Man Newton was at one time a highly respectable local tradesman, always in a very small way, as there is not much business doing at Ayrsham. It is a poor and straggling village, although its railway station is an important junction on the Midland system.

“There is some very good shooting in the neighbourhood, and about four or five years ago some of it, together with ‘The Limes,’ a pretty house just outside the village, was rented for the autumn by Mr. Ledbury and his brother.

“You know the firm of Ledbury and Co., do you not; the great small arms manufacturers? The elder Mr. Ledbury was the recipient of Birthday honours last year, and is the present Lord Walterton; his younger brother, Mervin, was in those days, and is still, a handsome young fellow in the Hussars.

“At the time—I mean about five years ago—Mary Newton was the local beauty of Ayrsham; she did a little dressmaking in her odd moments, but it appears that she spent most of her time in flirting. She was nominally engaged to be married to Samuel Holder, a young carpenter, but there was a good deal of scandal talked about her, for she was thought to be very fast; village gossip coupled her name with that of several young men in the neighbourhood, who were known to have paid the village beauty

marked attention, and among these admirers of Mary Newton during the autumn of which I am speaking, young Mr. Mervin Ledbury figured conspicuously.

“Be that as it may, certain it is that Mary Newton had a very bad reputation among the scandalmongers of Ayrsham, and though everybody was shocked, no one was astonished when one fine day in the winter following she suddenly left her father and her home, and went no one knew whither. She left, it appears, a very pathetic letter behind, begging for her father’s forgiveness, and that of Samuel Holder, whom she was jilting, but she was going to marry a gentleman above them all in station, and was going to be a real lady; then only would she return home.

“A very unusual village tragedy, as you see. Four years went by, and Mary Newton did not return home. As time went by and with it no news of his daughter, Old Man Newton took her disappearance very much to heart. He began to neglect his business, and then his house, which became dirty and ill-kept by an occasional charwoman who would do a bit of promiscuous tidying for him from time to time. He was ill-tempered, sullen, and morose, and very soon became hopelessly addicted to drink.

“Then suddenly, as unexpectedly as she had gone, Mary Newton returned to her home one fine day, after an absence of four years. What had become of her in the

interim, no one in the village ever knew; she was generally supposed to have earned a living by dressmaking, until her failing health had driven her well nigh to starvation, and then back to the home and her father she had so heedlessly left.

“Needless to say that all the talk of her ‘marriage with a gentleman above her in station’ was entirely at an end. As for Old Man Newton, he seems after his daughter’s return to have become more sullen and morose than ever, and the neighbours now busied themselves with talk of the fearful rows which frequently occurred in the back parlour of the little sweet-stuff shop.

“Father and daughter seemed to be leading a veritable cat-and-dog life together. Old Man Newton was hardly ever sober, and at the village inns he threw out weird and strange hints about ‘breach of promise actions with £5,000 damages, which his daughter would get, if only he knew where to lay hands upon the scoundrel.’

“He also made vague and wholly useless enquiries about young Mervin Ledbury, but in a sleepy, out-of-the-way village like Ayrsham, no one knows anything about what goes on beyond a narrow five-mile radius at most. ‘The Limes’ and the shooting were let to different tenants year after year, and neither Lord Walterton nor Mr. Mervin Ledbury had ever rented them again.”

CHAPTER II

"THAT was the past history of Old Newton," continued the man in the corner, after a brief pause, "that is to say, of the man who on a dark night last October was found murdered in a lonely lane, not far from Ayrsham. The public, as you may well imagine, took a very keen interest in the case from the outset: the story of Mary Newton, of the threatened breach of promise, of the £5,000 damages, roused masses of conjecture to which no one has yet dared to give definite shape.

"One name, however, had already been whispered significantly, that of Mr. Mervin Ledbury, the young Hussar, one of Mary Newton's admirers at the very time she left home in order, as she said, to be married to some one above her in station.

"Many thinking people, too, wanted to know what Samuel Holder, Mary's jilted *fiancé*, was doing close to the scene of the murder that night, and how he came to make the remark: 'Hello! Is that you, Mat Newton?' when the Old Man lived nearly half-a-mile away, and really had no cause for being in that particular lane, at that hour of the night in the drizzling rain.

"The inquest, which, for want of other

accommodation, was held at the local police station, was, as you may imagine, very largely attended.

"I had read a brief statement of the case in the London papers, and had hurried down to Ayrsham Junction, as I scented a mystery, and knew I should enjoy myself.

"When I got there, the room was already packed, and the medical evidence was being gone through.

"Old Man Newton, it appears, had been knocked on the head by a heavily-loaded cane, which was found in the ditch close to the murdered man's body.

"The cane was produced in court; it was as stout as an old-fashioned club, and of terrific weight. The man who wielded it must have been very powerful, for he had only dealt one blow, but that blow had cracked the old man's skull. The cane was undoubtedly of foreign make, for it had a solid silver ferrule at one end, which was not English hall-marked.

"In the opinion of the medical expert, death was the result of the blow, and must have been almost instantaneous.

"The labourers who first came across the body of the murdered man then repeated their story; they had nothing new to add, and their evidence was of no importance. But after that there was some stir in the court. Samuel Holder had been called and sworn to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

“He was a youngish, heavily-built man of about five-and-thirty, with a nervous, not altogether prepossessing expression of face. Pressed by the coroner, he gave us a few details of Old Man Newton’s earlier history, such as I have already told you.

“‘Old Mat,’ he explained, with some hesitation, ‘was for ever wanting to find out who the gentleman was who had promised marriage to Mary four years ago. But Mary was that obstinate, and wouldn’t tell him, and this exasperated the old man terribly, so that they had many rows on the subject.’

“‘I suppose,’ said the coroner tentatively, ‘that you never knew who that gentleman was?’

“Samuel Holder seemed to hesitate for a moment. His manner became even more nervous than before; he shifted his position from one foot to the other; finally, he said:

“‘I don’t know as I ought to say, but——’

“‘I am quite sure that you must tell us everything you know which might throw light upon this extraordinary and terrible murder,’ retorted the coroner sternly.

“‘Well,’ replied Samuel Holder, whilst great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead, ‘Mary never would give up the letters she had had from him, and she would not hear anything about a breach of promise case and £5,000 damages; but old Mat ’e often says to me, says ’e, “It’s young Mr. Ledbury,” ’e says, “she’s told

me that once. I got it out of 'er, and if I only knew where to find 'im——'”

“ ‘ You are quite sure of this ? ’ asked the coroner, for Holder had paused, and seemed quite horrified at the enormity of what he had said.

“ ‘ Yes—yes—your worship—your honour —— ’ stammered Holder. ‘ E’s told me ’twas young Mr. Ledbury times out of count, and——’

“ But Samuel Holder here completely broke down ; he seemed unable to speak, his lips twitched convulsively, and the coroner, fearing that the man would faint, had him conveyed into the next room to recover himself, whilst another witness was brought forward.

“ This was Michael Pitkin, landlord of the Fernhead Arms, at Ayrsham, who had been on very intimate terms with old Newton during the four years which elapsed after Mary’s disappearance. He had a very curious story to tell, which aroused public excitement to its highest pitch.

“ It appears that to him also the old man had often confided the fact that it was Mr. Ledbury who had promised to marry Mary, and then had shamefully left her stranded and moneyless in London.

“ ‘ But, of course, ’ added the jovial and pleasant-looking landlord of the Fernhead Arms, ‘ the likes of us down here didn’t know what became of Mr. Ledbury after he left “ The Limes, ” until one day I reads in the local paper that Sir John Fernhead’s daughter

is going to be married to Captain Mervin Ledbury. Of course, your honour and me, and all of us know Sir John, our squire, down at Fernhead Towers, and I says to old Mat: "It strikes me," I says, "that you've got your man." Sure enough it was the same Mr. Ledbury who rented "The Limes" years ago, who was engaged to the young lady up at the Towers, and last week there was grand doings there—lords and ladies and lots of quality staying there, and also the Captain.'

" 'Well?' asked the coroner eagerly, whilst every one held their breath, wondering what was to come.

" 'Well,' continued Michael Pitkin, 'Old Man Newton went down to the Towers one day. 'E was determined to see young Mr. Ledbury, and went. What 'appened I don't know, for old Mat wouldn't tell me, but he came back mighty furious from 'is visit, and swore 'e would ruin the young man and make no end of a scandal, and he would bring the law agin' 'im and get £5,000 damages.'

" This story, embellished, of course, by many details, was the gist of what the worthy landlord of the Fernhead Arms had to say, but you may imagine how every one's excitement and curiosity was aroused; in the meanwhile Samuel Holder was getting over his nervousness, and was more ready to give a clear account of what happened on the fatal night itself.

" 'It was about nine o'clock,' he explained,

in answer to the coroner, 'and I was hurrying back to Ayrsham, through the fields; it was dark and raining, and I was about to strike across the hedge into the lane when I heard voices—a woman's, then a man's. Of course, I could see nothing, and the man spoke in a whisper, but I had recognised Mary's voice quite plainly. She kept on saying: "'Tisn't my fault!" she says, "it's father's, 'e has made up 'is mind. I held out as long as I could, but 'e worried me, and now 'e's got your letters, and it's too late.'"

"Samuel Holder again paused a moment, then continued:

"'They talked together for a long time: Mary seemed very upset and the man very angry. Presently 'e says to 'er: "Well, tell your father to come out here and speak to me for a moment. I'll see what I can do." Mary seemed to 'esitate for a time, then she went away, and the man waited there in the drizzling rain, with me the other side of the 'edge watchin' 'im. I waited for a long time, for I wanted to know what was going to 'appen; then time went on. I thought perhaps that old Mat was at the Fernhead Arms, and that Mary couldn't find 'im, so I went back to Ayrsham by the fields, 'oping to find the old man. The stranger didn't budge. 'E seemed inclined to wait—so I left 'im there—and—and—that's all. I went to the Fernhead Arms, saw old Mat wasn't there—then I went back to the lane—and—

Old Man Newton was dead, and the stranger was gone.'

"There was a moment or two of dead silence in the court when Samuel Holder had given his evidence, then the coroner asked quietly :

"You do not know who the stranger was ?'

"Well, I couldn't be sure, your honour,' replied Samuel nervously, 'it was pitch dark. I wouldn't like to swear a fellow-creature's life and character away.'

"No, no, quite so,' rejoined the coroner ; 'but do you happen to know what time it was when all this occurred ?'

"Oh yes, your honour,' said Samuel decisively, 'as I walked away from the Fernhead Arms I 'eard Ayrsham church clock strike ten o'clock.'

"Ah ! that's always something,' said the coroner, with a sigh of satisfaction. 'Call Mary Newton, please.' "

CHAPTER III

“You may imagine,” continued the man in the corner, after a slight pause, “with what palpitating interest we all watched the pathetic little figure, clad in deep black, who now stepped forward to give evidence.

“It was difficult to imagine that Mary Newton could ever have been pretty; trouble had obviously wrought sad havoc with her good looks; she was now a wizened little thing, with dark rings under her eyes, and a pale, anæmic complexion. She stood perfectly listlessly before the coroner, waiting to be questioned, but otherwise not seeming to take the slightest interest in the proceedings. In an even, toneless voice she told her name, age, and status, then waited for further questions.

“‘Your father went out a little before ten o’clock on Tuesday night last, did he not?’ asked the coroner very kindly.

“‘Yes, sir, he did,’ replied Mary quietly.

“‘You had brought him a message from a gentleman whom you had met in the lane, and who wished to speak with your father?’

“‘No, sir,’ replied Mary, in the same even and toneless voice; ‘I brought no message to father, and he went out on his own.’

“‘But the gentleman you met in the

lane?' insisted the coroner with some impatience.

"'I didn't meet any one in the lane, sir. I never went out of the house that Tuesday night, it rained so.'

"'But the last witness, Samuel Holder, heard you talking in the lane at nine o'clock.'

"'Samuel Holder was mistaken,' she replied imperturbably; 'I wasn't out of the house the whole of that night.'

"'It would be useless for me,'" continued the man in the corner, "to attempt to convey to you the intense feeling of excitement which pervaded that crowded court, as that wizened little figure stood there for over half-an-hour, quietly and obstinately parrying the most rigid cross-examination.

"That she was lying—lying to shield the very man who perhaps had murdered her father—no one doubted for a single instant. Yet there she stood, sullen, apathetic, and defiant, flatly denying Samuel Holder's story from end to end, strictly adhering and swearing to her first statement, that her father went out 'on his own,' that she did not know where he was going to, and that she herself had never left the house that fatal Tuesday night.

"It did not seem to occur to her that by these statements she was hopelessly incriminating Samuel Holder, whom she was thus openly accusing of deliberate lies; on the contrary, many noticed a distinct touch of bitter animosity in the young girl against her

former sweetheart, which was singularly emphasised when the coroner asked her whether she approved of the idea of a breach of promise action being brought against Mr. Ledbury.

“‘No,’ she said; ‘all that talk about damages and breach of promise was between father and Sam Holder, because Sam had told father that he wouldn’t mind marrying me if I had £5,000 of my own.’

“It would be impossible to render the tone of hatred and contempt with which the young girl uttered these words. One seemed to live through the whole tragedy of the past few months—the girl, pestered by the greed of her father, yet refusing obstinately to aid in causing a scandal, perhaps disgrace, to the man whom she had once loved and trusted.

“As nothing more could be got out of her, and as circumstances now seemed to demand it, the coroner adjourned the inquest. The police, as you may well imagine, wanted to make certain enquiries. Mind you, Mary Newton flatly refused to mention Mr. Ledbury’s name; she was questioned and cross-questioned, yet her answer uniformly was:

“‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. The person I was going to marry four years ago has gone out of my life—I have never seen him since. I saw no one on that Tuesday night.’

“Against that, when she was asked to swear that it was *not* Mr.—now Captain—Ledbury who had promised her marriage she flatly refused to do so.

“Of course, there was not a soul there who had not made up his or her mind that Captain Ledbury *had* met Mary Newton in the lane, and had heard from her that all his love letters to her were now in her father’s hands, and that the old man meant to use these in order to extort money from him.

“Fearing the exposure and disgrace of so sensational a breach of promise action, and not having the money with which to meet Mat Newton’s preposterous demands, he probably lost control over himself, and in a moment of impulse and mad rage had silenced the old man for ever.

“I assure you that at the adjourned inquest everybody expected to see Captain Ledbury in the custody of two constables. The police in the interim had been extremely reticent, and no fresh details of the extraordinary case had found its way into the papers, but fresh details of a sensational character were fully expected, and I can assure you the public were not disappointed.

“It is no use my telling you all the proceedings of that second most memorable day; I will try and confine myself to the most important points of this interesting mystery.

"I must tell you that the story told by the landlord of the Fernhead Arms was fully corroborated by several witnesses, all of whom testified to the fact that the old man came back from his visit to Fernhead Towers in a terrible fury, swearing to bring disgrace upon the scoundrel who had ruined his daughter.

"What occurred during that visit was explained by Edward Sanders, the butler at The Towers. According to the testimony of this witness, there was a large house-party staying with Sir John Fernhead to celebrate the engagement of his daughter; the party naturally included Captain Mervin Ledbury, his brother, Lord Walterton, with the latter's newly-married young wife, also many neighbours and friends.

"At about six o'clock on Monday evening, it appears, a disreputable-looking old man, whom Edward Sanders did not know, but who gave the name of Newton, rang at the front door bell of The Towers and demanded to see Mr. Ledbury. Sanders naturally refused to admit him, but the old man was so persistent, and used such strange language, that the butler, after much hesitation, decided to apprise Captain Ledbury of his extraordinary visitor.

"Captain Ledbury, on hearing that Old Man Newton wished to speak to him, much to Sanders' astonishment, came downstairs and elected to interview his extraordinary

visitor in the dining-room, which was then deserted. Sanders showed the old man in, and waited in the hall. Very soon, however, he heard loud and angry voices, and the next moment Captain Ledbury threw open the dining-room door, and said :

“ ‘ This man is mad or drunk ; show him out, Sanders.’

“ And without another word the Captain walked upstairs, leaving Sanders the pleasant task of ‘ showing the old man out.’ That this was done very speedily and pretty roughly we may infer from Old Man Newton’s subsequent fury, and the threats he uttered even while he was being ‘ shown out.’

“ Now you see, do you not ? ” continued the man in the corner, “ that this evidence seemed to add another link to the chain which was incriminating young Mr. Ledbury in this terrible charge of murdering Old Man Newton.

“ The young man himself was now with his regiment stationed at York. It appears that the house-party at Fernhead Towers was breaking up on the very day of Old Man Newton’s strange visit thither. Lord and Lady Walerton left for town on the Tuesday morning, and Captain Ledbury went up to York on that very same fatal night.

“ You must know that the small local station of Fernhead is quite close to The Towers. Captain Ledbury took the late

local train there for Ayrsham Junction after dinner that night, arriving at the latter place at 9.15, with the intention of picking up the Midland express to the north at 10.15 p.m. later on.

“The police had ascertained that Captain Ledbury had got out of the local train at Ayrsham Junction at 9.15, and aimlessly strolled out of the station. Against that, it was definitely proved by several witnesses that the young man did catch the Midland express at 10.15 p.m., and travelled up north by it.

“Now, there was the hitch, do you see?” added the funny creature excitedly. “Samuel Holder overheard a conversation in the fatal lane between Mary Newton and the stranger, whom everybody by now believed to be Captain Ledbury. Good! That was between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m., and, as it happened, the young man does seem to have unaccountably strolled about in the neighbourhood whilst waiting for his train; but remember that when Sam Holder left the stranger waiting in the lane, and went back towards Ayrsham in order to try and find Old Man Newton, he distinctly heard Ayrsham church clock striking ten.

“Now, the lane where the murder occurred is two-and-a-half miles from Ayrsham Junction station, therefore it could not have been Captain Ledbury who was there lying in wait for the old man, as he could not

possibly have had his interview with old Mat, quarrelled with him and murdered him, and then caught his train two-and-a-half miles further on, all in the space of fifteen minutes.

“ Thus, even before the final verdict of ‘ Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown,’ the case against Captain Mervin Ledbury had completely fallen to the ground. He must also have succeeded in convincing Sir John Fernhead of his innocence, as I see by the papers that Miss Fernhead has since become Mrs. Ledbury.

“ But the result has been that the Ayrsham tragedy has remained an impenetrable mystery.

“ ‘ Who killed Old Man Newton? and why? ’ is a question which many people, including our clever criminal investigation department, have asked themselves many a time.

“ It was not a case of vulgar assault and robbery, as the old man was not worth robbing, and the few coppers he possessed were found intact in his waistcoat pocket.

“ Many people assert that Samuel Holder quarrelled with the old man and murdered him, but there are three reasons why that theory is bound to fall to the ground. Firstly, the total absence of any motive. Samuel Holder could have no possible object in killing the old man, but still, we’ll waive that ; people do quarrel—especially if they are con-

federates, as these two undoubtedly were—and quarrels do sometimes end fatally. Secondly, the weapon which caused the old man's death—a heavily-leaded cane of foreign make, with solid silver ferrule.

“Now, I ask you, where in the world could a village carpenter pick up an instrument of that sort? Moreover no one ever saw such a thing in Sam Holder's hands or in his house. When he walked to the Fernhead Arms in order to try and find the old man, he had nothing of the sort in his hand, and in spite of the most strenuous efforts on the part of the police, the history of that cane was never traced.

“Then, there is a third reason why obviously Sam Holder was not guilty of the murder, though that reason is a moral one; I am referring to Mary Newton's attitude at the inquest. She lied, of that there could not be a shadow of doubt; she was determined to shield her former lover, and incriminated Sam Holder only because she wished to save another man.

“Obviously, old Newton went out on that dark, wet night in order to meet someone in the lane, that someone could not have been Sam Holder, whom he met anywhere and everywhere, and every day in his own house.

“There! you see that Sam Holder was obviously innocent, that Captain Ledbury could not have committed the murder, that

surely Mary Newton did not kill her own father, and that in such a case, common sense should have come to the rescue, and not have left this case, what it now is, a tragic and impenetrable mystery."

CHAPTER IV

"BUT," I said at last, for indeed I was deeply mystified, "what does common sense argue?—the case seems to be absolutely hopeless."

He surveyed his beloved bit of string for a moment, and his mild blue eyes blinked at me over his bone-rimmed spectacles.

"Common sense," he said at last, with his most apologetic manner, "tells me that Ayrsham village is a remote little place, where a daily paper is unknown, and where no one reads the fashionable intelligence or knows anything about Birthday honours."

"What *do* you mean?" I gasped in amazement.

"Simply this, that no one at Ayrsham village, certainly not Mary Newton herself, had realised that one of the Mr. Ledburys, whom all had known at 'The Limes' four years ago, had since become Lord Walterton."

"Lord Walterton!" I ejaculated, wholly incredulously.

"Why, yes!" he replied quietly. "Do you mean to say you never thought of that? that it never occurred to you that Mary Newton may have admitted to her father that Mr. Ledbury had been the man who

had so wickedly wronged her, but that she, in her remote little village, had also no idea that the Mr. Ledbury she meant was recently made, and is now styled, Lord Walterton ?

“Old Man Newton, who knew of the gossip which had coupled his daughter’s name, years ago, with the younger Mr. Ledbury, naturally took it for granted that she was referring to him. Moreover, we may take it from the girl’s subsequent attitude that she did all she could to shield the man whom she had once loved ; women, you know, have that sort of little way with them.

“Old Newton, fully convinced that young Ledbury was the man he wanted, went up to The Towers and had the stormy interview, which no doubt greatly puzzled the young Hussar. He undoubtedly spoke of it to his brother, Lord Walterton, who, newly married and of high social position, would necessarily dread a scandal as much as anybody.

“Lord Walterton went up to town with his young wife the following morning. Ayrsham is only forty minutes from London. He came down in the evening, met Mary in the lane, asked to see her father, and killed him in a moment of passion, when he found that the old man’s demands were preposterously unreasonable. Moreover, Englishmen in all grades of society have an innate horror of being bullied or blackmailed ; the murder probably was not premeditated, but

the outcome of rage at being browbeaten by the old man.

"You see, the police did not use their common sense over so simple a matter. They naturally made no enquiries as to Lord Walterton's movements, who seemingly had absolutely nothing to do with the case. If they had, I feel convinced that they would have found that his lordship would have had some difficulty in satisfying everybody as to his whereabouts on that particular Tuesday night.

"Think of it, it is so simple—the only possible solution of that strange and unaccountable mystery."

XI

THE AFFAIR AT THE NOVELTY THEATRE

CHAPTER I

"TALKING of mysteries," said the man in the corner, rather irrelevantly, for he had not opened his mouth since he sat down and ordered his lunch, "talking of mysteries, it is always a puzzle to me how few thefts are committed in the dressing-rooms of fashionable actresses during a performance."

"There have been one or two," I suggested, "but nothing of any value was stolen."

"Yet you remember that affair at the Novelty Theatre a year or two ago, don't you?" he added. "It created a great deal of sensation at the time. You see, Miss Phyllis Morgan was, and still is, a very fashionable and popular actress, and her pearls are quite amongst the wonders of the world. She herself valued them at £10,000, and several experts who remember the pearls quite concur with that valuation."

"During the period of her short tenancy of the Novelty Theatre last season, she entrusted those beautiful pearls to Mr. Kidd,

the well-known Bond Street jeweller, to be re-strung. There were seven rows of perfectly matched pearls, held together by a small diamond clasp of 'art-nouveau' design.

"Kidd and Co. are, as you know, a very eminent and old established firm of jewellers. Mr. Thomas Kidd, its present sole representative, was some time president of the London Chamber of Commerce, and a man whose integrity has always been held to be above suspicion. His clerks, salesmen, and book-keeper had all been in his employ for years, and most of the work was executed on the premises.

"In the case of Miss Phyllis Morgan's valuable pearls they were re-strung and re-set in the back shop by Mr. Kidd's most valued and most trusted workman, a man named James Rumford, who is justly considered to be one of the cleverest craftsmen here in England.

"When the pearls were ready, Mr. Kidd himself took them down to the theatre, and delivered them into Miss Morgan's own hands.

"It appears that the worthy jeweller was extremely fond of the theatre; but, like so many persons in affluent circumstances, he was also very fond of getting a free seat when he could.

"All along he had made up his mind to take the pearls down to the Novelty Theatre one night, and to see Miss Morgan for a

moment before the performance ; she would then, he hoped, place a stall at his disposal.

“ His previsions were correct. Miss Morgan received the pearls, and Mr. Kidd was on that celebrated night accommodated with a seat in the stalls.

“ I don't know if you remember all the circumstances connected with that case, but, to make my point clear, I must remind you of one or two of the most salient details.

‘ In the drama in which Miss Phyllis Morgan was acting at the time, there is a brilliant masked ball scene which is the crux of the whole play ; it occurs in the second act, and Miss Phyllis Morgan, as the hapless heroine, dressed in the shabbiest of clothes, appears in the midst of a gay and giddy throng ; she apostrophises all and sundry there, including the villain, and has a magnificent scene which always brings down the house, and nightly adds to her histrionic laurels.

“ For this scene a large number of supers are engaged, and in order to further swell the crowd, practically all the available stage hands have to ‘ walk on ’ dressed in various coloured dominoes, and all wearing masks.

“ You have, of course, heard the name of Mr. Howard Dennis in connection with this extraordinary mystery. He is what is usually called ‘ a young man about town,’ and was one of Miss Phyllis Morgan's most favoured admirers. As a matter of fact, he

was generally understood to be the popular actress's *fiancé*, and as such, had of course the *entrée* of the Novelty Theatre.

"Like many another idle young man about town, Mr. Howard Dennis was stage-mad, and one of his greatest delights was to don nightly a mask and a blue domino, and to 'walk on' in the second act, not so much in order to gratify his love for the stage, as to watch Miss Phyllis Morgan in her great scene, and to be present, close by her, when she received her usual salvo of enthusiastic applause from a delighted public.

"On this eventful night—it was on 20th July last—the second act was in full swing; the supers, the stage hands, and all the principals were on the scene, the back of the stage was practically deserted. The beautiful pearls, fresh from the hands of Mr. Kidd, were in Miss Morgan's dressing-room, as she meant to wear them in the last act.

"Of course, since that memorable affair, many people have talked of the foolhardiness of leaving such valuable jewellery in the sole charge of a young girl—Miss Morgan's dresser—who acted with unpardonable folly and carelessness, but you must remember that this part of the theatre is only accessible through the stage door, where sits enthroned that uncorruptible dragon, the stage door-keeper.

"No one can get at it from the front, and

the dressing-rooms for the supers and lesser members of the company are on the opposite side of the stage to that reserved for Miss Morgan and one or two of the principals.

"It was just a quarter to ten, and the curtain was about to be rung down, when George Finch, the stage door-keeper, rushed excitedly into the wings; he was terribly upset, and was wildly clutching his coat, beneath which he evidently held something concealed.

"In response to the rapidly-whispered queries of the one or two stage hands that stood about, Finch only shook his head excitedly. He seemed scarcely able to control his impatience, during the close of the act, and the subsequent prolonged applause.

"When at last Miss Morgan, flushed with her triumph, came off the stage, Finch made a sudden rush for her.

"'Oh, Madam!' he gasped excitedly, 'it might have been such an awful misfortune! The rascal! I nearly got him through! but he escaped—fortunately it is safe—I have got it——!'

"It was some time before Miss Morgan understood what in the world the otherwise sober stage door-keeper was driving at. Every one who heard him certainly thought that he had been drinking. But the next moment from under his coat he pulled out, with another ejaculation of excitement, the magnificent pearl necklace which Miss Morgan

had thought safely put away in her dressing-room.

“ ‘ What in the world does all this mean ? ’ asked Mr. Howard Dennis, who, as usual, was escorting his *fiancée*. ‘ Finch, what are you doing with Madam’s necklace ? ’

“ Miss Phyllis Morgan herself was too bewildered to question Finch ; she gazed at him, then at her necklace, in speechless astonishment.

“ ‘ Well, you see, Madam, it was this way,’ Finch managed to explain at last, as with awestruck reverence he finally deposited the precious necklace in the actress’s hands. ‘ As you know, Madam, it is a very hot night. I had seen every one into the theatre and counted in the supers ; there was nothing much for me to do, and I got rather tired and very thirsty. I see’d a man loafing close to the door, and I ask him to fetch me a pint of beer from round the corner, and I give him some coppers ; I had noticed him loafing round before, and it was so hot I didn’t think I was doin’ no harm.’

“ ‘ No, no,’ said Miss Morgan impatiently. ‘ Well ! ’

“ ‘ Well,’ continued Finch, ‘ the man, he brought me the beer, and I had some of it—and—and—afterwards, I don’t quite know how it happened—it was the heat, perhaps—but—I was sitting in my box, and I suppose I must have dropped asleep. I just remember hearing the ring up for the second act, and

the call-boy calling you, Madam, then there's a sort of a blank in my mind. All of a sudden I seemed to wake with the feeling that there was something wrong somehow. In a moment I jumped up, and I tell you I was wide awake then, and I saw a man sneaking down the passage, past my box, towards the door. I challenged him, and he tried to dart past me, but I was too quick for him, and got him by the tails of his coat, for I saw at once that he was carrying something, and I had recognised the loafer who brought me the beer. I shouted for help, but there's never anybody about in this back street, and the loafer, he struggled like old Harry, and sure enough he managed to get free from me and away before I could stop him, but in his fright the rascal dropped his booty, for which Heaven be praised! and it was your pearls, Madam. Oh, my! but I did have a tussle,' concluded the worthy door-keeper, mopping his forehead, 'and I do hope, Madam, the scoundrel didn't take nothing else.'

"That was the story," continued the man in the corner, "which George Finch had to tell, and which he subsequently repeated without the slightest deviation. Miss Phyllis Morgan, with the light-heartedness peculiar to ladies of her profession, took the matter very quietly; all she said at the time was that she had nothing else of value in her dressing-room, but that Miss Knight—the

dresser—deserved a scolding for leaving the room unprotected.

“All’s well that ends well,” she said gaily, as she finally went into her dressing-room, carrying the pearls in her hand.

“It appears that the moment she opened the door, she found Miss Knight sitting in the room, in a deluge of tears. The girl had overheard George Finch telling his story, and was terribly upset at her own carelessness.

“In answer to Miss Morgan’s questions, she admitted that she had gone into the wings, and lingered there to watch the great actress’s beautiful performance. She thought no one could possibly get to the dressing-room, as nearly all hands were on the stage at the time, and of course George Finch was guarding the door.

“However, as there really had been no harm done, beyond a wholesome fright to everybody concerned, Miss Morgan readily forgave the girl and proceeded with her change of attire for the next act. Incidentally she noticed a bunch of roses, which were placed on her dressing-table, and asked Knight who had put them there.

“‘Mr. Dennis brought them,’ replied the girl.

“Miss Morgan looked pleased, blushed, and dismissing the whole matter from her mind, she proceeded with her toilette for the next act, in which, the hapless heroine having come into her own again, she was

able to wear her beautiful pearls around her neck.

"George Finch, however, took some time to recover himself; his indignation was only equalled by his volubility. When his excitement had somewhat subsided, he took the precaution of saving the few drops of beer which had remained at the bottom of the mug, brought to him by the loafer. This was subsequently shown to a chemist in the neighbourhood, who, without a moment's hesitation, pronounced the beer to contain an appreciable quantity of chloral."

CHAPTER II

"THE whole matter, as you may imagine, did not affect Miss Morgan's spirits that night," continued the man in the corner, after a slight pause.

"'All's well that ends well,' she had said gaily, since almost by a miracle, her pearls were once more safely round her neck.

"But the next day brought the rude awakening. Something had indeed happened which made the affair at the Novelty Theatre, what it has ever since remained, a curious and unexplainable mystery.

"The following morning Miss Phyllis Morgan decided that it was foolhardy to leave valuable property about in her dressing-room, when for stage purposes, imitation jewellery did just as well. She therefore determined to place her pearls in the bank until the termination of her London season.

"The moment, however, that, in broad daylight, she once more handled the necklace, she instinctively felt that there was something wrong with it. She examined it eagerly and closely, and, hardly daring to face her sudden terrible suspicions, she rushed round to the nearest jeweller, and begged him to examine the pearls.

“The examination did not take many moments: the jeweller at once pronounced the pearls to be false. There could be no doubt about it; the necklace was a perfect imitation of the original, even the clasp was an exact copy. Half-hysterical with rage and anxiety, Miss Morgan at once drove to Bond Street, and asked to see Mr. Kidd.

“Well, you may easily imagine the stormy interview that took place. Miss Phyllis Morgan, in no measured language, boldly accused Mr. Thomas Kidd, late president of the London Chamber of Commerce, of having substituted false pearls for her own priceless ones.

“The worthy jeweller, at first completely taken by surprise, examined the necklace, and was horrified to see that Miss Morgan’s statements were, alas! too true. Mr. Kidd was indeed in a terribly awkward position.

“The evening before, after business hours, he had taken the necklace home with him. Before starting for the theatre, he had examined it to see that it was quite in order. He had then, with his own hands, and in the presence of his wife, placed it in its case, and driven straight to the Novelty, where he finally gave it over to Miss Morgan herself.

“To all this he swore most positively; moreover, all his *employés* and workmen

could swear that they had last seen the necklace just after closing time at the shop, when Mr. Kidd walked off towards Piccadilly, with the precious article in the inner pocket of his coat.

“One point certainly was curious, and undoubtedly helped to deepen the mystery which to this day clings to the affair at the Novelty Theatre.

“When Mr. Kidd handed the packet containing the necklace to Miss Morgan, she was too busy to open it at once. She only spoke to Mr. Kidd through her dressing-room door, and never opened the packet till nearly an hour later, after she had dressed ready for the second act; the packet at that time had been untouched, and was wrapped up just as she had had it from Mr. Kidd’s own hands. She undid the packet, and handled the pearls; certainly, by the artificial light she could see nothing wrong with the necklace.

“Poor Mr. Kidd was nearly distracted with the horror of his position. Thirty years of an honest reputation suddenly tarnished with this awful suspicion—for he realised at once that Miss Morgan refused to believe his statements; in fact, she openly said that she would—unless immediate compensation was made to her—place the matter at once in the hands of the police.

“From the stormy interview in Bond Street, the irate actress drove at once to

Scotland Yard; but the old-established firm of Kidd and Co. was not destined to remain under any cloud that threatened its integrity.

“Mr. Kidd at once called upon his solicitor, with the result that an offer was made to Miss Morgan, whereby the jeweller would deposit the full value of the original necklace, *i.e.*, £10,000, in the hands of Messrs. Bentley and Co., bankers, that sum to be held by them for a whole year, at the end of which time, if the perpetrator of the fraud had not been discovered, the money was to be handed over to Miss Morgan in its entirety.

“Nothing could have been more fair, more equitable, or more just, but at the same time nothing could have been more mysterious.

“As Mr. Kidd swore that he had placed the real pearls in Miss Morgan’s hands, and was ready to back his oath by the sum of £10,000, no more suspicion could possibly attach to him. When the announcement of his generous offer appeared in the papers, the entire public approved and exonerated him, and then turned to wonder who the perpetrator of the daring fraud had been.

“How came a valueless necklace in exact imitation of the original one to be in Miss Morgan’s dressing-room? Where were the real pearls? Clearly the loafer who had drugged the stage door-keeper, and sneaked

into the theatre to steal a necklace, was not aware that he was risking several years' hard labour for the sake of a worthless trifle. He had been one of the many dupes of this extraordinary adventure.

"Macpherson, one of the most able men on the detective staff, had, indeed, his work cut out. The police were extremely reticent, but, in spite of this, one or two facts gradually found their way into the papers, and aroused public interest and curiosity to its highest pitch.

"What had transpired was this :

"Clara Knight, the dresser, had been very rigorously cross-questioned, and, from her many statements, the following seemed quite positive.

"After the curtain had rung up for the second act, and Miss Morgan had left her dressing-room, Knight had waited about for some time, and had even, it appears, handled and admired the necklace. Then, unfortunately, she was seized with the burning desire of seeing the famous scene from the wings. She thought that the place was quite safe, and that George Finch was as usual at his post.

"'I was going along the short passage that leads to the wings,' she exclaimed to the detectives, 'when I became aware of some one moving some distance behind me. I turned and saw a blue domino about to enter Miss Morgan's dressing-room,

“ ‘I thought nothing of that,’ continued the girl, ‘as we all know that Mr. Dennis is engaged to Miss Morgan. He is very fond of “walking on” in the ball-room scene, and he always wears a blue domino when he does ; so I was not at all alarmed. He had his mask on as usual, and he was carrying a bunch of roses. When he saw me at the other end of the passage, he waved his hand to me and pointed to the flowers. I nodded to him, and then he went into the room.’

“ These statements, as you may imagine, created a great deal of sensation ; so much so, in fact, that Mr. Kidd, with his £10,000 and his reputation in mind, moved heaven and earth to bring about the prosecution of Mr. Dennis for theft and fraud.

“ The papers were full of it, for Mr. Howard Dennis was well known in fashionable London Society. His answer to these curious statements was looked forward to eagerly ; when it came it satisfied no one and puzzled everybody.

“ ‘Miss Knight was mistaken,’ he said most emphatically, ‘I did not bring any roses for Miss Morgan that night. It was not I that she saw in a blue domino by the door, as I was on the stage before the curtain was rung up for the second act, and never left it until the close.’

“ This part of Howard Dennis’ statement was a little difficult to substantiate. No one

on the stage could swear positively whether he was 'on' early in the act or not, although, mind you, Macpherson had ascertained that in the whole crowd of supers on the stage, he was the only one who wore a blue domino.

"Mr. Kidd was very active in the matter, but Miss Morgan flatly refused to believe in her *fiancé's* guilt. The worthy jeweller maintained that Mr. Howard Dennis was the only person who knew the celebrated pearls and their quaint clasp well enough to have a facsimile made of them, and that when Miss Knight saw him enter the dressing-room, he actually substituted the false necklace for the real one; whilst the loafer who drugged George Finch's beer was—as every one supposed—only a dupe.

"Things had reached a very acute and painful stage, when one more detail found its way into the papers, which, whilst entirely clearing Mr. Howard Dennis' character, has helped to make the whole affair a hopeless mystery.

"Whilst questioning George Finch, Macpherson had ascertained that the stage door-keeper had seen Mr. Dennis enter the theatre some time before the beginning of the celebrated second act. He stopped to speak to George Finch for a moment or two, and the latter could swear positively that Mr. Dennis was not carrying any roses then.

"On the other hand a flower-girl, who

was selling roses in the neighbourhood of the Novelty Theatre late that memorable night, remembers selling some roses to a shabbily-dressed man, who looked like a labourer out of work. When Mr. Dennis was pointed out to her she swore positively that it was not he.

“ ‘The man looked like a labourer,’ she explained. ‘I took particular note of him, as I remember thinking that he didn’t look much as if he could afford to buy roses.’

“Now you see,” concluded the man in the corner excitedly, “where the hitch lies. There is absolutely no doubt, judging from the evidence of George Finch and of the flower-girl, that the loafer had provided himself with the roses, and had somehow or other managed to get hold of a blue domino, for the purpose of committing the theft. His giving drugged beer to Finch, moreover, proved his guilt beyond a doubt.

“But here the mystery becomes hopeless,” he added with a chuckle, “for the loafer dropped the booty which he had stolen—that booty was the false necklace, and it has remained an impenetrable mystery to this day as to who made the substitution and when.

“A whole year has elapsed since then, but the real necklace has never been traced or found; so Mr. Kidd has paid, with absolute quixotic chivalry, the sum of £10,000 to Miss

Morgan, and thus he has completely cleared the firm of Kidd and Co. of any suspicion as to its integrity."

CHAPTER III

"BUT then, what in the world is the explanation of it all?" I asked bewildered, as the funny creature paused in his narrative and seemed absorbed in the contemplation of a beautiful knot he had just completed in his bit of string.

"The explanation is so simple," he replied, "for it is obvious, is it not, that only four people could possibly have committed the fraud?"

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Well," he said, whilst his bony fingers began to fidget with that eternal piece of string, "there is, of course, old Mr. Kidd; but as the worthy jeweller has paid £10,000 to prove that he did not steal the real necklace and substitute a false one in its stead, we must assume that he was guiltless. Then, secondly, there is Mr. Howard Dennis."

"Well, yes," I said, "what about him?"

"There were several points in his favour," he rejoined, marking each point with a fresh and most complicated knot; "it was not he who bought the roses, therefore it was not he who, clad in a blue domino, entered Miss Morgan's dressing-room directly after Knight left it.

"And mark the force of this point," he added excitedly.

"Just before the curtain rang up for the second act, Miss Morgan had been in her room, and had then undone the packet, which, in her own words, was just as she had received it from Mr. Kidd's hands.

"After that Miss Knight remained in charge, and a mere ten seconds after she left the room she saw the blue domino carrying the roses at the door.

"The flower-girl's story and that of George Finch have proved that the blue domino could not have been Mr. Dennis, but it was the loafer who evidently stole the false necklace.

"If you bear all this in mind you will realise that there was no time in those ten seconds for Mr. Dennis to have made the substitution *before* the theft was committed. It stands to reason that he could not have done it afterwards.

"Then, again, many people suspected Miss Knight, the dresser, but this supposition we may easily dismiss. An uneducated, stupid girl, not three-and-twenty, could not possibly have planned so clever a substitution. An imitation necklace of that particular calibre and made to order would cost far more money than a poor theatrical dresser could ever afford; let alone the risks of ordering such an ornament to be made.

"No," said the funny creature, with comic

emphasis, "there is but one theory possible, which is my own."

"And that is?" I asked eagerly.

"The workman, Rumford, of course," he responded triumphantly. "Why! it jumps to the eyes, as our French friends would tell us. Who, other than he, could have the opportunity of making an exact copy of the necklace which had been entrusted to his firm?"

"Being in the trade he could easily obtain the false stones without exciting any undue suspicion; being a skilled craftsman, he could easily make the clasp, and string the pearls in exact imitation of the original; he could do this secretly in his own home and without the slightest risk.

"Then the plan, though extremely simple, was very cleverly thought out. Disguised as the loafer——"

"The loafer!" I exclaimed.

"Why, yes! the loafer," he replied quietly, "disguised as the loafer, he hung round the stage door of the Novelty after business hours, until he had collected the bits of gossip and information he wanted; thus he learnt that Mr. Howard Dennis was Miss Morgan's accredited *fiancé*; that he, like everybody else who was available, 'walked on' in the second act; and that during that time the back of the stage was practically deserted.

"No doubt he knew all along that Mr. Kidd meant to take the pearls down to the theatre himself that night, and it was quite easy to

ascertain that Miss Morgan—as the hapless heroine—wore no jewellery in the second act, and that Mr. Howard Dennis invariably wore a blue domino.

“Some people might incline to the belief that Miss Knight was a paid accomplice, that she left the dressing-room unprotected on purpose, and that her story of the blue domino and the roses was pre-arranged between herself and Rumford, but that is not my opinion.

“I think that the scoundrel was far too clever to need any accomplice, and too shrewd to put himself thereby at the mercy of a girl like Knight.

“Rumford, I find, is a married man: this to me explains the blue domino, which the police were never able to trace to any business place, where it might have been bought or hired. Like the necklace itself, it was ‘home-made.’

“Having got his properties and his plans ready, Rumford then set to work. You must remember that a stage door-keeper is never above accepting a glass of beer from a friendly acquaintance; and, no doubt, if George Finch had not asked the loafer to bring him a glass, the latter would have offered him one. To drug the beer was simple enough; then Rumford went to buy the roses, and, I should say, met his wife somewhere round the corner, who handed him the blue domino and the mask; all this

was done in order to completely puzzle the police subsequently, and also in order to throw suspicion, if possible, upon young Dennis.

“As soon as the drug took effect upon George Finch, Rumford slipped into the theatre. To slip a mask and domino on and off is, as you know, a matter of a few seconds. Probably his intention had been—if he found Knight in the room—to knock her down if she attempted to raise an alarm; but here fortune favoured him. Knight saw him from a distance, and mistook him easily for Mr. Dennis.

“After the theft of the real necklace, Rumford sneaked out of the theatre. And here you see how clever was the scoundrel’s plan: if he had merely substituted one necklace for another there would have been no doubt whatever that the loafer—whoever he was—was the culprit—the drugged beer would have been quite sufficient proof for that. The hue and cry would have been after the loafer, and, who knows? there might have been some one or something which might have identified that loafer with himself.

“He must have bought the shabby clothes somewhere, he certainly bought the roses from a flower-girl; anyhow, there were a hundred and one little risks and contingencies which might have brought the theft home to him.

“But mark what happens: he steals the real necklace, and keeps the false one in his hand, intending to drop it sooner or later, and thus sent the police entirely on the wrong scent. As the loafer, he was supposed to have stolen the false necklace, then dropped it whilst struggling with George Finch. The result is that no one has troubled about the loafer; no one thought that he had anything to do with the substitution, which was the main point at issue, and no very great effort has ever been made to find that mysterious loafer.

“It never occurred to any one that the fraud and the theft were committed by one and the same person, and that that person could be none other than James Rumford.”

XII

THE TRAGEDY OF BARNSDALE MANOR

CHAPTER I

"WE have heard so much about the evils of Bridge," said the man in the corner that afternoon, "but I doubt whether that fashionable game has ever been responsible for a more terrible tragedy than the one at Barnsdale Manor."

"You think, then," I asked, for I saw he was waiting to be drawn out, "you think that the high play at Bridge did have something to do with that awful murder?"

"Most people think that much, I fancy," he replied, "although no one has arrived any nearer to the solution of the mystery which surrounds the tragic death of Mme. Quesnard at Barnsdale Manor on the 23rd September last.

"On that fateful occasion, you must remember that the house party at the Manor included a number of sporting and fashionable friends of Lord and Lady Barnsdale, among whom Sir Gilbert Culworth was the

only one whose name was actually mentioned during the hearing of this extraordinary case.

“It seems to have been a very gay house party indeed. In the daytime Lord Barnsdale took some of his guests to shoot and fish, whilst a few devotees remained at home in order to indulge their passion for the modern craze of Bridge. It was generally understood that Lord Barnsdale did not altogether approve of quite so much gambling. He was not by any means well off; and although he was very much in love with his beautiful wife, he could ill afford to pay her losses at cards.

“This was the reason, no doubt, that Bridge at Barnsdale Manor was only indulged in whilst the host himself was out shooting or fishing; in the evenings there was music or billiards, but never any cards.

“One of the most interesting personalities in the Barnsdale *ménage* was undoubtedly Madame Nathalie Quesnard, a sister of Lord Barnsdale's mother, who, if you remember, was a Mademoiselle de la Trémouille. This Mme. Quesnard was extremely wealthy, the widow of a French West Indian planter, who had made millions in Martinique.

“She was very fond of her nephew, to whom, as she had no children or other relatives of her own, she intended to leave the bulk of her vast fortune. Pending her

death, which was not likely to occur for some time, as she was not more than fifty, she took up her abode at Barnsdale Manor, together with her companion and amanuensis, a poor girl named Alice Holt.

“Mme. Quesnard was seemingly an amiable old lady; the only unpleasant trait in her character being her intense dislike of her nephew’s beautiful and fashionable young wife. The old Frenchwoman, who, with all her wealth, had the unbounded and innate thriftiness peculiar to her nation, looked with perfect horror on Lady Barnsdale’s extravagances, and above all on her fondness for gambling; and subsequently several of the servants at the Manor testified to the amount of mischief the old lady strove to make between her nephew and his young wife.

“Mme. Quesnard’s dislike for Lady Barnsdale seems, moreover, to have been shared by her dependent and companion, the girl Alice Holt. Between them, these two ladies seem to have cordially hated the brilliant and much-admired mistress of Barnsdale Manor.

“Such were the chief inmates of the Manor last September, at the time the tragedy occurred. On that memorable night Alice Holt, who occupied a bedroom immediately above that of Mme. Quesnard, was awakened in the middle of the night by a persistent noise, which undoubtedly came from her

mistress's room. The walls and floorings at the old Manor are very thick, and the sound was a very confused one, although the girl was quite sure that she could hear Mme. Quesnard's shrill voice raised as if in anger.

"She tried to listen for a time, and presently she heard a sound as if some piece of furniture had been knocked over, then nothing more. Somehow the sudden silence seemed to have frightened the girl more than the noise had done. Trembling with nervousness she waited for some few minutes, then, unable to bear the suspense any longer, she got out of bed, slipped on her shoes and dressing-gown, and determined to run downstairs to see if anything were amiss.

"To her horror she found on trying her door that it had been locked on the outside. Quite convinced now that something must indeed be very wrong, she started screaming and banging against the door, determined to arouse the household, which she, of course, quickly succeeded in doing.

"The first to emerge from his room was Lord Barnsdale. He at once realised that the shrieks proceeded from Alice Holt's room. He ran upstairs helter-skelter, and as the key had been left in the door, he soon released the unfortunate girl, who by now was quite hysterical with anxiety for her mistress.

"Altogether, I take it, some six or seven minutes must have elapsed from the time when Alice Holt was first alarmed by the sudden silence following the noise in Mme. Quesnard's room until she was released by Lord Barnsdale.

"As quickly and as coherently as she could, she blurted forth all her fears about her mistress. I can imagine how picturesque the old Manor House must have looked then, with everybody, ladies and gentlemen, and servants, crowding into the hall, arrayed in various *négligé* attire, asking hurried questions, getting in each other's way, and all only dimly to be seen by the light of candles, carried by some of the more sensible ones in this motley crowd.

"However, in the meanwhile, Lord Barnsdale had managed to understand Alice Holt. He ran downstairs again and knocked at his aunt's door; he received no reply—he tried the handle, but the door was locked from the inside.

"Genuinely frightened now, he forced open the door, and then recoiled in horror.

"The window was wide open, and a brilliant moonlight streamed into the room, weirdly illumining Mme. Quesnard's inanimate body, which lay full length upon the ground. Hastily begging the ladies not to follow him, Lord Barnsdale quickly went forward and bent over his aunt's body.

"There was no doubt that she was dead.

An ugly wound at the back of her head, some red marks round her throat, all testified to the fact that the poor old lady had been assaulted and murdered. Lord Barnsdale at once sent for the nearest doctor, whilst he and Miss Holt lifted the unfortunate lady back to bed.

"The messenger who had gone for the doctor was at the same time instructed to deliver a note, hastily scribbled by Lord Barnsdale, at the local police station.

"That a hideous crime had been committed, with burglary for its object, no one could be in doubt for a moment. Lord Barnsdale and two or three of his guests had already thrown a glance into the next room, a little boudoir, which Mme. Quesnard used as a sitting-room. There the heavy oak bureau bore silent testimony to the motive of this dastardly outrage. Mme. Quesnard, with the unfortunate and foolhardy habit peculiar to all French people, kept a very large quantity of loose and ready money by her. That habit, mind you, is the chief reason why burglary is so rife and so profitable all over France.

"In this case the old lady's national characteristic was evidently the chief cause of her tragic fate; the drawer of the bureau had been forced open, and no one could doubt for a moment that a large sum of money had been abstracted from it.

"The burglar had then obviously made

good his escape through the window, which he could do quite easily, as Mme. Quesnard's apartments were on the ground floor. She suffered from shortness of breath, it appears, and had a horror of stairs; she was, moreover, not the least bit nervous, and her windows were usually barred and shuttered.

"One very curious fact, however, at once struck all those present, even before the arrival of the detectives, and that was, that the old lady was partially dressed when she was found lying on the ground. She had slipped on an elaborate dressing-gown, had smoothed her hair, and put on her slippers. In fact, it was evident that she had in some measure prepared herself for the reception of the burglar.

"Throughout these hasty and amateurish observations conducted by Lord Barnsdale and two of his male guests, Alice Holt had remained seated beside her late employer's bedside sobbing bitterly. In spite of Lord Barnsdale's entreaties she refused to move; and wildly waved aside any attempt at consolation offered to her by one or two of the older female servants who were present.

"It was only when everybody at last made up their minds to return to their rooms, that some one mentioned Lady Barnsdale's name. She had been taken ill and faint the evening before, and had not been well all night. Jane Barlow, her maid, expressed the hope that her ladyship was

none the worse for this awful commotion, and must be wondering what it all meant.

"At this, suddenly, Alice Holt jumped up, like a madwoman.

"'What it all means?' she shrieked, whilst every one looked at her in speechless horror, 'it means that that woman has murdered my mistress, and robbed her. I know it—I know it—I know it!'

"And once more sinking beside the bed, she covered her dead mistress's hand with kisses, and sobbed and wailed as if her heart would break."

CHAPTER II

"You may well imagine the awful commotion the girl's wild outburst had created in the old Manor House. Lady Barnsdale had been taken ill the previous evening, and, of course, no one had breathed a word of it to her, but equally, of course, it was freely talked about at Barnsdale Manor, in the neighbourhood, and even so far as in the London clubs.

"Lord and Lady Barnsdale were very well known in London society, and Lord Barnsdale's adoration for his beautiful wife was quite notorious.

"Alice Holt, after her frantic outburst, had not breathed another word. Silent and sullen she went up to her room, packed her things, and left the house, where, of course, it became impossible that she should stay another day. She refused Lord Barnsdale's generous offer of money and help, and only stayed long enough to see the detectives and reply to the questions they thought fit to put to her.

"The whole neighbourhood was in a fever of excitement; many gossips would have it that the evidence against Lady Barnsdale

was conclusive, and that a warrant for her arrest had already been applied for.

“What had transpired was this :

“It appears that the day preceding the tragedy, Bridge was, as usual, being played for, I believe, guinea points. Lord Barnsdale was out shooting all day, and though the guests at the Manor were very loyal to their hostess, and refused to make any positive statements, there seems to be no doubt that Lady Barnsdale lost a very large sum of money to Sir Gilbert Culworth.

“Be that as it may, nothing further could be gleaned by enterprising reporters fresh from town; the police were more than usually reticent, and every one eagerly awaited the opening of the inquest, when sensational developments were expected in this mysterious case.

“It was held on September the 25th, in the servants' hall of Barnsdale Manor, and you may be sure that the large room was crowded to its utmost capacity. Lord Barnsdale was, of course, present, so was Sir Gilbert Culworth, but it was understood that Lady Barnsdale was still suffering from nervous prostration, and was unable to be present.

“When I arrived there, and gradually made my way to the front rank, the doctor who had been originally summoned to the murdered lady's bedside was giving his evidence.

“ He gave it as his opinion that the fractured skull from which Mme. Quesnard died was caused through her hitting the back of her head against the corner of the marble-topped washstand, in the immediate proximity of which she lay outstretched, when Lord Barnsdale first forced open the door. The stains on the marble had confirmed him in that opinion. Mme. Quesnard, he thought, must have fallen, owing to an onslaught made upon her by the burglar; the marks round the old lady’s throat testified to this, although these were not the cause of death.

“ After this there was a good deal of police evidence, with regard to the subsequent movements of the unknown miscreant. He had undoubtedly broken open the drawer of the bureau in the adjoining boudoir, the door of communication between this and Mme. Quesnard’s bedroom being always kept open, and it was presumed that he had made a considerable haul both in gold and notes. He had then locked the bedroom door on the inside and made good his escape through the window.

“ Immediately beneath this window, the flower-bed, muddy with the recent rain, bore the imprint of having been hastily trampled upon; but all actual footmarks had been carefully obliterated. Beyond this, all round the house, the garden paths are asphalted, and the burglar had evidently taken the

precaution to keep to these asphalted paths, or else to cross the garden by the lawns.

"You must understand," continued the man in the corner, after a slight pause, "that throughout all this preliminary evidence, everything went to prove that the crime had been committed by an inmate of the house, or at any rate by some one well acquainted with its usages and its *ménages*. Alice Holt, whose room was immediately above that of Mme. Quesnard, and who was, therefore, most likely to hear the noise of the conflict and to run to her mistress's assistance, had been first of all locked up in her room. It had, therefore, become quite evident that the miscreant had commenced operations from inside the house, and had entered Mme. Quesnard's room by the door, and not by the window, as had been at first supposed.

"But," added the funny creature excitedly, "as the old lady had, according to evidence, locked her door that night, it became more and more clear, as the case progressed, that she must of her own accord have admitted the person who subsequently caused her tragic death. This was, of course, confirmed by the fact that she was partially dressed when she was subsequently found dead.

"Strangely enough, with the exception of Alice Holt, no one else had heard any noise during the night. But, as I remarked before, the walls of these old houses are very

thick, and no one else slept on the ground floor.

"Another fact which in the early part of the inquest went to prove that the outrage was committed by some one familiar with the house, was that Ben, the watch-dog, had not raised any alarm. His kennel was quite close to Mme. Quesnard's windows, and he had not even barked.

"I doubt if the law would take official cognisance of the dumb testimony of a dog; nevertheless, Ben's evidence was in this case quite worthy of consideration.

"You may imagine how gradually, as these facts were unfolded, excitement grew to fever pitch, and when at last Alice Holt was called, every one literally held their breath, eagerly waiting to hear what was coming.

"She is a tall, handsome-looking girl, with fine eyes and a rich voice. Dressed in deep black she certainly looked an imposing figure as she stood there, repeating the story of how she was awakened in the night, by the sound of her mistress's angry voice, of the noise and sudden silence, and also of her terror, when she found that she had been locked up in her room.

"But obviously the girl had more to tell, and was only waiting for the coroner's direct question.

"Will you tell the jury the reason why you made such an extraordinary and unwar-

rantable accusation against Lady Barnsdale ?' he asked her at last, amid breathless silence in the crowded room.

"Every one instinctively looked across the room to where Lord Barnsdale sat between his friend Sir Gilbert Culworth and his lawyer, Sir Arthur Inglewood, who had evidently come down from London in order to watch the case on his client's behalf. Alice Holt, too, looked across at Lord Barnsdale for a moment. He seemed attentive and interested, but otherwise quite calm and impassive.

"I, who watched the girl, saw a look of pity cross her face as she gazed at him, and I think, when we bear in mind that the distinguished English gentleman and the poor paid companion had known each other years ago, when they were girl and boy together in old Mme. Quesnard's French home, we may make a pretty shrewd guess why Alice Holt hated the beautiful Lady Barnsdale.

" 'It was about six o'clock in the afternoon,' she began at last, in the same quiet tone of voice, 'I was sitting sewing in Madame's boudoir, when Lady Barnsdale came into the bedroom. She did not see me, I know, for she began at once talking volubly to Madame about a serious loss she had just sustained at Bridge ; several hundred pounds, she said.'

" 'Well ?' queried the coroner, for the girl had paused, almost as if she regretted

what she had already said. She certainly threw an appealing look at Lord Barnsdale, who, however, seemed to take no notice of her.

“ ‘Well,’ she continued with sudden resolution, ‘Madame was very angry at this; she declared that Lady Barnsdale deserved a severe lesson; her extravagances were a positive scandal. “Not a penny will I give you to pay your gambling debts,” said Madame; “and, moreover, I shall make it my business to inform my nephew of your goings-on whilst he is absent.”’

“ ‘Lady Barnsdale was in a wild state of excitement. She begged and implored Madame to say nothing to Lord Barnsdale about it, and did her very best to try to induce her to help her out of her difficulties, just this once more. But Madame was obdurate. Thereupon Lady Barnsdale turned on her like a fury, called her every opprobrious name under the sun, and finally flounced out of the room, banging the door behind her.

“ ‘Madame was very much upset after this,’ continued Alice Holt, ‘and I was not a bit astonished when directly after dinner she rang for me, and asked to be put to bed. It was then nine o’clock.

“ ‘That is the last I saw of poor Madame alive.

“ ‘She was very excited then, and told me that she was quite frightened of Lady

Barnsdale—a gambler, she said, was as likely as not to become a thief, if opportunity arose. I offered to sleep on the sofa in the next room, for the old lady seemed quite nervous, a thing I have never known her to be. But she was too proud to own to nervousness, and she dismissed me finally, saying that she would lock her door, for once: a thing she scarcely ever did.'

"It was a curious story, to say the least of it, which Alice Holt thus told to an excited public. Cross-examined by the coroner, she never departed from a single point of it, her calm and presence of mind being only equalled throughout this trying ordeal by that of Lord Barnsdale, who sat seemingly unmoved whilst these terrible insinuations were made against his wife.

"But there was more to come. Sir Gilbert Culworth had been called; in the interest of justice, and in accordance with his duty as a citizen, he was forced to stand up and, all unwillingly, to add another tiny link to the chain of evidence that implicated his friend's wife in this most terrible crime.

"Right loyally he tried to shield her in every possible way, but cross-questioned by the coroner, harassed nearly out of his senses, he was forced to admit two facts—namely, that Lady Barnsdale had lost nearly £800 at Bridge the day before the murder, and that she had paid her debt to himself in full, on the following morning, in gold and notes.

“He had been forced, much against his will, to show the notes to the police; unfortunately for the justice of the case, however, the numbers of these could not be directly traceable as having been in Mme. Quesnard’s possession at the time of her death. No diaries or books of accounts of any kind were found. Like most French people, she arranged all her money affairs herself, receiving her vast dividends in foreign money, and converting this into English notes and gold, as occasion demanded, at the nearest money-changer’s that happened to be handy.

“She had, like a great many foreigners, a holy horror of banks. She would have mistrusted the Bank of England itself; as for solicitors, she held them in perfect abhorrence. She only went once to one in her life, and that was in order to make a will leaving everything she possessed unconditionally to her beloved nephew, Lord Barnsdale.

“But in spite of this difficulty about the notes, you see for yourself, do you not, how terribly strong was the circumstantial evidence against Lady Barnsdale? Her losses at cards, her appeal to Mme. Quesnard, the latter’s refusal to help her, and finally the payment in full of the debt to Sir Gilbert Culworth on the following morning.

“There was only one thing that spoke for her, and that was the very horror of the crime itself. It was practically impossible

to conceive that a woman of Lady Barnsdale's refinement and education should have sprung upon an elderly woman, like some navy's wife by the docks, and then that she should have had the presence of mind to jump out of the window, to obliterate her footmarks in the flower-bed, and, in fact, to have given the crime the look of a clever burglary.

"Still, we all know that money difficulties will debase the noblest of us, that greed will madden the sanest and most refined. When the inquest was adjourned, I can assure you that no one had any doubt whatever that within twenty-four hours Lady Barnsdale would be arrested on the capital charge."

CHAPTER III

"BUT the detectives in charge of the case had reckoned without Sir Arthur Inglewood, the great lawyer, who was watching the proceedings on behalf of his aristocratic clients," said the man in the corner, when he had assured himself of my undivided attention.

"The adjourned inquest brought with it, I assure you, its full quota of sensation. Again Lord Barnsdale was present, calm, haughty, and impassive, whilst Lady Barnsdale was still too ill to attend. But she had made a statement upon oath, in which, whilst flatly denying that her interview with the deceased at 6 p.m. had been of an acrimonious character as alleged by Alice Holt, she swore most positively that all through the night she had been ill, and had not left her room after 11.30 p.m.

"The first witness called after this affidavit had been read was Jane Barlow, Lady Barnsdale's maid.

"The girl deposed that on that memorable evening preceding the murder, she went up to her mistress's room at about 11.30 in order to get everything ready for the night. As a rule, of course, there was nobody about in the bedroom at that hour, but on this

occasion when Jane Barlow entered the room, which she did without knocking, she saw her mistress sitting by her desk.

“ ‘ Her ladyship looked up when I came in,’ continued Jane Barlow, ‘ and seemed very cross with me for not knocking at the door. I apologised, then began to get the room tidy ; as I did so I could see that my lady was busy counting a lot of money. There were lots of sovereigns and banknotes. My lady put some together in an envelope and addressed it, then she got up from her desk and went to lock up the remainder of the money in her jewel safe.’

“ ‘ And this was at what time ? ’ asked the coroner.

“ ‘ At about half-past eleven, I think, sir,’ repeated the girl.

“ ‘ Well,’ said the coroner, ‘ did you notice anything else ? ’

“ ‘ Yes,’ replied Jane, ‘ whilst my lady was at her safe, I saw the envelope in which she had put the money lying on the desk. I couldn’t help looking at it, for I knew it was ever so full of banknotes, and I saw that my lady had addressed it to Sir Gilbert Culworth.’

“ At this point Sir Arthur Inglewood jumped to his feet and handed something over to the coroner ; it was evidently an envelope which had been torn open. The coroner looked at it very intently, then suddenly asked Jane Barlow if she had

happened to notice anything about the envelope which was lying on her ladyship's desk that evening.

" "Oh, yes, sir!" she replied unhesitatingly, 'I noticed my lady had made a splotch, right on top of the C in Sir Gilbert Culworth's name.'

" "This, then, is the envelope,' was the coroner's quiet comment, as he handed the paper across to the girl.

" "Yes, there's the splotch,' she replied, 'I'd know it anywhere.'

" "So you see," continued the man in the corner, with a chuckle, "that the chain of circumstantial evidence against Lady Barnsdale was getting somewhat entangled. It was indeed fortunate for her that Sir Gilbert Culworth had not destroyed the envelope in which she had handed him over the money on the following day.

" Alice Holt, as you know, heard the conflict and raised the alarm much later in the night, when everybody was already in bed, whilst long before that Lady Barnsdale was apparently in possession of the money with which she could pay back her debt.

" Thus the motive for the crime, so far as she was concerned, was entirely done away with. Directly after the episode witnessed by Jane Barlow, Lady Barnsdale had a sort of nervous collapse, and went to bed feeling very ill. Lord Barnsdale was terribly concerned about her; he and the maid remained

alternately by her bedside for an hour or two ; finally Lord Barnsdale went to sleep in his dressing-room, whilst Jane also finally retired to rest.

“ Ill as Lady Barnsdale undoubtedly was then, it was absolutely preposterous to conceive that she could after that have planned and carried out so monstrous a crime, without any motive whatever. To have locked Alice Holt’s door, then gone downstairs, forced her way into the old lady’s room, struggled with her, to have jumped out of the window, and run back into the house by the garden, might have been the work of a determined woman, driven mad by the desire for money, but became absolutely out of the question in the case of a woman suffering from nervous collapse, and having apparently no motive for the crime.

“ Of course Sir Arthur Inglewood made the most of the fact that no mud was found on any shoes or dress belonging to Lady Barnsdale. The flower-bed was very soft with the heavy rain of the day before, and Lady Barnsdale could not possibly have jumped even from a ground-floor window and trampled on the flower-bed without staining her skirts.

“ Then there was another point which the clever lawyer brought to the coroner’s notice. As Alice Holt had stated in her sworn evidence that Mme. Quesnard had owned to being frightened of Lady Barnsdale

that night, was it likely that she would *of her own accord* have opened the door to her in the middle of the night, without at least calling for assistance?

"Thus the matter has remained a strange and unaccountable puzzle. It has always been called the 'Barnsdale Mystery' for that very reason. Every one, somehow, has always felt that Lady Barnsdale did have something to do with that terrible tragedy. Her husband has taken her abroad, and they have let Barnsdale Manor; it almost seems as if the ghost of the old Frenchwoman had driven them forth from their own country.

"As for Alice Holt, she maintains to this day that Lady Barnsdale was the culprit, and I understand that she has not yet given up all hope of collecting a sufficiency of evidence to have the beautiful and fashionable woman of society arraigned for this hideous murder."

CHAPTER IV

"WILL she succeed, do you think?" I asked at last.

"Succeed? Of course she won't," he retorted excitedly. "Lady Barnsdale never committed that murder; no woman, except, perhaps, an East-end factory hand, could have done it at all."

"But then——" I urged.

"Why, then," he replied, with a chuckle, "the only logical conclusion is that the robbery and the murder were not committed by the same person, nor at the same hour of the night; moreover, I contend that there was no premeditated murder, but that the old lady died from the result of a pure accident."

"But how?" I gasped.

"This is my version of the story," he said excitedly, as his long bony fingers started fidgeting, fidgeting with that eternal bit of string. "Lady Barnsdale, pressed for money, made an appeal to Mme. Quesnard, which the latter refused, as we know. Then there was an acrimonious dispute between the two ladies, after which came the dinner hour, then Madame, feeling ill and upset, went up to bed at nine o'clock.

"Now my contention is that undoubtedly

the robbery had been committed before that, between the dispute and Madame's bedtime."

"By whom?"

"By Lady Barnsdale, of course, who, as the mistress of the house, could come and go from room to room without exciting any comment, who, moreover, at 6 p.m. was hard pressed for money, and who but a few hours later was handling a mass of gold and banknotes.

"But the strain of committing even an ordinary theft is very great upon a refined woman's organisation. Lady Barnsdale has a nervous breakdown. Well! what is the most likely thing to happen? Why! that she should confess everything to her husband, who worships her, and no doubt express her repentance at what she had done.

"Then imagine Lord Barnsdale's horror! The old lady had not discovered the theft before going to bed. That was only natural, since she was feeling unwell, and was not likely to sit up at night counting her money; the lock of the bureau drawer having been tampered with, would perhaps not attract her attention at night.

"But in the morning, the very first thing, she would discover everything, at once suspect the worst, and who knows, make a scandal, talk of it before Alice Holt, Lady Barnsdale's arch enemy, and all before restitution could be made.

"No, no, that restitution must be made at once! not a minute must be lost, since any moment might bring forth discovery, and perhaps an awful catastrophe.

"I take it that Mme. Quesnard and her nephew were on very intimate terms. He hoped to arouse no one by going to his aunt's room, but in order to make quite sure that Alice Holt, hearing a noise in her mistress's room, should not surreptitiously come down, and perhaps play eavesdropper at the momentous interview, he turned the key of the girl's door as he went past, and locked her in.

"Then he knocked at his aunt's door (gently, of course, for old people are light sleepers), and called her by name. Mme. Quesnard, recognising her nephew's voice, slipped on her dressing-gown, smoothed her hair, and let him in.

"Exactly what took place at the interview it is, of course, impossible for any human being to say. Here even I can but conjecture," he added, with inimitable conceit, "but we can only imagine that, having heard Lord Barnsdale's confession of his wife's folly, the old lady, who as a Frenchwoman was of quick temper and unbridled tongue, would indulge in not very elegant rhetoric on the subject of the woman she had always disliked.

"Lord Barnsdale would, of course, defend his wife, and the old lady, with feminine

obstinacy, would continue the attack. Then some insulting epithet, a word only perhaps, roused the devoted husband's towering indignation—the meekest man on earth becomes a mad bull when he really loves, and the woman he loves is insulted.

“I maintain that the old lady's death was really due to a pure accident; that Lord Barnsdale gripped her by the throat, in a moment of mad anger, at some hideous insult hurled at his wife; of that I am as convinced as if I had witnessed the whole scene. Then the old lady fell, hit her head against the marble, and Lord Barnsdale realised that he was alone at night in his aunt's room, and that he had killed her.

“What would anyone do under the circumstances?” he added excitedly. “Why, of course, collect his senses and try to save himself from what might prove to be consequences of the most awful kind. This Lord Barnsdale thought he could best do by giving the accident, which looked so like murder, the appearance of a burglary.

“The lock of the desk in the next room had already been forced open; he now locked the door on the inside, threw open the shutter and the window, jumped out as any burglar would have done; and, being careful to obliterate his own footmarks, he crept back into the house and thence into his own room, without alarming the watch-dog, who naturally knew his own master. He was, of

course, just in time before Alice Holt succeeded in rousing the household with her screams.

"And thus you see," he added, "there are no such things as mysteries. The police call them so, so do the public, but every crime has its perpetrator, and every puzzle its solution. My experience is that the simplest solution is invariably the right one."

THE END

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