

"You remember that it was Percival who remained beside his father and carried him up to his room. Where was Murray throughout that long and painful day, when his father lay dying—he, the idolised son, the apple of the old man's eye? You never hear his name mentioned as being present there all that day. But he knew that he had offended his father mortally, and that his father meant to cut him off with a shilling. He knew that Mr. Wethered had been sent for, that Wethered left the house soon after four o'clock.

"And here the cleverness of the man comes in. Having lain in wait for Wethered and knocked him on the back of the head with a stick, he could not very well make that will disappear altogether. There remained the faint chance of some other witnesses knowing that Mr. Brooks had made a fresh will, Mr. Wethered's partner, his clerk, or one of the confidential servants in the house. Therefore *a* will must be discovered after the old man's death.

"Now, Murray Brooks was not an expert forger, it takes years of training to become that. A forged will executed by himself would be sure to be found out—yes, that's it, sure to be found out. The forgery will be palpable—let it be palpable, and then it will be found out, branded as such, and the original will of 1891, so favourable to the young blackguard's interests, would be

held as valid. Was it devilry or merely additional caution which prompted Murray to pen that forged will so glaringly in Percival's favour? It is impossible to say.

"Anyhow, it was the cleverest touch in that marvellously devised crime. To plan that evil deed was great, to execute it was easy enough. He had several hours' leisure in which to do it. Then at night it was simplicity itself to slip the document under the dead man's pillow. Sacrilege causes no shudder to such natures as Murray Brooks. The rest of the drama you know already——"

"But Percival Brooks?"

"The jury returned a verdict of 'Not guilty.' There was no evidence against him."

"But the money? Surely the scoundrel does not have the enjoyment of it still?"

"No; he enjoyed it for a time, but he died about three months ago, and forgot to take the precaution of making a will, so his brother Percival has got the business after all. If you ever go to Dublin, I should order some of Brooks' bacon if I were you. It is very good."

CHAPTER XXIV

AN UNPARALLELED OUTRAGE

“**D**O you care for the seaside ? ” asked the man in the corner when he had finished his lunch. “ I don’t mean the seaside at Ostend or Trouville, but honest English seaside with nigger minstrels, three-shilling excursionists, and dirty, expensive furnished apartments, where they charge you a shilling for lighting the hall gas on Sundays and sixpence on other evenings. Do you care for that ? ”

“ I prefer the country. ”

“ Ah ! perhaps it is preferable. Personally I only liked one of our English seaside resorts once, and that was for a week, when Edward Skinner was up before the magistrate, charged with what was known as the ‘ Brighton Outrage. ’ I don’t know if you remember the memorable day in Brighton, memorable for that elegant town, which deals more in amusements than mysteries, when Mr. Francis Morton, one of its most noted residents, disappeared. Yes ! disappeared as completely as any vanishing lady in a music-hall. He was wealthy, had a fine house, servants, a

wife and children, and he disappeared. There was no getting away from that.

"Mr. Francis Morton lived with his wife in one of the large houses in Sussex Square at the Kemp Town end of Brighton. Mrs. Morton was well known for her Americanisms, her swagger dinner parties, and beautiful Paris gowns. She was the daughter of one of the many American millionaires (I think her father was a Chicago pork-butcher), who conveniently provide wealthy wives for English gentlemen; and she had married Mr. Francis Morton a few years ago and brought him her quarter of a million, for no other reason but that she fell in love with him. He was neither good-looking nor distinguished, in fact, he was one of those men who seem to have CITY stamped all over their person.

"He was a gentleman of very regular habits, going up to London every morning on business and returning every afternoon by the 'husband's train.' So regular was he in these habits that all the servants at the Sussex Square house were betrayed into actual gossip over the fact that on Wednesday, March 17th, the master was not home for dinner. Hales, the butler, remarked that the mistress seemed a bit anxious and didn't eat much food. The evening wore on and Mr. Morton did not appear. At nine o'clock the young footman was dispatched to the station to make inquiries whether his master had been seen

there in the afternoon, or whether—which Heaven forbid—there had been an accident on the line. The young man interviewed two or three porters, the bookstall boy, and ticket clerk; all were agreed that Mr. Morton did not go up to London during the day; no one had seen him within the precincts of the station. There certainly had been no accident reported either on the up or down line.

“But the morning of the 18th came, with its usual postman’s knock, but neither Mr. Morton nor any sign or news from him. Mrs. Morton, who evidently had spent a sleepless night, for she looked sadly changed and haggard, sent a wire to the hall porter at the large building in Cannon Street, where her husband had his office. An hour later she had the reply: ‘Not seen Mr. Morton all day yesterday, not here to-day.’ By the afternoon every one in Brighton knew that a fellow-resident had mysteriously disappeared from or in the city.

“A couple of days, then another, elapsed, and still no sign of Mr. Morton. The police were doing their best. The gentleman was so well known in Brighton—as he had been a resident two years—that it was not difficult to firmly establish the one fact that he had not left the city, since no one saw him in the station on the morning of the 17th, nor at any time since then. Mild excitement prevailed throughout the town. At

first the newspapers took the matter somewhat jocosely. 'Where is Mr. Morton?' was the usual placard on the evening's contents bills, but after three days had gone by and the worthy Brighton resident was still missing, while Mrs. Morton was seen to look more haggard and care-worn every day, mild excitement gave place to anxiety.

"There were vague hints now as to foul play. The news had leaked out that the missing gentleman was carrying a large sum of money on the day of his disappearance. There were also vague rumours of a scandal not unconnected with Mrs. Morton herself and her own past history, which in her anxiety for her husband she had been forced to reveal to the detective-inspector in charge of the case.

"Then on Saturday the news which the late evening papers contained was this :

" 'Acting on certain information received, the police to-day forced an entrance into one of the rooms of Russell House, a high-class furnished apartment on the King's Parade, and there they discovered our missing distinguished townsman, Mr. Francis Morton, who had been robbed and subsequently locked up in that room since Wednesday, the 17th. When discovered he was in the last stages of inanition, he was tied into an arm-chair with ropes, a thick wool shawl had been wound round his mouth, and it is a positive

marvel that, left thus without food and very little air, the unfortunate gentleman survived the horrors of these four days of incarceration.

“ ‘ He has been conveyed to his residence in Sussex Square, and we are pleased to say that Doctor Mellish, who is in attendance, has declared his patient to be out of serious danger, and that with care and rest he will be soon quite himself again.

“ ‘ At the same time our readers will learn with unmixed satisfaction that the police of our city, with their usual acuteness and activity, have already discovered the identity and whereabouts of the cowardly ruffian who committed this unparalleled outrage.’ ”

CHAPTER XXV

THE PRISONER

"I REALLY don't know," continued the man in the corner blandly, "what it was that interested me in the case from the very first. Certainly it had nothing very out of the way or mysterious about it, but I journeyed down to Brighton nevertheless, as I felt that something deeper and more subtle lay behind that extraordinary assault, following a robbery, no doubt.

"I must tell you that the police had allowed it to be freely circulated abroad that they held a clue. It had been easy enough to ascertain who the lodger was who had rented the furnished room in Russell House. His name was supposed to be Edward Skinner, and he had taken the room about a fortnight ago, but had gone away ostensibly for two or three days on the very day of Mr. Morton's mysterious disappearance. It was on the 20th that Mr. Morton was found, and thirty-six hours later the public were gratified to hear that Mr. Edward Skinner had been traced to London and arrested on the charge

of assault upon the person of Mr. Francis Morton and of robbing him of the sum of £10,000.

"Then a further sensation was added to the already bewildering case by the startling announcement that Mr. Francis Morton refused to prosecute.

"Of course, the Treasury took up the case and subpoenaed Mr. Morton as a witness, so that gentleman—if he wished to hush the matter up, or had been in any way terrorised into a promise of doing so—gained nothing by his refusal, except an additional amount of curiosity in the public mind and further sensation around the mysterious case.

"It was all this, you see, which had interested me and brought me down to Brighton on March 23rd to see the prisoner Edward Skinner arraigned before the beak. I must say that he was a very ordinary-looking individual. Fair, of ruddy complexion, with snub nose and the beginning of a bald place on the top of his head, he, too, looked the embodiment of a prosperous, stodgy 'City gent.'

"I took a quick survey of the witnesses present, and guessed that the handsome, stylish woman sitting next to Mr. Reginald Pepys, the noted lawyer for the Crown, was Mrs. Morton.

"There was a large crowd in court, and I heard whispered comments among the feminine portion thereof as to the beauty of Mrs. Morton's

gown, the value of her large picture hat, and the magnificence of her diamond rings.

"The police gave all the evidence required with regard to the finding of Mr. Morton in the room at Russell House and also to the arrest of Skinner at the Langham Hotel in London. It appears that the prisoner seemed completely taken aback at the charge preferred against him, and declared that though he knew Mr. Francis Morton slightly in business he knew nothing as to his private life.

"'Prisoner stated,' continued Inspector Buckle, 'that he was not even aware Mr. Morton lived in Brighton, but I have evidence here, which I will place before your Honour, to prove that the prisoner was seen in the company of Mr. Morton at 9.30 o'clock on the morning of the assault.'

"Cross-examined by Mr. Matthew Quiller, the detective-inspector admitted that prisoner merely said that he did not know that Mr. Morton was a *resident* of Brighton—he never denied having met him there.

"The witness, or rather witnesses, referred to by the police were two Brighton tradesmen who knew Mr. Morton by sight and had seen him on the morning of the 17th walking with the accused.

"In this instance Mr. Quiller had no question to ask of the witnesses, and it was generally understood that the prisoner did not wish to contradict their statement.

“ Constable Hartrick told the story of the finding of the unfortunate Mr. Morton after his four days’ incarceration. The constable had been sent round by the chief inspector, after certain information given by Mrs. Chapman, the landlady of Russell House. He had found the door locked and forced it open. Mr. Morton was in an arm-chair, with several yards of rope wound loosely round him ; he was almost unconscious, and there was a thick wool shawl tied round his mouth which must have deadened any cry or groan the poor gentleman might have uttered. But, as a matter of fact, the constable was under the impression that Mr. Morton had been either drugged or stunned in some way at first, which had left him weak and faint and prevented him from making himself heard or extricating himself from his bonds, which were very clumsily, evidently very hastily, wound round his body.

“ The medical officer who was called in, and also Dr. Mellish who attended Mr. Morton, both said that he seemed dazed by some stupefying drug, and also, of course, terribly weak and faint with the want of food.

“ The first witness of real importance was Mrs. Chapman, the proprietress of Russell House, whose original information to the police led to the discovery of Mr. Morton. In answer to Mr. Pepys, she said that on March 1st the accused

called at her house and gave his name as Mr. Edward Skinner.

“ ‘He required, he said, a furnished room at a moderate rental for a permanency, with full attendance when he was in, but he added that he would often be away for two or three days, or even longer, at a time.

“ ‘He told me that he was a traveller for a tea-house,’ continued Mrs. Chapman, ‘and I showed him the front room on the third floor, as he did not want to pay more than twelve shillings a week. I asked him for a reference, but he put three sovereigns in my hand, and said with a laugh that he supposed paying for his room a month in advance was sufficient reference; if I didn’t like him after that, I could give him a week’s notice to quit.’

“ ‘You did not think of asking him the name of the firm for which he travelled?’ asked Mr. Pepys.

“ ‘No, I was quite satisfied as he paid me for the room. The next day he sent in his luggage and took possession of the room. He went out most mornings on business, but was always in Brighton for Saturday and Sunday. On the 16th he told me that he was going to Liverpool for a couple of days; he slept in the house that night, and went off early on the 17th, taking his portmanteau with him.’

“ ‘At what time did he leave?’ asked Mr. Pepys.

" 'I couldn't say exactly,' replied Mrs. Chapman with some hesitation. 'You see this is the off season here. None of my rooms are let, except the one to Mr. Skinner, and I only have one servant. I keep four during the summer, autumn, and winter season,' she added with conscious pride, fearing that her former statement might prejudice the reputation of Russell House. 'I thought I had heard Mr. Skinner go out about nine o'clock, but about an hour later the girl and I were both in the basement, and we heard the front door open and shut with a bang, and then a step in the hall.

" ' "That's Mr. Skinner," said Mary. "So it is," I said, "why, I thought he had gone an hour ago." "He did go out then," said Mary, "for he left his bedroom door open and I went in to do his bed and tidy his room." "Just go and see if that's him, Mary," I said, and Mary ran up to the hall and up the stairs, and came back to tell me that that was Mr. Skinner all right enough; he had gone straight up to his room. Mary didn't see him, but he had another gentleman with him, as she could hear them talking in Mr. Skinner's room.'

" 'Then you can't tell us at what time the prisoner left the house finally?'

" 'No, that I can't. I went out shopping soon after that. When I came in it was twelve o'clock. I went up to the third floor and found

that Mr. Skinner had locked his door and taken the key with him. As I knew Mary had already done the room I did not trouble more about it, though I did think it strange for a gentleman to lock up his room and not leave the key with me.'

" 'And, of course, you heard no noise of any kind in the room then ? '

" 'No. Not that day or the next, but on the third day Mary and I both thought we heard a funny sound. I said that Mr. Skinner had left his window open, and it was the blind flapping against the window-pane ; but when we heard that funny noise again I put my ear to the key-hole and I thought I could hear a groan. I was very frightened, and sent Mary for the police.'

" Mrs. Chapman had nothing more of interest to say. The prisoner certainly was her lodger. She had last seen him on the evening of the 16th going up to his room with his candle. Mary the servant had much the same story to relate as her mistress.

" 'I think it was 'im, right enough,' said Mary guardedly. 'I didn't see 'im, but I went up to 'is landing and stopped a moment outside 'is door. I could 'ear loud voices in the room—gentlemen talking.'

" 'I suppose you would not do such a thing as to listen, Mary ? ' queried Mr. Pepys with a smile.

" 'No, sir,' said Mary with a bland smile, 'I

didn't catch what the gentlemen said, but one of them spoke so loud I thought they must be quarrelling.'

" ' Mr. Skinner was the only person in possession of a latch-key, I presume. No one else could have come in without ringing at the door ? ' "

" ' Oh no, sir. ' "

" That was all. So far, you see, the case was progressing splendidly for the Crown against the prisoner. The contention, of course, was that Skinner had met Mr. Morton, brought him home with him, assaulted, drugged, then gagged and bound him, and finally robbed him of whatever money he had in his possession, which, according to certain affidavits which presently would be placed before the magistrate, amounted to £10,000 in notes.

" But in all this there still remained the great element of mystery for which the public and the magistrate would demand an explanation: namely, what were the relationships between Mr. Morton and Skinner, which had induced the former to refuse the prosecution of the man who had not only robbed him, but had so nearly succeeded in leaving him to die a terrible and lingering death ?

" Mr. Morton was too ill as yet to appear in person. Dr. Mellish had absolutely forbidden his patient to undergo the fatigue and excitement of giving evidence himself in court that

day. But his depositions had been taken at his bedside, were sworn to by him, and were now placed before the magistrate by the prosecuting counsel, and the facts they revealed were certainly as remarkable as they were brief and enigmatical.

“As they were read by Mr. Pepys, an awed and expectant hush seemed to descend over the large crowd gathered there, and all necks were strained eagerly forward to catch a glimpse of a tall, elegant woman, faultlessly dressed and wearing exquisite jewellery, but whose handsome face wore, as the prosecuting counsel read her husband’s deposition, a more and more ashen hue.

“‘This, your Honour, is the statement made upon oath by Mr. Francis Morton,’ commenced Mr. Pepys in that loud, sonorous voice of his which sounds so impressive in a crowded and hushed court. “‘I was obliged, for certain reasons which I refuse to disclose, to make a payment of a large sum of money to a man whom I did not know and have never seen. It was in a matter of which my wife was cognisant and which had entirely to do with her own affairs. I was merely the go-between, as I thought it was not fit that she should see to this matter herself. The individual in question had made certain demands, of which she kept me in ignorance as long as she could, not wishing to unneces-

sarily worry me. At last she decided to place the whole matter before me, and I agreed with her that it would be best to satisfy the man's demands.

“ “ “ I then wrote to that individual whose name I do not wish to disclose, addressing the letter, as my wife directed me to do, to the Brighton post office, saying that I was ready to pay the £10,000 to him, at any place or time and in what manner he might appoint. I received a reply which bore the Brighton postmark, and which desired me to be outside Furnival's, the drapers, in West Street, at 9.30 on the morning of March 17th, and to bring the money (£10,000) in Bank of England notes.

“ “ “ On the 16th my wife gave me a cheque for the amount and I cashed it at her bank—Bird's in Fleet Street. At half-past nine the following morning I was at the appointed place. An individual wearing a grey overcoat, bowler hat, and red tie accosted me by name and requested me to walk as far as his lodgings in the King's Parade. I followed him. Neither of us spoke. He stopped at a house which bore the name 'Russell House,' and which I shall be able to swear to as soon as I am able to go out. He let himself in with a latch-key, and asked me to follow him up to his room on the third floor. I thought I noticed when we were in the room that he locked the door ; however, I had nothing

of any value about me except the £10,000, which I was ready to give him. We had not exchanged the slightest word.

“ “ “ I gave him the notes, and he folded them and put them in his pocket-book. Then I turned towards the door, and, without the slightest warning, I felt myself suddenly gripped by the shoulder, while a handkerchief was pressed to my nose and mouth. I struggled as best I could, but the handkerchief was saturated with chloroform, and I soon lost consciousness. I hazily remember the man saying to me in short, jerky sentences, spoken at intervals while I was still weakly struggling :

“ “ “ “ What a fool you must think me, my dear sir ! Did you really think that I was going to let you quietly walk out of here, straight to the police-station, eh ? Such dodges have been done before, I know, when a man's silence has to be bought for money. Find out who he is, see where he lives, give him the money, then inform against him. No you don't ! not this time. I am off to the Continong with this £10,000, and I can get to Newhaven in time for the midday boat, so you'll have to keep quiet until I am the other side of the Channel, my friend. You won't be much inconvenienced ; my landlady will hear your groans presently and release you, so you'll be all right. There, now, drink this—that's better.' He forced something bitter

down my throat, then I remember nothing more.

“ “ “ When I regained consciousness I was sitting in an arm-chair with some rope tied round me and a wool shawl round my mouth. I hadn't the strength to make the slightest effort to disentangle myself or to utter a scream. I felt terribly sick and faint.” ”

“ Mr. Reginald Pepys had finished reading, and no one in that crowded court had thought of uttering a sound ; the magistrate's eyes were fixed upon the handsome lady in the magnificent gown, who was mopping her eyes with a dainty lace handkerchief.

“ The extraordinary narrative of the victim of so daring an outrage had kept every one in suspense ; one thing was still expected to make the measure of sensation as full as it had ever been over any criminal case, and that was Mrs. Morton's evidence. She was called by the prosecuting counsel, and slowly, gracefully, she entered the witness-box. There was no doubt that she had felt keenly the tortures which her husband had undergone, and also the humiliation of seeing her name dragged forcibly into this ugly, black-mailing scandal.

“ Closely questioned by Mr. Reginald Pepys, she was forced to admit that the man who black-mailed her was connected with her early life in a way which would have brought terrible dis-

grace upon her and upon her children. The story she told, amidst many tears and sobs, and much use of her beautiful lace handkerchief and be-ringed hands, was exceedingly pathetic.

"It appears that when she was barely seventeen she was inveigled into a secret marriage with one of those foreign adventurers who swarm in every country, and who styled himself Comte Armand de la Tremouille. He seems to have been a black-guard of unusually low pattern, for, after he had extracted from her some £200 of her pin money and a few diamond brooches, he left her one fine day with a laconic word to say that he was sailing for Europe by the *Argentina*, and would not be back for some time. She was in love with the brute, poor young soul, for when, a week later, she read that the *Argentina* was wrecked, and presumably every soul on board had perished, she wept very many bitter tears over her early widowhood.

"Fortunately her father, a very wealthy pork-butcher of Chicago, had known nothing of his daughter's culpable foolishness. Four years later he took her to London, where she met Mr. Francis Morton and married him. She led six or seven years of very happy married life when one day, like a thunderbolt from a clear, blue sky, she received a typewritten letter, signed 'Armand de la Tremouille,' full of protestations of undying love, telling a long and pathetic tale of years of

suffering in a foreign land, whither he had drifted after having been rescued almost miraculously from the wreck of the *Argentina*, and where he never had been able to scrape a sufficient amount of money to pay for his passage home. At last fate had favoured him. He had, after many vicissitudes, found the whereabouts of his dear wife, and was now ready to forgive all that was past and take her to his loving arms once again.

“What followed was the usual course of events when there is a blackguard and a fool of a woman. She was terrorised and did not dare to tell her husband for some time; she corresponded with the Comte de la Tremouille, begging him for her sake and in memory of the past not to attempt to see her. She found him amenable to reason in the shape of several hundred pounds which passed through the Brighton post office into his hands. At last one day, by accident, Mr. Morton came across one of the Comte de la Tremouille’s interesting letters. She confessed everything, throwing herself upon her husband’s mercy.

“Now, Mr. Francis Morton was a business man, who viewed life practically and soberly. He liked his wife, who kept him in luxury, and wished to keep her, whereas the Comte de la Tremouille seemed willing enough to give her up for a consideration. Mrs. Morton, who had the sole and absolute control of her fortune, on the other hand, was willing enough to pay the

price and hush up the scandal, which she believed—since she was a bit of a fool—would land her in prison for bigamy. Mr. Francis Morton wrote to the Comte de la Tremouille that his wife was ready to pay him the sum of £10,000 which he demanded in payment for her absolute liberty and his own complete disappearance out of her life now and for ever. The appointment was made, and Mr. Morton left his house at 9 a.m. on March 17th with the £10,000 in his pocket.

“The public and the magistrate had hung breathless upon her words. There was nothing but sympathy felt for this handsome woman, who throughout had been more sinned against than sinning, and whose gravest fault seems to have been a total lack of intelligence in dealing with her own life. But I can assure you of one thing, that in no case within my recollection was there ever such a sensation in a court as when the magistrate, after a few minutes’ silence, said gently to Mrs. Morton :

“ ‘ And now, Mrs. Morton, will you kindly look at the prisoner, and tell me if in him you recognize your former husband ? ’ ”

“ And she, without even turning to look at the accused, said quietly :

“ ‘ Oh no ! your Honour ! of course that man is *not* the Comte de la Tremouille. ’ ”

CHAPTER XXVI

A SENSATION

"I CAN assure you that the situation was quite dramatic," continued the man in the corner, whilst his funny, claw-like hands took up a bit of string with renewed feverishness.

"In answer to further questions from the magistrate, she declared that she had never seen the accused ; he might have been the go-between, however, that she could not say. The letters she received were all typewritten, but signed 'Armand de la Tremouille,' and certainly the signature was identical with that on the letters she used to receive from him years ago, all of which she had kept.

" 'And did it *never* strike you,' asked the magistrate with a smile, 'that the letters you received might be forgeries ? '

" 'How could they be ? ' she replied decisively ; 'no one knew of my marriage to the Comte de la Tremouille, no one in England certainly. And, besides, if some one did know the Comte intimately enough to forge his handwriting and to blackmail me, why should that some one have

waited all these years? I have been married seven years, your Honour.'

"That was true enough, and there the matter rested as far as she was concerned. But the identity of Mr. Francis Morton's assailant had to be finally established, of course, before the prisoner was committed for trial. Dr. Mellish promised that Mr. Morton would be allowed to come to court for half an hour and identify the accused on the following day, and the case was adjourned until then. The accused was led away between two constables, bail being refused, and Brighton had perforce to moderate its impatience until the Wednesday.

"On that day the court was crowded to overflowing; actors, playwrights, literary men of all sorts had fought for admission to study for themselves the various phases and faces in connection with the case. Mrs. Morton was not present when the prisoner, quiet and self-possessed, was brought in and placed in the dock. His solicitor was with him, and a sensational defence was expected.

"Presently there was a stir in the court, and that certain sound, half rustle, half sigh, which preludes an expected palpitating event. Mr. Morton, pale, thin, wearing yet in his hollow eyes the stamp of those five days of suffering, walked into court leaning on the arm of his doctor—Mrs. Morton was not with him.

"He was at once accommodated with a chair in the witness-box, and the magistrate, after a few words of kindly sympathy, asked him if he had anything to add to his written statement. On Mr. Morton replying in the negative, the magistrate added :

" ' And now, Mr. Morton, will you kindly look at the accused in the dock and tell me whether you recognize the person who took you to the room in Russell House and then assaulted you ? ' "

"Slowly the sick man turned towards the prisoner and looked at him ; then he shook his head and replied quietly :

" ' No, sir, that certainly was not the man. ' "

" ' You are quite sure ? ' asked the magistrate in amazement, while the crowd literally gasped with wonder.

" ' I swear it, ' asserted Mr. Morton.

" ' Can you describe the man who assaulted you ? ' "

" ' Certainly. He was dark, of swarthy complexion, tall, thin, with bushy eyebrows and thick black hair and short beard. He spoke English with just the faintest suspicion of a foreign accent. ' "

"The prisoner, as I told you before, was English in every feature. English in his ruddy complexion, and absolutely English in his speech.

"After that the case for the prosecution began to collapse. Every one had expected a sensational

defence, and Mr. Matthew Quiller, counsel for Skinner, fully justified all these expectations. He had no fewer than four witnesses present who swore positively that at 9.45 a.m. on the morning of Wednesday, March 17th, the prisoner was in the express train leaving Brighton for Victoria.

"Not being endowed with the gift of being in two places at once, and Mr. Morton having added the whole weight of his own evidence in Mr. Edward Skinner's favour, that gentleman was once more remanded by the magistrate, pending further investigation by the police, bail being allowed this time in two sureties of £50 each."

CHAPTER XXVII

TWO BLACKGUARDS

"TELL me what you think of it," said the man in the corner, seeing that Polly remained silent and puzzled.

"Well," she replied dubiously, "I suppose that the so-called Armand de la Tremouille's story was true in substance. That he did not perish on the *Argentina*, but drifted home, and blackmailed his former wife."

"Doesn't it strike you that there are at least two very strong points against that theory?" he asked, making two gigantic knots in his piece of string.

"Two?"

"Yes. In the first place, if the blackmailer was the 'Comte de la Tremouille' returned to life, why should he have been content to take £10,000 from a lady who was his lawful wife, and who could keep him in luxury for the rest of his natural life upon her large fortune, which was close upon a quarter of a million? The real Comte de la Tremouille, remember, had never found it difficult to get money out of his wife

during their brief married life, whatever Mr. Morton's subsequent experience in the same direction might have been. And, secondly, why should he have typewritten his letters to his wife ? ”

“ Because—— ”

“ That was a point which, to my mind, the police never made the most of. Now, my experience in criminal cases has invariably been that when a typewritten letter figures in one, that letter is a forgery. It is not very difficult to imitate a signature, but it is a jolly sight more difficult to imitate a handwriting throughout an entire letter.”

“ Then, do you think—— ”

“ I think, if you will allow me,” he interrupted excitedly, “ that we will go through the points—the sensible, tangible points of the case. Firstly : Mr. Morton disappears with £10,000 in his pocket for four entire days ; at the end of that time he is discovered loosely tied to an arm-chair, and a wool shawl round his mouth. Secondly : A man named Skinner is accused of the outrage. Mr. Morton, although he himself is able, mind you, to furnish the best defence possible for Skinner, by denying his identity with the man who assaulted him, refuses to prosecute. Why ? ”

“ He did not wish to drag his wife's name into the case.”

"He must have known that the Crown would take up the case. Then, again, how is it no one saw him in the company of the swarthy foreigner he described?"

"Two witnesses did see Mr. Morton in company with Skinner," argued Polly.

"Yes, at 9.20 in West Street; that would give Edward Skinner time to catch the 9.45 at the station, and to entrust Mr. Morton with the latch-key of Russell House," remarked the man in the corner dryly.

"What nonsense!" Polly ejaculated.

"Nonsense, is it?" he said, tugging wildly at his bit of string; "is it nonsense to affirm that if a man wants to make sure that his victim shall not escape, he does not usually wind rope 'loosely' round his figure, nor does he throw a wool shawl lightly round his mouth. The police were idiotic beyond words; they themselves discovered that Morton was so 'loosely' fastened to his chair that very little movement would have disentangled him, and yet it never struck them that nothing was easier for that particular type of scoundrel to sit down in an arm-chair and wind a few yards of rope round himself, then, having wrapped a wool shawl round his throat, to slip his two arms inside the ropes."

"But what object would a man in Mr. Morton's position have for playing such extraordinary pranks?"

"Ah, the motive! There you are! What do I always tell you? Seek the motive! Now, what was Mr. Morton's position? He was the husband of a lady who owned a quarter of a million of money, not one penny of which he could touch without her consent, as it was settled on herself, and who, after the terrible way in which she had been plundered and then abandoned in her early youth, no doubt kept a very tight hold upon the purse-strings. Mr. Morton's subsequent life has proved that he had certain expensive, not altogether avowable, tastes. One day he discovers the old love letters of the 'Comte Armand de la Tremouille.'

"Then he lays his plans. He typewrites a letter, forges the signature of the erstwhile Count, and awaits events. The fish does rise to the bait. He gets sundry bits of money, and his success makes him daring. He looks round him for an accomplice—clever, unscrupulous, greedy—and selects Mr. Edward Skinner, probably some former pal of his wild oats days.

"The plan was very neat, you must confess. Mr. Skinner takes the room in Russell House, and studies all the manners and customs of his landlady and her servant. He then draws the full attention of the police upon himself. He meets Morton in West Street, then disappears ostensibly after the 'assault.' In the meanwhile Morton goes to Russell House. He walks up-

stairs, talks loudly in the room, then makes elaborate preparations for his comedy."

"Why! he nearly died of starvation!"

"That, I dare say, was not a part of his reckoning. He thought, no doubt, that Mrs. Chapman or the servant would discover and rescue him pretty soon. He meant to appear just a little faint, and endured quietly the first twenty-four hours of inanition. But the excitement and want of food told on him more than he expected. After twenty-four hours he turned very giddy and sick, and, falling from one fainting fit into another, was unable to give the alarm.

"However, he is all right again now, and concludes his part of a downright blackguard to perfection. Under the plea that his conscience does not allow him to live with a lady whose first husband is still alive, he has taken a bachelor flat in London, and only pays afternoon calls on his wife in Brighton. But presently he will tire of his bachelor life, and will return to his wife. And I'll guarantee that the Comte de la Tremouille will never be heard of again."

And that afternoon the man in the corner left Miss Polly Burton alone with a couple of photos of two uninteresting, stodgy, quiet-looking men—Morton and Skinner—who, if the old scarecrow was right in his theories, were a pair of the finest blackguards unhung.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE REGENT'S PARK MURDER

BY this time Miss Polly Burton had become quite accustomed to her extraordinary *vis-à-vis* in the corner.

He was always there, when she arrived, in the selfsame corner, dressed in one of his remarkable check tweed suits; he seldom said good morning, and invariably when she appeared he began to fidget with increased nervousness, with some tattered and knotty piece of string.

"Were you ever interested in the Regent's Park murder?" he asked her one day.

Polly replied that she had forgotten most of the particulars connected with that curious murder, but that she fully remembered the stir and flutter it had caused in a certain section of London Society.

"The racing and gambling set, particularly, you mean," he said. "All the persons implicated in the murder, directly or indirectly, were of the type commonly called 'Society men,' or 'men about town,' whilst the Harewood Club in Hanover Square, round which centred all the

scandal in connection with the murder, was one of the smartest clubs in London.

"Probably the doings of the Harewood Club, which was essentially a gambling club, would for ever have remained 'officially' absent from the knowledge of the police authorities but for the murder in the Regent's Park and the revelations which came to light in connection with it.

"I dare say you know the quiet square which lies between Portland Place and the Regent's Park and is called Park Crescent at its south end, and subsequently Park Square East and West. The Marylebone Road, with all its heavy traffic, cuts straight across the large square and its pretty gardens, but the latter are connected together by a tunnel under the road; and of course you must remember that the new tube station in the south portion of the Square had not yet been planned.

"February 6th, 1907, was a very foggy night, nevertheless Mr. Aaron Cohen, of 30, Park Square West, at two o'clock in the morning, having finally pocketed the heavy winnings which he had just swept off the green table of the Harewood Club, started to walk home alone. An hour later most of the inhabitants of Park Square West were aroused from their peaceful slumbers by the sounds of a violent altercation in the road. A man's angry voice was heard shouting violently

for a minute or two, and was followed immediately by frantic screams of 'Police' and 'Murder.' Then there was the double sharp report of firearms, and nothing more.

"The fog was very dense, and, as you no doubt have experienced yourself, it is very difficult to locate sound in a fog. Nevertheless, not more than a minute or two had elapsed before Constable F 18, the point policeman at the corner of Marylebone Road, arrived on the scene, and, having first of all whistled for any of his comrades on the beat, began to grope his way about in the fog, more confused than effectually assisted by contradictory directions from the inhabitants of the houses close by, who were nearly falling out of the upper windows as they shouted out to the constable.

" 'By the railings, policeman.

" 'Higher up the road.'

" 'No, lower down.'

" 'It was on this side of the pavement I am sure.'

" 'No, the other.'

"At last it was another policeman, F 22, who, turning into Park Square West from the north side, almost stumbled upon the body of a man lying on the pavement with his head against the railings of the Square. By this time quite a little crowd of people from the different houses in the road had come down, curious to know what had actually happened.

"The policeman turned the strong light of his bull's-eye lantern on the unfortunate man's face.

" 'It looks as if he had been strangled, don't it?' he murmured to his comrade.

"And he pointed to the swollen tongue, the eyes half out of their sockets, bloodshot and congested, the purple, almost black, hue of the face.

"At this point one of the spectators, more callous to horrors, peered curiously into the dead man's face. He uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

" 'Why, surely, it's Mr. Cohen from No. 30!'

"The mention of a name familiar down the length of the street had caused two or three other men to come forward and to look more closely into the horribly distorted mask of the murdered man.

" 'Our next-door neighbour, undoubtedly,' asserted Mr. Ellison, a young barrister, residing at No. 31.

" 'What in the world was he doing this foggy night all alone, and on foot?' asked somebody else.

" 'He usually came home very late. I fancy he belonged to some gambling club in town. I dare say he couldn't get a cab to bring him out here. Mind you, I don't know much about him. We only knew him to nod to'

" 'Poor beggar! it looks almost like an old-fashioned case of garrotting.'

" 'Anyway, the blackguardly murderer, whoever he was, wanted to make sure he had killed his man!' added Constable F 18, as he picked up an object from the pavement. 'Here's the revolver, with two cartridges missing. You gentlemen heard the report just now?'

" 'He don't seem to have hit him though. The poor bloke was strangled, no doubt.'

" 'And tried to shoot at his assailant, obviously,' asserted the young barrister with authority.

" 'If he succeeded in hitting the brute, there might be a chance of tracing the way he went.'

" 'But not in the fog.'

" 'Soon, however, the appearance of the inspector, detective, and medical officer, who had quickly been informed of the tragedy, put an end to further discussion.

" 'The bell at No. 30 was rung, and the servants—all four of them women—were asked to look at the body.

" 'Amidst tears of horror and screams of fright, they all recognized in the murdered man their master, Mr. Aaron Cohen. He was therefore conveyed to his own room pending the coroner's inquest.

" 'The police had a pretty difficult task, you will admit; there were so very few indications to go by, and at first literally no clue.

"The inquest revealed practically nothing. Very little was known in the neighbourhood about Mr. Aaron Cohen and his affairs. His female servants did not even know the name or whereabouts of the various clubs he frequented.

"He had an office in Throgmorton Street and went to business every day. He dined at home, and sometimes had friends to dinner. When he was alone he invariably went to the club, where he stayed until the small hours of the morning.

"The night of the murder he had gone out at about nine o'clock. That was the last his servants had seen of him. With regard to the revolver, all four servants swore positively that they had never seen it before, and that, unless Mr. Cohen had bought it that very day, it did not belong to their master.

"Beyond that, no trace whatever of the murderer had been found, but on the morning after the crime a couple of keys linked together by a short metal chain were found close to a gate at the opposite end of the Square, that which immediately faced Portland Place. These were proved to be, firstly, Mr. Cohen's latch-key, and, secondly, his gate-key of the Square.

"It was therefore presumed that the murderer, having accomplished his fell design and ransacked his victim's pockets, had found the keys and made good his escape by slipping into

the Square, cutting under the tunnel, and out again by the further gate. He then took the precaution not to carry the keys with him any further, but threw them away and disappeared in the fog.

"The jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown, and the police were put on their mettle to discover the unknown and daring murderer. The result of their investigations, conducted with marvellous skill by Mr. William Fisher, led, about a week after the crime, to the sensational arrest of one of London's smartest young bucks.

"The case Mr. Fisher had got up against the accused briefly amounted to this :

"On the night of February 6th, soon after midnight, play began to run very high at the Harewood Club, in Hanover Square. Mr. Aaron Cohen held the bank at roulette against some twenty or thirty of his friends, mostly young fellows with no wits and plenty of money. 'The Bank' was winning heavily, and it appears that this was the third consecutive night on which Mr. Aaron Cohen had gone home richer by several hundreds than he had been at the start of play.

"Young John Ashley, who is the son of a very worthy county gentleman who is M.F.H. somewhere in the Midlands, was losing heavily, and in his case also it appears that it was the

third consecutive night that Fortune had turned her face against him.

"Remember," continued the man in the corner, "that when I tell you all these details and facts, I am giving you the combined evidence of several witnesses, which it took many days to collect and to classify.

"It appears that young Mr. Ashley, though very popular in society, was generally believed to be in what is vulgarly termed 'low water'; up to his eyes in debt, and mortally afraid of his dad, whose younger son he was, and who had on one occasion threatened to ship him off to Australia with a £5 note in his pocket if he made any further extravagant calls upon his paternal indulgence.

"It was also evident to all John Ashley's many companions that the worthy M.F.H. held the purse-strings in a very tight grip. The young man, bitten with the desire to cut a smart figure in the circles in which he moved, had often recourse to the varying fortunes which now and again smiled upon him across the green tables in the Harewood Club.

"Be that as it may, the general consensus of opinion at the Club was that young Ashley had changed his last 'pony' before he sat down to a turn of roulette with Aaron Cohen on that particular night of February 6th.

"It appears that all his friends, conspicuous

among whom was Mr. Walter Hatherell, tried their very best to dissuade him from pitting his luck against that of Cohen, who had been having a most unprecedented run of good fortune. But young Ashley, heated with wine, exasperated at his own bad luck, would listen to no one; he tossed one £5 note after another on the board, he borrowed from those who would lend, then played on parole for a while. Finally, at half-past one in the morning, after a run of nineteen on the red, the young man found himself without a penny in his pockets, and owing a debt—a gambling debt—a debt of honour of £1500 to Mr. Aaron Cohen.

“Now we must render this much maligned gentleman that justice which was persistently denied to him by press and public alike; it was positively asserted by all those present that Mr. Cohen himself repeatedly tried to induce young Mr. Ashley to give up playing. He himself was in a delicate position in the matter, as he was the winner, and once or twice the taunt had risen to the young man’s lips, accusing the holder of the bank of the wish to retire on a competence before the break in his luck.

“Mr. Aaron Cohen, smoking the best of Havanas, had finally shrugged his shoulders and said: ‘As you please!’

“But at half-past one he had had enough of the player, who always lost and never paid—

never could pay, so Mr. Cohen probably believed. He therefore at that hour refused to accept Mr. John Ashley's 'promissory' stakes any longer. A very few heated words ensued, quickly checked by the management, who are ever on the alert to avoid the least suspicion of scandal.

"In the meanwhile Mr. Hatherell, with great good sense, persuaded young Ashley to leave the Club and all its temptations and go home; if possible to bed.

"The friendship of the two young men, which was very well known in society, consisted chiefly, it appears, in Walter Hatherell being the willing companion and helpmeet of John Ashley in his mad and extravagant pranks. But to-night the latter, apparently tardily sobered by his terrible and heavy losses, allowed himself to be led away by his friend from the scene of his disasters. It was then about twenty minutes to two.

"Here the situation becomes interesting," continued the man in the corner in his nervous way. "No wonder that the police interrogated at least a dozen witnesses before they were quite satisfied that every statement was conclusively proved.

"Walter Hatherell, after about ten minutes' absence, that is to say at ten minutes to two, returned to the club room. In reply to several inquiries, he said that he had parted with his

friend at the corner of New Bond Street, since he seemed anxious to be alone, and that Ashley said he would take a turn down Piccadilly before going home—he thought a walk would do him good.

“At two o'clock or thereabouts Mr. Aaron Cohen, satisfied with his evening's work, gave up his position at the bank and, pocketing his heavy winnings, started on his homeward walk, while Mr. Walter Hatherell left the club half an hour later.

“At three o'clock precisely the cries of ‘Murder’ and the report of fire-arms were heard in Park Square West, and Mr. Aaron Cohen was found strangled outside the garden railings.”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MOTIVE

“NOW at first sight the murder in the Regent’s Park appeared both to police and public as one of those silly, clumsy crimes, obviously the work of a novice, and absolutely purposeless, seeing that it could but inevitably lead its perpetrators, without any difficulty, to the gallows.

“You see, a motive had been established. ‘Seek him whom the crime benefits,’ say our French *confrères*. But there was something more than that.

“Constable James Funnell, on his beat, turned from Portland Place into Park Crescent a few minutes after he had heard the clock at Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone, strike half-past two. The fog at that moment was perhaps not quite so dense as it was later on in the morning, and the policeman saw two gentlemen in overcoats and top-hats leaning arm in arm against the railings of the Square, close to the gate. He could not, of course, distinguish their faces because of the fog, but he heard one of them saying to the other :

“ ‘It is but a question of time, Mr. Cohen. I

know my father will pay the money for me, and you will lose nothing by waiting.'

"To this the other apparently made no reply, and the constable passed on; when he returned to the same spot, after having walked over his beat, the two gentlemen had gone, but later on it was near this very gate that the two keys referred to at the inquest had been found.

"Another interesting fact," added the man in the corner, with one of those sarcastic smiles of his which Polly could not quite explain, "was the finding of the revolver upon the scene of the crime. That revolver, shown to Mr. Ashley's valet, was sworn to by him as being the property of his master.

"All these facts made, of course, a very remarkable, so far quite unbroken, chain of circumstantial evidence against Mr. John Ashley. No wonder, therefore, that the police, thoroughly satisfied with Mr. Fisher's work and their own, applied for a warrant against the young man, and arrested him in his rooms in Clarges Street exactly a week after the committal of the crime.

"As a matter of fact, you know, experience has invariably taught me that when a murderer seems particularly foolish and clumsy, and proofs against him seem particularly damning, that is the time when the police should be most guarded against pitfalls.

"Now in this case, if John Ashley had indeed

committed the murder in Regent's Park in the manner suggested by the police, he would have been a criminal in more senses than one, for idiocy of that kind is to my mind worse than many crimes.

"The prosecution brought its witnesses up in triumphal array one after another. There were the members of the Harewood Club—who had seen the prisoner's excited condition after his heavy gambling losses to Mr. Aaron Cohen; there was Mr. Hatherell, who, in spite of his friendship for Ashley, was bound to admit that he had parted from him at the corner of Bond Street at twenty minutes to two, and had not seen him again till his return home at five a.m.

"Then came the evidence of Arthur Chipps, John Ashley's valet. It proved of a very sensational character.

"He deposed that on the night in question his master came home at about ten minutes to two. Chipps had then not yet gone to bed. Five minutes later Mr. Ashley went out again, telling the valet not to sit up for him. Chipps could not say at what time either of the young gentlemen had come home.

"That short visit home—presumably to fetch the revolver—was thought to be very important, and Mr. John Ashley's friends felt that his case was practically hopeless.

"The valet's evidence and that of James

Funnell, the constable, who had overheard the conversation near the park railings, were certainly the two most damning proofs against the accused. I assure you I was having a rare old time that day. There were two faces in court to watch which was the greatest treat I had had for many a day. One of these was Mr. John Ashley's.

"Here's his photo—short, dark, dapper, a little 'racy' in style, but otherwise he looks a son of a well-to-do farmer. He was very quiet and placid in court, and addressed a few words now and again to his solicitor. He listened gravely, and with an occasional shrug of the shoulders, to the recital of the crime, such as the police had reconstructed it, before an excited and horrified audience.

"Mr. John Ashley, driven to madness and frenzy by terrible financial difficulties, had first of all gone home in search of a weapon, then waylaid Mr. Aaron Cohen somewhere on that gentleman's way home. The young man had begged for delay. Mr. Cohen perhaps was obdurate; but Ashley followed him with his importunities almost to his door.

"There, seeing his creditor determined at last to cut short the painful interview, he had seized the unfortunate man at an unguarded moment from behind, and strangled him; then, fearing that his dastardly work was not fully

accomplished, he had shot twice at the already dead body, missing it both times from sheer nervous excitement. The murderer then must have emptied his victim's pockets, and, finding the key of the garden, thought that it would be a safe way of evading capture by cutting across the squares, under the tunnel, and so through the more distant gate which faced Portland Place.

"The loss of the revolver was one of those unforeseen accidents which a retributive Providence places in the path of the miscreant, delivering him by his own act of folly into the hands of human justice.

"Mr. John Ashley, however, did not appear the least bit impressed by the recital of his crime. He had not engaged the services of one of the most eminent lawyers, expert at extracting contradictions from witnesses by skilful cross-examinations—oh, dear me, no! he had been contented with those of a dull, prosy, very second-rate limb of the law, who, as he called his witnesses, was completely innocent of any desire to create a sensation.

"He rose quietly from his seat, and, amidst breathless silence, called the first of three witnesses on behalf of his client. He called three—but he could have produced twelve—gentlemen, members of the Ashton Club in Great Portland Street, all of whom swore that at three

o'clock on the morning of February 6th, that is to say, at the very moment when the cries of 'Murder' roused the inhabitants of Park Square West, and the crime was being committed, Mr. John Ashley was sitting quietly in the club-rooms of the Ashton playing bridge with the three witnesses. He had come in a few minutes before three—as the hall porter of the Club testified—and stayed for about an hour and a half.

"I need not tell you that this undoubted, this fully proved, *alibi* was a positive bomb-shell in the stronghold of the prosecution. The most accomplished criminal could not possibly be in two places at once, and though the Ashton Club transgresses in many ways against the gambling laws of our very moral country, yet its members belong to the best, most unimpeachable classes of society. Mr. Ashley had been seen and spoken to at the very moment of the crime by at least a dozen gentlemen whose testimony was absolutely above suspicion.

"Mr. John Ashley's conduct throughout this astonishing phase of the inquiry remained perfectly calm and correct. It was no doubt the consciousness of being able to prove his innocence with such absolute conclusion that had steadied his nerves throughout the proceedings.

"His answers to the magistrate were clear

and simple, even on the ticklish subject of the revolver.

“ ‘I left the club, sir,’ he explained, ‘fully determined to speak with Mr. Cohen alone in order to ask him for a delay in the settlement of my debt to him. You will understand that I should not care to do this in the presence of other gentlemen. I went home for a minute or two—not in order to fetch a revolver, as the police assert, for I always carry a revolver about with me in foggy weather—but in order to see if a very important business letter had come for me in my absence.

“ ‘Then I went out again, and met Mr. Aaron Cohen not far from the Harewood Club. I walked the greater part of the way with him, and our conversation was of the most amicable character. We parted at the top of Portland Place, near the gate of the Square, where the policeman saw us. Mr. Cohen then had the intention of cutting across the Square, as being a shorter way to his own house. I thought the Square looked dark and dangerous in the fog, especially as Mr. Cohen was carrying a large sum of money.

“ ‘We had a short discussion on the subject, and finally I persuaded him to take my revolver, as I was going home only through very frequented streets, and moreover carried nothing that was worth stealing. After a little demur

Mr. Cohen accepted the loan of my revolver, and that is how it came to be found on the actual scene of the crime ; finally I parted from Mr. Cohen a very few minutes after I had heard the church clock striking a quarter before three. I was at the Oxford Street end of Great Portland Street at five minutes to three, and it takes at least ten minutes to walk from where I was to the Ashton Club.'

"This explanation was all the more credible, mind you, because the question of the revolver had never been very satisfactorily explained by the prosecution. A man who has effectually strangled his victim would not discharge two shots of his revolver for, apparently, no other purpose than that of rousing the attention of the nearest passer-by. It was far more likely that it was Mr. Cohen who shot—perhaps wildly into the air, when suddenly attacked from behind. Mr. Ashley's explanation therefore was not only plausible, it was the only possible one.

"You will understand therefore how it was that, after nearly half an hour's examination, the magistrate, the police, and the public were alike pleased to proclaim that the accused left the court without a stain upon his character."

CHAPTER XXX

FRIENDS

"YES," interrupted Polly eagerly, since, for once, her acumen had been at least as sharp as his, "but suspicion of that horrible crime only shifted its taint from one friend to another, and, of course, I know——"

"But that's just it," he quietly interrupted, "you don't know—Mr. Walter Hatherell, of course, you mean. So did every one else at once. The friend, weak and willing, committing a crime on behalf of his cowardly, yet more assertive friend who had tempted him to evil. It was a good theory; and was held pretty generally, I fancy, even by the police.

"I say 'even' because they worked really hard in order to build up a case against young Hatherell, but the great difficulty was that of time. At the hour when the policeman had seen the two men outside Park Square together, Walter Hatherell was still sitting in the Harewood Club, which he never left until twenty minutes to two. Had he wished to waylay and rob Aaron Cohen he would not have waited

surely till the time when presumably the latter would already have reached home.

"Moreover, twenty minutes was an incredibly short time in which to walk from Hanover Square to Regent's Park without the chance of cutting across the squares, to look for a man, whose whereabouts you could not determine to within twenty yards or so, to have an argument with him, murder him, and ransack his pockets. And then there was the total absence of motive."

"But——" said Polly meditatively, for she remembered now that the Regent's Park murder, as it had been popularly called, was one of those which had remained as impenetrable a mystery as any other crime had ever been in the annals of the police.

The man in the corner cocked his funny bird-like head well on one side and looked at her, highly amused evidently at her perplexity.

"You do not see how that murder was committed?" he asked with a grin.

Polly was bound to admit that she did not.

"If you had happened to have been in Mr. John Ashley's predicament," he persisted, "you do not see how you could conveniently have done away with Mr. Aaron Cohen, pocketed his winnings, and then led the police of your country entirely by the nose, by proving an indisputable *alibi*?"

"I could not arrange conveniently," she retorted, "to be in two different places half a mile apart at one and the same time."

"No! I quite admit that you could not do this unless you also had a friend——"

"A friend? But you say——"

"I say that I admired Mr. John Ashley, for his was the head which planned the whole thing, but he could not have accomplished the fascinating and terrible drama without the help of willing and able hands."

"Even then——" she protested.

"Point number one," he began excitedly, fidgeting with his inevitable piece of string. "John Ashley and his friend Walter Hatherell leave the club together, and together decide on the plan of campaign. Hatherell returns to the club, and Ashley goes to fetch the revolver—the revolver which played such an important part in the drama, but not the part assigned to it by the police. Now try to follow Ashley closely, as he dogs Aaron Cohen's footsteps. Do you believe that he entered into conversation with him? That he walked by his side? That he asked for delay? No! He sneaked behind him and caught him by the throat, as the garroters used to do in the fog. Cohen was apoplectic, and Ashley is young and powerful. Moreover, he meant to kill——"

"But the two men talked together outside

the Square gates," protested Polly, "one of whom was Cohen, and the other Ashley."

"Pardon me," he said, jumping up in his seat like a monkey on a stick, "there were not two men talking outside the Square gates. According to the testimony of James Funnell, the constable, two men were leaning arm in arm against the railings and *one* man was talking."

"Then you think that——"

"At the hour when James Funnell heard Holy Trinity clock striking half-past two Aaron Cohen was already dead. Look how simple the whole thing is," he added eagerly, "and how easy after that—easy, but oh, dear me! how wonderfully, how stupendously clever. As soon as James Funnell has passed on, John Ashley, having opened the gate, lifts the body of Aaron Cohen in his arms and carries him across the Square. The Square is deserted, of course, but the way is easy enough, and we must presume that Ashley had been in it before. Anyway, there was no fear of meeting any one.

"In the meantime Hatherell has left the club: as fast as his athletic legs can carry him he rushes along Oxford Street and Portland Place. It had been arranged between the two miscreants that the Square gate should be left on the latch.

"Close on Ashley's heels now, Hatherell too cuts across the Square, and reaches the further

gate in good time to give his confederate a hand in disposing the body against the railings. Then, without another instant's delay, Ashley runs back across the gardens, straight to the Ashton Club, throwing away the keys of the dead man, on the very spot where he had made it a point of being seen and heard by a passer-by.

"Hatherell gives his friend six or seven minutes' start, then he begins the altercation which lasts two or three minutes, and finally rouses the neighbourhood with cries of 'Murder' and report of pistol in order to establish that the crime was committed at the hour when its perpetrator has already made out an indisputable *alibi*."

"I don't know what you think of it all, of course," added the funny creature as he fumbled for his coat and his gloves, "but I call the planning of that murder—on the part of novices, mind you—one of the cleverest pieces of strategy I have ever come across. It is one of those cases where there is no possibility whatever now of bringing the crime home to its perpetrator or his abettor. They have not left a single proof behind them; they foresaw everything, and each acted his part with a coolness and courage which, applied to a great and good cause, would have made fine statesmen of them both.

"As it is, I fear, they are just a pair of young blackguards, who have escaped human justice,

and have only deserved the full and ungrudging admiration of yours very sincerely."

He had gone. Polly wanted to call him back, but his meagre person was no longer visible through the glass door. There were many things she would have wished to ask of him—what were his proofs, his facts? His were theories, after all, and yet, somehow, she felt that he had solved once again one of the darkest mysteries of great criminal London.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DE GENNEVILLE PEERAGE

THE man in the corner rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and looked out upon the busy street below.

"I suppose," he said, "there is some truth in the saying that Providence watches over bankrupts, kittens, and lawyers."

"I didn't know there was such a saying," replied Polly, with guarded dignity.

"Isn't there? Perhaps I am misquoting; anyway, there should be. Kittens, it seems, live and thrive through social and domestic upheavals which would annihilate a self-supporting tom-cat, and to-day I read in the morning papers the account of a noble lord's bankruptcy, and in the society ones that of his visit at the house of a Cabinet minister, where he is the most honoured guest. As for lawyers, when Providence had exhausted all other means of securing their welfare, it brought forth the peerage cases."

"I believe, as a matter of fact, that this special dispensation of Providence, as you call it, requires more technical knowledge than any

other legal complication that comes before the law courts," she said.

"And also a great deal more money in the client's pocket than any other complication. Now, take the Brockelsby peerage case. Have you any idea how much money was spent over that soap bubble, which only burst after many hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds went in lawyers' and counsels' fees?"

"I suppose a great deal of money was spent on both sides," she replied, "until that sudden, awful issue——"

"Which settled the dispute effectually," he interrupted with a dry chuckle. "Of course, it is very doubtful if any reputable solicitor would have taken up the case. Timothy Beddingfield, the Birmingham lawyer, is a gentleman who—well—has had some misfortunes, shall we say? He is still on the rolls, mind you, but I doubt if any case would have its chances improved by his conducting it. Against that there is just this to be said, that some of these old peerages have such peculiar histories, and own such wonderful archives, that a claim is always worth investigating—you never know what may be the rights of it.

"I believe that, at first, every one laughed over the pretensions of the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville to the joint title and part revenues of the old barony of Genneville, but, obviously,

he *might* have got his case. It certainly sounded almost like a fairy-tale, this claim based upon the supposed validity of an ancient document over 400 years old. It was *then* that a mediæval Lord de Genneville, more endowed with muscle than common sense, became during his turbulent existence much embarrassed and hopelessly puzzled through the presentation made to him by his lady of twin-born sons.

“ His embarrassment chiefly arose from the fact that my lady’s attendants, while ministering to the comfort of the mother, had, in a moment of absent-mindedness, so placed the two infants in their cot that subsequently no one, not even—perhaps least of all—the mother, could tell which was the one who had been the first to make his appearance into this troublesome and puzzling world.

“ After many years of cogitation, during which the Lord de Genneville approached nearer to the grave and his sons to man’s estate, he gave up trying to solve the riddle as to which of the twins should succeed to his title and revenues ; he appealed to his Liege Lord and King—Edward, fourth of that name—and with the latter’s august sanction he drew up a certain document, wherein he enacted that both his sons should, after his death, share his titles and goodly revenues, and that the first son born in wedlock of *either* father should subsequently be the sole heir.

“ In this document was also added that if in

future times should any Lords de Genneville be similarly afflicted with twin sons, who had equal rights to be considered the eldest born, the same rule should apply as to the succession.

"Subsequently a Lord de Genneville was created Earl of Brockelsby by one of the Stuart kings, but for four hundred years after its enactment the extraordinary deed of succession remained a mere tradition, the Countesses of Brockelsby having, seemingly, no predilection for twins. But in 1878 the mistress of Brockelsby Castle presented her lord with twin-born sons.

"Fortunately, in modern times, science is more wide-awake, and attendants more careful. The twin brothers did not get mixed up, and one of them was styled Viscount Tirlemont, and was heir to the earldom, whilst the other, born two hours later, was that fascinating, dashing young Guardsman, well known at Hurlingham, Goodwood, London, and in his own county—the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville.

"It certainly was an evil day for this brilliant young scion of the ancient race when he lent an ear to Timothy Beddingfield. This man, and his family before him, had been solicitors to the Earls of Brockelsby for many generations, but Timothy, owing to certain 'irregularities,' had forfeited the confidence of his client, the late earl.

"He was still in practice in Birmingham, however, and, of course, knew the ancient family

tradition anent the twin succession. Whether he was prompted by revenge or merely self-advertisement no one knows.

"Certain it is that he did advise the Hon. Robert de Genneville—who apparently had more debts than he conveniently could pay, and more extravagant tastes than he could gratify on a younger son's portion—to lay a claim, on his father's death, to the joint title and a moiety of the revenues of the ancient barony of Genneville, that claim being based upon the validity of the fifteenth-century document.

"You may gather how extensive were the pretensions of the Hon. Robert from the fact that the greater part of Edgbaston is now built upon land belonging to the old barony. Anyway, it was the last straw in an ocean of debt and difficulties, and I have no doubt that Beddingfield had not much trouble in persuading the Hon. Robert to commence litigation at once.

"The young Earl of Brockelsby's attitude, however, remained one of absolute quietude in his nine points of the law. He was in possession both of the title and of the document. It was for the other side to force him to produce the one or to share the other.

"It was at this stage of the proceedings that the Hon. Robert was advised to marry, in order to secure, if possible, the first male heir of the next generation, since the young earl himself

292 THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER

was still a bachelor. A suitable *fiancée* was found for him by his friends in the person of Miss Mabel Brandon, the daughter of a rich Birmingham manufacturer, and the marriage was fixed to take place at Birmingham on Thursday, September 15th, 1907.

"On the 13th the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville arrived at the Castle Hotel in New Street for his wedding, and on the 14th, at eight o'clock in the morning, he was discovered lying on the floor of his bedroom—murdered.

"The sensation which the awful and unexpected sequel to the De Genneville peerage case caused in the minds of the friends of both litigants was quite unparalleled. I don't think any crime of modern times created quite so much stir in all classes of society. Birmingham was wild with excitement, and the employés of the Castle Hotel had real difficulty in keeping off the eager and inquisitive crowd who thronged daily to the hall, vainly hoping to gather details of news relating to the terrible tragedy.

"At present there was but little to tell. The shrieks of the chambermaid, who had gone into the Hon. Robert's room with his shaving water at eight o'clock, had attracted some of the waiters. Soon the manager and his secretary came up, and immediately sent for the police.

"It seemed at first sight as if the young man had been the victim of a homicidal maniac, so

brutal had been the way in which he had been assassinated. The head and body were battered and bruised by some heavy stick or poker, almost past human shape, as if the murderer had wished to wreak some awful vengeance upon the body of his victim. In fact, it would be impossible to recount the gruesome aspect of that room and of the murdered man's body such as the police and the medical officer took note of that day.

"It was supposed that the murder had been committed the evening before, as the victim was dressed in his evening clothes, and all the lights in the room had been left fully turned on. Robbery, also, must have had a large share in the miscreant's motives, for the drawers and cupboards, the portmanteau and dressing-bag had been ransacked as if in search of valuables. On the floor there lay a pocket-book torn in half and only containing a few letters addressed to the Hon. Robert de Genneville.

"The Earl of Brockelsby, next-of-kin to the deceased, was also telegraphed for. He drove over from Brockelsby Castle, which is about seven miles from Birmingham. He was terribly affected by the awfulness of the tragedy, and offered a liberal reward to stimulate the activity of the police in search of the miscreant.

"The inquest was fixed for the 17th, three days later, and the public was left wondering where the solution lay of the terrible and gruesome murder at the Castle Hotel."

CHAPTER XXXII

A HIGH-BRED GENTLEMAN

“THE central figure in the coroner’s court that day was undoubtedly the Earl of Brockelsby in deep black, which contrasted strongly with his florid complexion and fair hair. Sir Marmaduke Ingersoll, his solicitor, was with him, and he had already performed the painful duty of identifying the deceased as his brother. This had been an exceedingly painful duty owing to the terribly mutilated state of the body and face; but the clothes and various trinkets he wore, including a signet ring, had fortunately not tempted the brutal assassin, and it was through them chiefly that Lord Brockelsby was able to swear to the identity of his brother.

“The various employés at the hotel gave evidence as to the discovery of the body, and the medical officer gave his opinion as to the immediate cause of death. Deceased had evidently been struck at the back of the head with a poker or heavy stick, the murderer then venting his blind fury upon the body by battering in the face and bruising it in a way that certainly suggested the work of a maniac.

"Then the Earl of Brockelsby was called, and was requested by the coroner to state when he had last seen his brother alive.

" 'The morning before his death,' replied his lordship, 'he came up to Birmingham by an early train, and I drove up from Brockelsby to see him. I got to the hotel at eleven o'clock and stayed with him for about an hour.'

" 'And that is the last you saw of the deceased ?'

" 'That is the last I saw of him,' replied Lord Brockelsby.

"He seemed to hesitate for a moment or two as if in thought whether he should speak or not, and then to suddenly make up his mind to speak, for he added : 'I stayed in town the whole of that day, and only drove back to Brockelsby late in the evening. I had some business to transact, and put up at the Grand, as I usually do, and dined with some friends.'

" 'Would you tell us at what time you returned to Brockelsby Castle ?'

" 'I think it must have been about eleven o'clock. It is a seven-mile drive from here.'

" 'I believe,' said the coroner after a slight pause, during which the attention of all the spectators was riveted upon the handsome figure of the young man as he stood in the witness-box, the very personification of a high-bred gentleman, 'I believe that I am right in stating that there

was an unfortunate legal dispute between your lordship and your brother ? ’

“ ‘ That is so. ’

“ The coroner stroked his chin thoughtfully for a moment or two, then he added :

“ ‘ In the event of the deceased’s claim to the joint title and revenues of De Genneville being held good in the courts of law, there would be a great importance, would there not, attached to his marriage, which was to have taken place on the 15th ? ’

“ ‘ In that event, there certainly would be.

“ ‘ Is the jury to understand, then, that you and the deceased parted on amicable terms after your interview with him in the morning ? ’

“ The Earl of Brockelsby hesitated again for a minute or two, while the crowd and the jury hung breathless on his lips.

“ ‘ There was no enmity between us,’ he replied at last.

“ ‘ From which we may gather that there may have been—shall I say—a slight disagreement at that interview ? ’

“ ‘ My brother had unfortunately been misled by the misrepresentations or perhaps the too optimistic views of his lawyer. He had been dragged into litigation on the strength of an old family document which he had never seen, which, moreover, is antiquated, and, owing to certain wording in it, invalid. I thought that it would

be kinder and more considerate if I were to let my brother judge of the document for himself. I knew that when he had seen it he would be convinced of the absolutely futile basis of his claim, and that it would be a terrible disappointment to him. That is the reason why I wished to see him myself about it, rather than to do it through the more formal—perhaps more correct—medium of our respective lawyers. I placed the facts before him with, on my part, a perfectly amicable spirit.'

"The young Earl of Brockelsby had made this somewhat lengthy, perfectly voluntary explanation of the state of affairs in a calm, quiet voice, with much dignity and perfect simplicity, but the coroner did not seem impressed by it, for he asked very drily :

" ' Did you part good friends ? ' "

" ' On my side absolutely so. ' "

" ' But not on his ? ' insisted the coroner. "

" ' I think he felt naturally annoyed that he had been so ill-advised by his solicitors. ' "

" ' And you made no attempt later on in the day to adjust any ill-feeling that may have existed between you and him ? ' asked the coroner, marking with strange, earnest emphasis every word he uttered. "

" ' If you mean did I go and see my brother again that day—no, I did not. ' "

" ' And your lordship can give us no further

information which might throw some light upon the mystery which surrounds the Hon. Robert de Genneville's death ? ' still persisted the coroner.

" ' I am sorry to say I cannot,' replied the Earl of Brockelsby with firm decision.

" The coroner still looked puzzled and thoughtful. It seemed at first as if he wished to press his point further ; every one felt that some deep import had lain behind his examination of the witness, and all were on tenter-hooks as to what the next evidence might bring forth. The Earl of Brockelsby had waited a minute or two, then, at a sign from the coroner, had left the witness-box in order to have a talk with his solicitor.

" At first he paid no attention to the depositions of the cashier and hall porter of the Castle Hotel, but gradually it seemed to strike him that curious statements were being made by these witnesses, and a frown of anxious wonder settled between his brows, whilst his young face lost some of its florid hue.

" Mr. Tremlett, the cashier at the hotel, had been holding the attention of the court. He stated that the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville had arrived at the hotel at eight o'clock on the morning of the 13th ; he had the room which he usually occupied when he came to the ' Castle,' namely, No. 21, and he went up to it immediately on his arrival, ordering some breakfast to be brought up to him.

"At eleven o'clock the Earl of Brockelsby called to see his brother and remained with him until about twelve. In the afternoon deceased went out, and returned for his dinner at seven o'clock in company with a gentleman whom the cashier knew well by sight, Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, the lawyer, of Paradise Street. The gentlemen had their dinner downstairs, and after that they went up to the Hon. Mr. de Genneville's room for coffee and cigars.

" 'I could not say at what time Mr. Beddingfield left,' continued the cashier, 'but I rather fancy I saw him in the hall at about 9.15 p.m. He was wearing an Inverness cape over his dress clothes and a Glengarry cap. It was just at the hour when the visitors who had come down for the night from London were arriving thick and fast; the hall was very full, and there was a large party of Americans monopolising most of our *personnel*, so I could not swear positively whether I did see Mr. Beddingfield or not then, though I am quite sure that it was Mr. Timothy Beddingfield who dined and spent the evening with the Hon. Mr. de Genneville, as I know him quite well by sight. At ten o'clock I am off duty, and the night porter remains alone in the hall.'

"Mr. Tremlett's evidence was corroborated in most respects by a waiter and by the hall porter. They had both seen the deceased come in at seven o'clock in company with a gentleman, and

their description of the latter coincided with that of the appearance of Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, whom, however, they did not actually know.

"At this point of the proceedings the foreman of the jury wished to know why Mr. Timothy Beddingfield's evidence had not been obtained, and was informed by the detective-inspector in charge of the case that that gentleman had seemingly left Birmingham, but was expected home shortly. The coroner suggested an adjournment pending Mr. Beddingfield's appearance, but at the earnest request of the detective he consented to hear the evidence of Peter Tyrrell, the night porter at the Castle Hotel, who, if you remember the case at all, succeeded in creating the biggest sensation of any which had been made through this extraordinary and weirdly gruesome case.

"'It was the first time I had been on duty at "The Castle,"' he said, 'for I used to be night porter at "Bright's," in Wolverhampton, but just after I had come on duty at ten o'clock a gentleman came and asked if he could see the Hon. Robert de Genneville. I said that I thought he was in, but would send up and see. The gentleman said: "It doesn't matter. Don't trouble; I know his room. Twenty-one, isn't it?" And up he went before I could say another word.'

"'Did he give you any name?' asked the coroner.

“ ‘No, sir.’

“ ‘What was he like?’

“ ‘A young gentleman, sir, as far as I can remember, in an Inverness cape and Glengarry cap, but I could not see his face very well as he stood with his back to the light, and the cap shaded his eyes, and he only spoke to me for a minute.’

“ ‘Look all round you,’ said the coroner quietly. ‘Is there any one in this court at all like the gentleman you speak of?’

“An awed hush fell over the many spectators there present as Peter Tyrrell, the night porter of the Castle Hotel, turned his head towards the body of the court and slowly scanned the many faces there present; for a moment he seemed to hesitate—only for a moment though, then, as if vaguely conscious of the terrible importance his next words might have, he shook his head gravely and said:

“ ‘I wouldn’t like to swear.’

“The coroner tried to press him, but with true British stolidity he repeated: ‘I wouldn’t like to say.’

“ ‘Well, then, what happened?’ asked the coroner, who had perforce to abandon his point.

“ ‘The gentleman went upstairs, sir, and about a quarter of an hour later he come down again, and I let him out. He was in a great hurry then, he threw me a half-crown and said: “Good night.”’

“ ‘ And though you saw him again then, you cannot tell us if you would know him again ? ’ ”

“ Once more the hall porter's eyes wandered as if instinctively to a certain face in the court ; once more he hesitated for many seconds which seemed like so many hours, during which a man's honour, a man's life, hung perhaps in the balance.

“ Then Peter Tyrrell repeated slowly : ‘ I wouldn't swear.’ ”

“ But coroner and jury alike, aye, and every spectator in that crowded court, had seen that the man's eyes had rested during that one moment of hesitation upon the face of the Earl of Brockelsby.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

THE man in the corner blinked across at Polly with his funny mild blue eyes.

"No wonder you are puzzled," he continued, "so was everybody in the court that day, every one save myself. I alone could see in my mind's eye that gruesome murder such as it had been committed, with all its details, and, above all, its motive, and such as you will see it presently, when I place it all clearly before you.

"But before you see daylight in this strange case, I must plunge you into further darkness, in the same manner as the coroner and jury were plunged on the following day, the second day of that remarkable inquest. It had to be adjourned, since the appearance of Mr. Timothy Beddingfield had now become of vital importance. The public had come to regard his absence from Birmingham at this critical moment as decidedly remarkable, to say the least of it, and all those who did not know the lawyer by sight wished to see him in his Inverness cape and Glengarry cap such as he had appeared before the several witnesses on the night of the awful murder.

"When the coroner and jury were seated, the first piece of information which the police placed before them was the astounding statement that Mr. Timothy Beddingfield's whereabouts had not been ascertained, though it was confidently expected that he had not gone far and could easily be traced. There was a witness present who, the police thought, might throw some light as to the lawyer's probable destination, for obviously he had left Birmingham directly after his interview with the deceased.

"This witness was Mrs. Higgins, who was Mr. Beddingfield's housekeeper. She stated that her master was in the constant habit—especially latterly—of going up to London on business. He usually left by a late evening train on those occasions, and mostly was only absent thirty-six hours. He kept a portmanteau always ready packed for the purpose, for he often left at a few moments' notice. Mrs. Higgins added that her master stayed at the Great Western Hotel in London, for it was there that she was instructed to wire if anything urgent required his presence back in Birmingham.

"'On the night of the 14th,' she continued, 'at nine o'clock or thereabouts, a messenger came to the door with the master's card, and said that he was instructed to fetch Mr. Beddingfield's portmanteau, and then to meet him at the station in time to catch the 9.35 p.m. up train. I gave

him the portmanteau, of course, as he had brought the card, and I had no idea there could be anything wrong ; but since then I have heard nothing of my master, and I don't know when he will return.'

" Questioned by the coroner, she added that Mr. Beddingfield had never stayed away quite so long without having his letters forwarded to him. There was a large pile waiting for him now ; she had written to the Great Western Hotel, London, asking what she should do about the letters, but had received no reply. She did not know the messenger by sight who had called for the portmanteau. Once or twice before Mr. Beddingfield had sent for his things in that manner when he had been dining out.

" Mr. Beddingfield certainly wore his Inverness cape over his dress clothes when he went out at about six o'clock in the afternoon. He also wore a Glengarry cap.

" The messenger had so far not yet been found, and from this point—namely, the sending for the portmanteau—all traces of Mr. Timothy Beddingfield seem to have been lost. Whether he went up to London by that 9.35 train or not could not be definitely ascertained. The police had questioned at least a dozen porters at the railway, as well as ticket collectors ; but no one had any special recollection of a gentleman in an Inverness cape and Glengarry cap, a costume

worn by more than one first-class passenger on a cold night in September.

"There was the hitch, you see; it all lay in this. Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, the lawyer, had undoubtedly made himself scarce. He was last seen in company with the deceased, and wearing an Inverness cape and Glengarry cap; two or three witnesses saw him leaving the hotel at about 9.15. Then the messenger calls at the lawyer's house for the portmanteau, after which Mr. Timothy Beddingfield seems to vanish into thin air; but—and that is a great 'but'—the night porter at the 'Castle' seems to have seen some one wearing the momentous Inverness and Glengarry half an hour or so later on, and going up to deceased's room, where he stayed about a quarter of an hour.

"Undoubtedly you will say, as every one said to themselves that day after the night porter and Mrs. Higgins had been heard, that there was a very ugly and very black finger which pointed unpleasantly at Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, especially as that gentleman, for some reason which still required an explanation, was not there to put matters right for himself. But there was just one little thing—a mere trifle, perhaps—which neither the coroner nor the jury dared to overlook, though, strictly speaking, it was not evidence.

"You will remember that when the night porter was asked if he could, among the persons

present in court, recognize the Hon. Robert de Genneville's belated visitor, every one had noticed his hesitation, and marked that the man's eyes had rested doubtingly upon the face and figure of the young Earl of Brockelsby.

"Now, if that belated visitor had been Mr. Timothy Beddingfield—tall, lean, dry as dust, with a bird-like beak and clean-shaven chin—no one could for a moment have mistaken his face—even if they only saw it very casually and recollected it but very dimly—with that of young Lord Brockelsby, who was florid and rather short—the only point in common between them was their Saxon hair.

"You see that it was a curious point, don't you?" added the man in the corner, who now had become so excited that his fingers worked like long thin tentacles round and round his bit of string. "It weighed very heavily in favour of Timothy Beddingfield. Added to which you must also remember that, as far as he was concerned, the Hon. Robert de Genneville was to him the goose with the golden eggs.

"The 'De Geneville peerage case' had brought Beddingfield's name in great prominence. With the death of the claimant all hopes of prolonging the litigation came to an end. There was a total lack of motive as far as Beddingfield was concerned."

"Not so with the Earl of Brockelsby," said Polly, "and I've often maintained——"

"What?" he interrupted. "That the Earl of Brockelsby changed clothes with Beddingfield in order more conveniently to murder his own brother? Where and when could the exchange of costume have been effected, considering that the Inverness cape and Glengarry cap were in the hall of the Castle Hotel at 9.15, and at that hour and until ten o'clock Lord Brockelsby was at the Grand Hotel finishing dinner with some friends? That was subsequently proved, remember, and also that he was back at Brockelsby Castle, which is seven miles from Birmingham, at eleven o'clock sharp. Now, the visit of the individual in the Glengarry occurred some time after 10 p.m."

"Then there was the disappearance of Beddingfield," said the girl musingly. "That certainly points very strongly to him. He was a man in good practice, I believe, and fairly well known."

"And has never been heard of from that day to this," concluded the old scarecrow with a chuckle. "No wonder you are puzzled. The police were quite baffled, and still are, for a matter of that. And yet see how simple it is! Only the police would not look further than these two men—Lord Brockelsby with a strong motive and the night porter's hesitation against him, and Beddingfield without a motive, but with strong circumstantial evidence and his own disappearance as condemnatory signs."

"If only they would look at the case as I did,

and think a little about the dead as well as about the living. If they had remembered that peerage case, the Hon. Robert's debts, his last straw which proved a futile claim.

"Only that very day the Earl of Brockelsby had, by quietly showing the original ancient document to his brother, persuaded him how futile were all his hopes. Who knows how many were the debts contracted, the promises made, the money borrowed and obtained on the strength of that claim which was mere romance? Ahead nothing but ruin, enmity with his brother, his marriage probably broken off, a wasted life, in fact.

"Is it small wonder that, though ill-feeling against the Earl of Brockelsby may have been deep, there was hatred, bitter, deadly hatred against the man who with false promises had led him into so hopeless a quagmire? Probably the Hon. Robert owed a great deal of money to Beddingfield, which the latter hoped to recoup at usurious interest, with threats of scandal and what not.

"Think of all that," he added, "and then tell me if you believe that a stronger motive for the murder of such an enemy could well be found."

"But what you suggest is impossible," said Polly, aghast.

"Allow me," he said, "it is more than possible—it is very easy and simple. The two men were alone together in the Hon. Robert de Genne-

ville's room after dinner. You, as representing the public, and the police say that Beddingfield went away and returned half an hour later in order to kill his client. I say that it was the lawyer who was murdered at nine o'clock that evening, and that Robert de Genneville, the ruined man, the hopeless bankrupt, was the assassin."

"Then——"

"Yes, of course, now you remember, for I have put you on the track. The face and the body were so battered and bruised that they were past recognition. Both men were of equal height. The hair, which alone could not be disfigured or obliterated, was in both men similar in colour.

"Then the murderer proceeds to dress his victim in his own clothes. With the utmost care he places his own rings on the fingers of the dead man, his own watch in the pocket; a gruesome task, but an important one, and it is thoroughly well done. Then he himself puts on the clothes of his victim, with finally the Inverness cape and Glengarry, and when the hall is full of visitors he slips out unperceived. He sends the messenger for Beddingfield's portmanteau and starts off by the night express."

"But then his visit at the Castle Hotel at ten o'clock——" she urged. "How dangerous!"

"Dangerous? Yes! but oh, how clever. You see, he was the Earl of Brockelsby's twin

brother, and twin brothers are always somewhat alike. He wished to appear dead, murdered by some one, he cared not whom, but what he did care about was to throw clouds of dust in the eyes of the police, and he succeeded with a vengeance. Perhaps—who knows?—he wished to assure himself that he had forgotten nothing in the *mise en scène*, that the body, battered and bruised past all semblance of any human shape save for its clothes, really would appear to every one as that of the Hon. Robert de Genneville, while the latter disappeared for ever from the old world and started life again in the new.

“Then you must always reckon with the practically invariable rule that a murderer always revisits, if only once, the scene of his crime.

“Two years have elapsed since the crime; no trace of Timothy Beddingfield, the lawyer, has ever been found, and I can assure you that it will never be, for his plebeian body lies buried in the aristocratic family vault of the Earls of Brockelsby.”

He was gone before Polly could say another word. The faces of Timothy Beddingfield, of the Earl of Brockelsby, of the Hon. Robert de Genneville seemed to dance before her eyes and to mock her for the hopeless bewilderment in which she found herself plunged because of them; then all the faces vanished, or, rather, were merged in one long, thin, bird-like one, with bone-rimmed

spectacles on the top of its beak, and a wide, rude grin beneath it, and, still puzzled, still doubtful, the young girl too paid for her scanty luncheon and went her way.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH IN
PERCY STREET

MISS POLLY BURTON had had many an argument with Mr. Richard Frobisher about that old man in the corner, who seemed far more interesting and deucedly more mysterious than any of the crimes over which he philosophised.

Dick thought, moreover, that Miss Polly spent more of her leisure time now in that A.B.C. shop than she had done in his own company before, and told her so, with that delightful air of sheepish sulkiness which the male creature invariably wears when he feels jealous and won't admit it.

Polly liked Dick to be jealous, but she liked that old scarecrow in the A.B.C. shop very much too, and though she made sundry vague promises from time to time to Mr. Richard Frobisher, she nevertheless drifted back instinctively day after day to the tea-shop in Norfolk Street, Strand, and stayed there sipping coffee for as long as the man in the corner chose to talk.

On this particular afternoon she went to the

A.B.C. shop with a fixed purpose, that of making him give her his views of Mrs. Owen's mysterious death in Percy Street.

The facts had interested and puzzled her. She had had countless arguments with Mr. Richard Frobisher as to the three great possible solutions of the puzzle—"Accident, Suicide, Murder?"

"Undoubtedly neither accident nor suicide," he said dryly.

Polly was not aware that she had spoken. What an uncanny habit that creature had of reading her thoughts!

"You incline to the idea, then, that Mrs. Owen was murdered. Do you know by whom?"

He laughed, and drew forth the piece of string he always fidgeted with when unravelling some mystery.

"You would like to know who murdered that old woman?" he asked at last.

"I would like to hear your views on the subject," Polly replied.

"I have no views," he said dryly. "No one can know who murdered the woman, since no one ever saw the person who did it. No one can give the faintest description of the mysterious man who alone could have committed that clever deed, and the police are playing a game of blind man's buff."

"But you must have formed some theory of your own," she persisted.

It annoyed her that the funny creature was obstinate about this point, and she tried to nettle his vanity.

"I suppose that as a matter of fact your original remark that 'there are no such things as mysteries' does not apply universally. There is a mystery—that of the death in Percy Street, and you, like the police, are unable to fathom it."

He pulled up his eyebrows and looked at her for a minute or two.

"Confess that that murder was one of the cleverest bits of work accomplished outside Russian diplomacy," he said with a nervous laugh. "I must say that were I the judge, called upon to pronounce sentence of death on the man who conceived that murder, I could not bring myself to do it. I would politely request the gentleman to enter our Foreign Office—we have need of such men. The whole *mise en scène* was truly artistic, worthy of its *milieu*—the Rubens Studios in Percy Street, Tottenham Court Road.

"Have you ever noticed them? They are only studios by name, and are merely a set of rooms in a corner house, with the windows slightly enlarged, and the rents charged accordingly in consideration of that additional five inches of smoky daylight, filtering through dusty windows. On the ground floor there is the order office of some stained glass works, with a work-

shop in the rear, and on the first floor landing a small room allotted to the caretaker, with gas, coal, and fifteen shillings a week, for which princely income she is deputed to keep tidy and clean the general aspect of the house.

"Mrs. Owen, who was the caretaker there, was a quiet, respectable woman, who eked out her scanty wages by sundry—mostly very meagre—tips doled out to her by impecunious artists in exchange for promiscuous domestic services in and about the respective studios.

"But if Mrs. Owen's earnings were not large, they were very regular, and she had no fastidious tastes. She and her cockatoo lived on her wages; and all the tips added up, and never spent, year after year, went to swell a very comfortable little account at interest in the Birkbeck Bank. This little account had mounted up to a very tidy sum, and the thrifty widow—or old maid—no one ever knew which she was—was generally referred to by the young artists of the Rubens Studios as a 'lady of means.' But this is a digression.

"No one slept on the premises except Mrs. Owen and her cockatoo. The rule was that one by one as the tenants left their rooms in the evening they took their respective keys to the caretaker's room. She would then, in the early morning, tidy and dust the studios and the office downstairs, lay the fire and carry up coals.

"The foreman of the glass works was the first to arrive in the morning. He had a latch-key, and let himself in, after which it was the custom of the house that he should leave the street door open for the benefit of the other tenants and their visitors.

"Usually, when he came at about nine o'clock, he found Mrs. Owen busy about the house doing her work, and he had often a brief chat with her about the weather, but on this particular morning of February 2nd he neither saw nor heard her. However, as the shop had been tidied and the fire laid, he surmised that Mrs. Owen had finished her work earlier than usual, and thought no more about it. One by one the tenants of the studios turned up, and the day sped on without any one's attention being drawn noticeably to the fact that the caretaker had not appeared upon the scene.

"It had been a bitterly cold night, and the day was even worse; a cutting north-easterly gale was blowing, there had been a great deal of snow during the night which lay quite thick on the ground, and at five o'clock in the afternoon, when the last glimmer of the pale winter daylight had disappeared, the confraternity of the brush put palette and easel aside and prepared to go home. The first to leave was Mr. Charles Pitt; he locked up his studio and, as usual, took his key into the caretaker's room.

"He had just opened the door when an icy blast literally struck him in the face; both the windows were wide open, and the snow and sleet were beating thickly into the room, forming already a white carpet upon the floor.

"The room was in semi-obscurity, and at first Mr. Pitt saw nothing, but instinctively realizing that something was wrong, he lit a match, and saw before him the spectacle of that awful and mysterious tragedy which has ever since puzzled both police and public. On the floor, already half covered by the drifting snow, lay the body of Mrs. Owen face downwards, in a nightgown, with feet and ankles bare, and these and her hands were of a deep purple colour; whilst in a corner of the room, huddled up with the cold, the body of the cockatoo lay stark and stiff."

CHAPTER XXXV

SUICIDE OR MURDER ?

“**A**T first there was only talk of a terrible accident, the result of some inexplicable carelessness which perhaps the evidence at the inquest would help to elucidate.

“Medical assistance came too late ; the unfortunate woman was indeed dead, frozen to death, inside her own room. Further examination showed that she had received a severe blow at the back of the head, which must have stunned her and caused her to fall, helpless, beside the open window. Temperature at five degrees below zero had done the rest. Detective Inspector Howell discovered close to the window a wrought-iron gas bracket, the height of which corresponded exactly with the bruise at the back of Mrs. Owen’s head.

“Hardly however had a couple of days elapsed when public curiosity was whetted by a few startling headlines, such as the halfpenny evening papers alone know how to concoct.

“‘The mysterious death in Percy Street.’
‘Is it Suicide or Murder ?’ ‘Thrilling details
—Strange developments.’ ‘Sensational Arrest.’

"What had happened was simply this :

"At the inquest a few certainly very curious facts connected with Mrs. Owen's life had come to light, and this had led to the apprehension of a young man of very respectable parentage on a charge of being concerned in the tragic death of the unfortunate caretaker.

"To begin with, it happened that her life, which in an ordinary way should have been very monotonous and regular, seemed, at any rate latterly, to have been more than usually chequered and excited. Every witness who had known her in the past concurred in the statement that since October last a great change had come over the worthy and honest woman.

"I happen to have a photo of Mrs. Owen as she was before this great change occurred in her quiet and uneventful life, and which led, as far as the poor soul was concerned, to such disastrous results.

"Here she is to the life," added the funny creature, placing the photo before Polly—"as respectable, as stodgy, as uninteresting as it is well possible for a member of your charming sex to be ; not a face, you will admit, to lead any youngster to temptation or to induce him to commit a crime.

"Nevertheless one day all the tenants of the Rubens Studios were surprised and shocked to see Mrs. Owen, quiet, respectable Mrs. Owen,

sallying forth at six o'clock in the afternoon, attired in an extravagant bonnet and a cloak trimmed with imitation astrakhan which—slightly open in front—displayed a gold locket and chain of astonishing proportions.

“Many were the comments, the hints, the bits of sarcasm levelled at the worthy woman by the frivolous confraternity of the brush.

“The plot thickened when from that day forth a complete change came over the worthy caretaker of the Rubens Studios. While she appeared day after day before the astonished gaze of the tenants and the scandalized looks of the neighbours, attired in new and extravagant dresses, her work was hopelessly neglected, and she was always ‘out’ when wanted.

“There was, of course, much talk and comment in various parts of the Rubens Studios on the subject of Mrs. Owen’s ‘dissipations.’ The tenants began to put two and two together, and after a very little while the general consensus of opinion became firmly established that the honest caretaker’s demoralisation coincided week for week, almost day for day, with young Greenhill’s establishment in No. 8 Studio.

“Every one had remarked that he stayed much later in the evening than any one else, and yet no one presumed that he stayed for purposes of work. Suspicions soon rose to certainty when Mrs. Owen and Arthur Greenhill were seen by

one of the glass workmen dining together at Gambia's Restaurant in Tottenham Court Road.

"The workman, who was having a cup of tea at the counter, noticed particularly that when the bill was paid the money came out of Mrs. Owen's purse. The dinner had been sumptuous—veal cutlets, a cut from the joint, dessert, coffee and liqueurs. Finally the pair left the restaurant apparently very gay, young Greenhill smoking a choice cigar.

"Irregularities such as these were bound sooner or later to come to the ears and eyes of Mr. Allman, the landlord of the Rubens Studios; and a month after the New Year, without further warning, he gave her a week's notice to quit his house.

" 'Mrs. Owen did not seem the least bit upset when I gave her notice,' Mr. Allman declared in his evidence at the inquest; 'on the contrary, she told me that she had ample means, and had only worked latterly for the sake of something to do. She added that she had plenty of friends who would look after her, for she had a nice little pile to leave to any one who would know how 'to get the right side of her.' "

"Nevertheless, in spite of this cheerful interview, Miss Bedford, the tenant of No. 6 Studio, had stated that when she took her key to the caretaker's room at 6.30 that afternoon she found Mrs. Owen in tears. The caretaker refused

to be comforted, nor would she speak of her trouble to Miss Bedford.

"Twenty-four hours later she was found dead.

"The coroner's jury returned an open verdict, and Detective-Inspector Jones was charged by the police to make some inquiries about young Mr. Greenhill, whose intimacy with the unfortunate woman had been universally commented upon.

"The detective, however, pushed his investigations as far as the Birkbeck Bank. There he discovered that after her interview with Mr. Allman, Mrs. Owen had withdrawn what money she had on deposit, some £800, the result of twenty-five years' saving and thrift.

"But the immediate result of Detective-Inspector Jones's labours was that Mr. Arthur Greenhill, lithographer, was brought before the magistrate at Bow Street on the charge of being concerned in the death of Mrs. Owen, caretaker of the Rubens Studios, Percy Street.

"Now that magisterial inquiry is one of the few interesting ones which I had the misfortune to miss," continued the man in the corner, with a nervous shake of the shoulders. "But you know as well as I do how the attitude of the young prisoner impressed the magistrate and police so unfavourably that, with every new witness brought forward, his position became more and more unfortunate.

"Yet he was a good-looking, rather coarsely built young fellow, with one of those awful Cockney accents which literally make one jump. But he looked painfully nervous, stammered at every word spoken, and repeatedly gave answers entirely at random.

"His father acted as lawyer for him, a rough-looking elderly man, who had the appearance of a common country attorney rather than of a London solicitor.

"The police had built up a fairly strong case against the lithographer. Medical evidence revealed nothing new : Mrs. Owen had died from exposure, the blow at the back of the head not being sufficiently serious to cause anything but temporary disablement. When the medical officer had been called in, death had intervened for some time ; it was quite impossible to say how long, whether one hour or five or twelve.

"The appearance and state of the room, when the unfortunate woman was found by Mr. Charles Pitt, were again gone over in minute detail. Mrs. Owen's clothes, which she had worn during the day, were folded neatly on a chair. The key of her cupboard was in the pocket of her dress. The door had been slightly ajar, but both the windows were wide open ; one of them, which had the sash-line broken, had been fastened up most scientifically with a piece of rope.

"Mrs. Owen had obviously undressed preparatory to going to bed, and the magistrate very naturally soon made the remark how untenable the theory of an accident must be. No one in their five senses would undress with a temperature at below zero, and the windows wide open.

"After these preliminary statements the cashier of the Birkbeck was called and he related the caretaker's visit at the bank.

" 'It was then about one o'clock,' he stated. 'Mrs. Owen called and presented a cheque to self for £827, the amount of her balance. She seemed exceedingly happy and cheerful, and talked about needing plenty of cash, as she was going abroad to join her nephew, for whom she would in future keep house. I warned her about being sufficiently careful with so large a sum, and parting from it injudiciously, as women of her class are very apt to do. She laughingly declared that not only was she careful of it in the present, but meant to be so for the far-off future, for she intended to go that very day to a lawyer's office and to make a will.'

"The cashier's evidence was certainly startling in the extreme, since in the widow's room no trace of any kind was found of any money; against that, two of the notes handed over by the bank to Mrs. Owen on that day were cashed by young Greenhill on the very morning of her

mysterious death. One was handed in by him to the West End Clothiers Company, in payment for a suit of clothes, and the other he changed at the Post Office in Oxford Street.

"After that all the evidence had of necessity to be gone through again on the subject of young Greenhill's intimacy with Mrs. Owen. He listened to it all with an air of the most painful nervousness, his cheeks were positively green, his lips seemed dry and parched, for he repeatedly passed his tongue over them, and when Constable E 18 deposed that at 2 a.m. on the morning of February 2nd he had seen the accused and spoken to him at the corner of Percy Street and Tottenham Court Road, young Greenhill all but fainted.

"The contention of the police was that the caretaker had been murdered and robbed during that night before she went to bed, that young Greenhill had done the murder, seeing that he was the only person known to have been intimate with the woman, and that it was, moreover, proved unquestionably that he was in the immediate neighbourhood of the Rubens Studios at an extraordinarily late hour of the night.

"His own account of himself, and of that same night, could certainly not be called very satisfactory. Mrs. Owen was a relative of his late mother's, he declared. He himself was a lithographer by trade, with a good deal of time

and leisure on his hands. He certainly had employed some of that time in taking the old woman to various places of amusement. He had on more than one occasion suggested that she should give up menial work, and come and live with him, but, unfortunately, she was a great deal imposed upon by her nephew, a man of the name of Owen, who exploited the good-natured woman in every possible way, and who had on more than one occasion made severe attacks upon her savings at the Birkbeck Bank.

"Severely cross-examined by the prosecuting counsel about this supposed relative of Mrs. Owen, Greenhill admitted that he did not know him—had, in fact, never seen him. He knew that his name was Owen and that was all. His chief occupation consisted in sponging on the kind-hearted old woman, but he only went to see her in the evenings, when he presumably knew that she would be alone, and invariably after all the tenants of the Rubens Studios had left for the day.

"I don't know whether at this point it strikes you at all, as it did both magistrate and counsel, that there was a direct contradiction in this statement and the one made by the cashier of the Birkbeck on the subject of his last conversation with Mrs. Owen. 'I am going abroad to join my nephew, for whom I am going to keep house,' was what the unfortunate woman had said.

"Now Greenhill, in spite of his nervousness and at times contradictory answers, strictly adhered to his point, that there was a nephew in London, who came frequently to see his aunt.

"Anyway, the sayings of the murdered woman could not be taken as evidence in law. Mr. Greenhill senior put the objection, adding: 'There may have been two nephews,' which the magistrate and the prosecution were bound to admit.

"With regard to the night immediately preceding Mrs. Owen's death, Greenhill stated that he had been with her to the theatre, had seen her home, and had had some supper with her in her room. Before he left her, at 2 a.m., she had of her own accord made him a present of £10, saying: 'I am a sort of aunt to you, Arthur, and if you don't have it, Bill is sure to get it.'

"She had seemed rather worried in the early part of the evening, but later on she cheered up.

"'Did she speak at all about this nephew of hers or about her money affairs?' asked the magistrate.

"Again the young man hesitated, but said, 'No! she did not mention either Owen or her money affairs.'

"If I remember rightly," added the man in the corner, "for recollect I was not present, the

case was here adjourned. But the magistrate would not grant bail. Greenhill was removed looking more dead than alive—though every one remarked that Mr. Greenhill senior looked determined and not the least worried. In the course of his examination on behalf of his son, of the medical officer and one or two other witnesses, he had very ably tried to confuse them on the subject of the hour at which Mrs. Owen was last known to be alive.

“He made a very great point of the fact that the usual morning’s work was done throughout the house when the inmates arrived. Was it conceivable, he argued, that a woman would do that kind of work overnight, especially as she was going to the theatre, and therefore would wish to dress in her smarter clothes? It certainly was a very nice point levelled against the prosecution, who promptly retorted: Just as conceivable as that a woman in those circumstances of life should, having done her work, undress beside an open window at nine o’clock in the morning with the snow beating into the room.

“Now it seems that Mr. Greenhill senior could produce any amount of witnesses who could help to prove a conclusive *alibi* on behalf of his son, if only some time subsequent to that fatal 2 a.m. the murdered woman had been seen alive by some chance passer-by.

"However, he was an able man and an earnest one, and I fancy the magistrate felt some sympathy for his strenuous endeavours on his son's behalf. He granted a week's adjournment, which seemed to satisfy Mr. Greenhill completely.

"In the meanwhile the papers had talked of and almost exhausted the subject of the mystery in Percy Street. There had been, as you no doubt know from personal experience, innumerable arguments on the puzzling alternatives :—

"Accident ?

"Suicide ?

"Murder ?

"A week went by, and then the case against young Greenhill was resumed. Of course the court was crowded. It needed no great penetration to remark at once that the prisoner looked more hopeful, and his father quite elated.

"Again a great deal of minor evidence was taken, and then came the turn of the defence. Mr. Greenhill called Mrs. Hall, confectioner, of Percy Street, opposite the Rubens Studios. She deposed that at 8 o'clock in the morning of February 2nd, while she was tidying her shop window, she saw the caretaker of the Studios opposite, as usual, on her knees, her head and body wrapped in a shawl, cleaning her front steps. Her husband also saw Mrs. Owen, and Mrs. Hall remarked to her husband how thank-

ful she was that her own shop had tiled steps, which did not need scrubbing on so cold a morning.

“Mr. Hall, confectioner, of the same address, corroborated this statement, and Mr. Greenhill, with absolute triumph, produced a third witness, Mrs. Martin, of Percy Street, who from her window on the second floor had, at 7.30 a.m., seen the caretaker shaking mats outside her front door. The description this witness gave of Mrs. Owen’s get-up, with the shawl round her head, coincided point by point with that given by Mr. and Mrs. Hall.

“After that Mr. Greenhill’s task became an easy one; his son was at home having his breakfast at 8 o’clock that morning—not only himself, but his servants would testify to that.

“The weather had been so bitter that the whole of that day Arthur had not stirred from his own fireside. Mrs. Owen was murdered after 8 a.m. on that day, since she was seen alive by three people at that hour, therefore his son could not have murdered Mrs. Owen. The police must find the criminal elsewhere, or else bow to the opinion originally expressed by the public that Mrs. Owen had met with a terrible untoward accident, or that perhaps she may have wilfully sought her own death in that extraordinary and tragic fashion.

“Before young Greenhill was finally dis-

charged one or two witnesses were again examined, chief among these being the foreman of the glassworks. He had turned up at the Rubens Studios at 9 o'clock, and been in business all day. He averred positively that he did not specially notice any suspicious-looking individual crossing the hall that day. 'But,' he remarked with a smile, 'I don't sit and watch every one who goes up and down stairs. I am too busy for that. The street door is always left open; any one can walk in, up or down, who knows the way.'

"That there was a mystery in connection with Mrs. Owen's death—of that the police have remained perfectly convinced; whether young Greenhill held the key of that mystery or not they have never found out to this day.

"I could enlighten them as to the cause of the young lithographer's anxiety at the magisterial inquiry, but, I assure you, I do not care to do the work of the police for them. Why should I? Greenhill will never suffer from unjust suspicions. He and his father alone—besides myself—know in what a terribly tight corner he all but found himself.

"The young man did not reach home till nearly *five* o'clock that morning. His last train had gone; he had to walk, lost his way, and wandered about Hampstead for hours. Think what his position would have been if the worthy

confectioners of Percy Street had not seen Mrs. Owen 'wrapped up in a shawl, on her knees, doing the front steps.'

"Moreover, Mr. Greenhill senior is a solicitor, who has a small office in John Street, Bedford Row. The afternoon before her death Mrs. Owen had been to that office and had there made a will by which she left all her savings to young Arthur Greenhill, lithographer. Had that will been in other than paternal hands, it would have been proved, in the natural course of such things, and one other link would have been added to the chain which nearly dragged Arthur Greenhill to the gallows—the link of a very strong motive.'

"Can you wonder that the young man turned livid, until such time as it was proved beyond a doubt that the murdered woman was alive hours after he had reached the safe shelter of his home?

"I saw you smile when I used the word 'murdered,'" continued the man in the corner, growing quite excited now that he was approaching the *dénouement* of his story. "I know that the public, after the magistrate had discharged Arthur Greenhill, were quite satisfied to think that the mystery in Percy Street was a case of accident—or suicide."

"No," replied Polly, "there could be no question of suicide, for two very distinct reasons."

He looked at her with some degree of astonishment. She supposed that he was amazed at her venturing to form an opinion of her own.

"And may I ask what, in your opinion, these reasons are?" he asked very sarcastically.

"To begin with, the question of money," she said—"has any more of it been traced so far?"

"Not another £5 note," he said with a chuckle; "they were all cashed in Paris during the Exhibition, and you have no conception how easy a thing that is to do, at any of the hotels or smaller *agents de change*."

"That nephew was a clever blackguard," she commented.

"You believe, then, in the existence of that nephew?"

"Why should I doubt it? Some one must have existed who was sufficiently familiar with the house to go about in it in the middle of the day without attracting any one's attention."

"In the middle of the day?" he said with a chuckle.

"Any time after 8.30 in the morning."

"So you, too, believe in the 'caretaker, wrapped up in a shawl,' cleaning her front steps?" he queried.

"But——"

"It never struck you, in spite of the training your intercourse with me must have given you, that the person who carefully did all the work

in the Rubens Studios, laid the fires and carried up the coals, merely did it in order to gain time ; in order that the bitter frost might really and effectually do its work, and Mrs. Owen be not missed until she was truly dead."

"But——" suggested Polly again.

"It never struck you that one of the greatest secrets of successful crime is to lead the police astray with regard to the time when the crime was committed. That was, if you remember, the great point in the Regent's Park murder.

"In this case the 'nephew,' since we admit his existence, would—even if he were ever found, which is doubtful—be able to prove as good an *alibi* as young Greenhill."

"But I don't understand——"

"How the murder was committed ? " he said eagerly. "Surely you can see it all for yourself, since you admit the 'nephew'—a scamp, perhaps—who sponges on the good-natured woman. He terrorises and threatens her, so much so that she fancies her money is no longer safe even in the Birkbeck Bank. Women of that class are apt at times to mistrust the Bank of England. Anyway, she withdraws her money. Who knows what she meant to do with it in the immediate future ?

"In any case, she wishes to secure it after her death to a young man whom she likes, and who has known how to win her good graces.

That afternoon the nephew begs, entreats for more money; they have a row; the poor woman is in tears, and is only temporarily consoled by a pleasant visit at the theatre.

"At 2 o'clock in the morning young Greenhill parts from her. Two minutes later the nephew knocks at the door. He comes with a plausible tale of having missed his last train, and asks for a 'shake down' somewhere in the house. The good-natured woman suggests a sofa in one of the studios, and then quietly prepares to go to bed. The rest is very simple and elementary. The nephew sneaks into his aunt's room, finds her standing in her nightgown; he demands money with threats of violence; terrified, she staggers, knocks her head against the gas bracket, and falls on the floor stunned, while the nephew seeks for her keys and takes possession of the £800. You will admit that the subsequent *mise en scène*—is worthy of a genius.

"No struggle, not the usual hideous accessories round a crime. Only the open windows, the bitter north-easterly gale, and the heavily falling snow—two silent accomplices, as silent as the dead.

"After that the murderer, with perfect presence of mind, busies himself in the house, doing the work which will ensure that Mrs. Owen shall not be missed, at any rate, for some time. He dusts and tidies; some few hours later he even

slips on his aunt's skirt and bodice, wraps his head in a shawl, and boldly allows those neighbours who are astir to see what they believe to be Mrs. Owen. Then he goes back to her room, resumes his normal appearance, and quietly leaves the house."

"He may have been seen."

"He undoubtedly *was* seen by two or three people, but no one thought anything of seeing a man leave the house at that hour. It was very cold, the snow was falling thickly, and as he wore a muffler round the lower part of his face, those who saw him would not undertake to know him again."

"That man was never seen nor heard of again?" Polly asked.

"He has disappeared off the face of the earth. The police are searching for him, and perhaps some day they will find him—then society will be rid of one of the most ingenious men of the age."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE END

HE had paused, absorbed in meditation. The young girl also was silent. Some memory too vague as yet to take a definite form was persistently haunting her—one thought was hammering away in her brain, and playing havoc with her nerves. That thought was the inexplicable feeling within her that there was something in connection with that hideous crime which she ought to recollect, something which—if she could only remember what it was—would give her the clue to the tragic mystery, and for once ensure her triumph over this self-conceited and sarcastic scarecrow in the corner.

He was watching her through his great bone-rimmed spectacles, and she could see the knuckles of his bony hands, just above the top of the table, fidgeting, fidgeting, fidgeting, till she wondered if there existed another set of fingers in the world which could undo the knots his lean ones made in that tiresome piece of string.

Then suddenly—*à propos* of nothing, Polly remembered—the whole thing stood before her,

short and clear like a vivid flash of lightning :— Mrs. Owen lying dead in the snow beside her open window ; one of them with a broken sash-line, tied up most scientifically with a piece of string. She remembered the talk there had been at the time about this improvised sash-line.

That was after young Greenhill had been discharged, and the question of suicide had been voted an impossibility.

Polly remembered that in the illustrated papers photographs appeared of this wonderfully knotted piece of string, so contrived that the weight of the frame could but tighten the knots, and thus keep the window open. She remembered that people deduced many things from that improvised sash-line, chief among these deductions being that the murderer was a sailor—so wonderful, so complicated, so numerous were the knots which secured that window-frame.

But Polly knew better. In her mind's eye she saw those fingers, rendered doubly nervous by the fearful cerebral excitement, grasping at first mechanically, even thoughtlessly, a bit of twine with which to secure the window ; then the ruling habit strongest through all, the girl could see it ; the lean and ingenious fingers fidgeting, fidgeting with that piece of string, tying knot after knot, more wonderful, more complicated, than any she had yet witnessed.

"If I were you," she said, without daring to

look into that corner where he sat, "I would break myself of the habit of perpetually making knots in a piece of string."

He did not reply, and at last Polly ventured to look up—the corner was empty, and through the glass door beyond the desk, where he had just deposited his few coppers, she saw the tails of his tweed coat, his extraordinary hat, his meagre, shrivelled-up personality, fast disappearing down the street.

Miss Polly Burton (of the *Evening Observer*) was married the other day to Mr. Richard Frobisher (of the *London Mail*). She has never set eyes on the man in the corner from that day to this.

FINIS



