Le Queux William

The Seven Secrets

William Le Queux

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Le Queux W.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCES AMBLER JEVONS

"Ah! You don't take the matter at all seriously!" I observed, a trifle annoyed.

"Why should I?" asked my friend, Ambler Jevons, with a deep pull at his well-coloured briar. "What you've told me shows quite plainly that you have in the first place viewed one little circumstance with suspicion, then brooded over it until it has become magnified and now occupies your whole mind. Take my advice, old chap, and think nothing more about it. Why should you make yourself miserable for no earthly reason? You're a rising man – hard up like most of us – but under old Eyton's wing you've got a brilliant future before you. Unlike myself, a mere nobody, struggling against the tide of adversity, you're already a long way up the medical ladder. If you climb straight you'll end with an appointment of Physician-in-Ordinary and a knighthood thrown in as makeweight. Old Macalister used to prophesy it, you remember, when we were up at Edinburgh. Therefore, I can't, for the life of me, discover any cause why you should allow yourself to have these touches of the blues – unless it's liver, or some other internal organ about which you know a lot more than I do. Why, man, you've got the whole world before you, and as for Ethelwynn – "

"Ethelwynn!" I ejaculated, starting up from my chair. "Leave her out of the question! We need not discuss her," and I walked to the mantelshelf to light a fresh cigarette.

"As you wish, my dear fellow," said my merry, easy-going friend. "I merely wish to point out the utter folly of all this suspicion."

"I don't suspect her," I snapped.

"I didn't suggest that." Then, after a pause during which he smoked on vigorously, he suddenly asked, "Well now, be frank, Ralph, whom do you really suspect?"

I was silent. Truth to tell, his question entirely nonplussed me. I had suspicions – distinct suspicions – that certain persons surrounding me were acting in accord towards some sinister end, but which of those persons were culpable I certainly could not determine. It was that very circumstance which was puzzling me to the point of distraction.

"Ah!" I replied. "That's the worst of it. I know that the whole affair seems quite absurd, but I must admit that I can't fix suspicion upon anyone in particular."

Jevons laughed outright.

"In that case, my dear Boyd, you ought really to see the folly of the thing."

"Perhaps I ought, but I don't," I answered, facing him with my back to the fire. "To you, my most intimate friend, I've explained, in strictest confidence, the matter which is puzzling me. I live in hourly dread of some catastrophe the nature of which I'm utterly at a loss to determine. Can you define intuition?"

My question held him in pensive silence. His manner changed as he looked me straight in the face. Unlike his usual careless self – for his was a curious character of the semi-Bohemian order and Savage Club type – he grew serious and thoughtful, regarding me with critical gaze after removing his pipe from his lips.

"Well," he exclaimed at last. "I'll tell you what it is, Boyd. This intuition, or whatever you may call it, is an infernally bad thing for you. I'm your friend – one of your best and most devoted friends, old chap – and if there's anything in it, I'll render you whatever help I can."

"Thank you, Ambler," I said gratefully, taking his hand. "I have told you all this to-night in order to enlist your sympathy, although I scarcely liked to ask your aid. Your life is a busy one – busier even than my own, perhaps – and you have no desire to be bothered with my personal affairs."

"On the contrary, old fellow," he said. "Remember that in mystery I'm in my element."

"I know," I replied. "But at present there is no mystery – only suspicion."

What Ambler Jevons had asserted was a fact. He was an investigator of mysteries, making it his hobby just as other men take to collecting curios or pictures. About his personal appearance there was nothing very remarkable. When pre-occupied he had an abrupt, rather brusque manner, but at all other times he was a very easy-going man of the world, possessor of an ample income left him by his aunt, and this he augmented by carrying on, in partnership with an elder man, a profitable tea-blending business in Mark Lane.

He had entered the tea trade not because of necessity, but because he considered it a bad thing for a man to lead an idle life. Nevertheless, the chief object of his existence had always seemed to be the unravelling of mysteries of police and crime. Surely few men, even those professional investigators at Scotland Yard, held such a record of successes. He was a born detective, with a keen scent for clues, an ingenuity that was marvellous, and a patience and endurance that were inexhaustible. At Scotland Yard the name of Ambler Jevons had for several years been synonymous with all that is clever and astute in the art of detecting crime.

To be a good criminal investigator a man must be born such. He must be physically strong; he must be untiring in his search after truth; he must be able to scent a mystery as a hound does a fox, to follow up the trail with energy unflagging, and seize opportunities without hesitation; he must possess a cool presence of mind, and above all be able to calmly distinguish the facts which are of importance in the strengthening of the clue from those that are merely superfluous. All these, besides other qualities, are necessary for the successful penetration of criminal mysteries; hence it is that the average amateur, who takes up the hobby without any natural instinct, is invariably a blunderer.

Ambler Jevons, blender of teas and investigator of mysteries, was lolling back in my armchair, his dreamy eyes half-closed, smoking on in silence.

Myself, I was thirty-three, and I fear not much of an ornament to the medical profession. True, at Edinburgh I had taken my M.B. and C.M. with highest honours, and three years later had graduated M.D., but my friends thought a good deal more of my success than I did, for they overlooked my shortcomings and magnified my talents.

I suppose it was because my father had represented a county constituency in the House of Commons, and therefore I possessed that very useful advantage which is vaguely termed family influence, that I had been appointed assistant physician at Guy's. My own practice was very small, therefore I devilled, as the lawyers would term it, for my chief, Sir Bernard Eyton, knight, the consulting physician to my hospital.

Sir Bernard, whom all the smart world of London knew as the first specialist in nervous disorders, had his professional headquarters in Harley Street, but lived down at Hove, in order to avoid night work or the calls which Society made upon him. I lived a stone's-throw away from his house in Harley Street, just round the corner in Harley Place, and it was my duty to take charge of his extensive practice during his absence at night or while on holidays.

I must here declare that my own position was not at all disagreeable. True, I sometimes had night work, which is never very pleasant, but being one of the evils of the life of every medical man he accepts it as such. I had very comfortable bachelor quarters in an ancient and rather grimy house, with an old fashioned dark-panelled sitting-room, a dining-room, bedroom and dressing-room, and,

save for the fact that I was compelled to be on duty after four o'clock, when Sir Bernard drove to Victoria Station, my time in the evening was very much my own.

Many a man would, I suppose, have envied me. It is not every day that a first-class physician requires an assistant, and certainly no man could have been more generous and kindly disposed than Sir Bernard himself, even though his character was something of the miser. Yet all of us find some petty shortcomings in the good things of this world, and I was no exception. Sometimes I grumbled, but generally, be it said, without much cause.

Truth to tell, a mysterious feeling of insecurity had been gradually creeping upon me through several months; indeed ever since I had returned from a holiday in Scotland in the spring. I could not define it, not really knowing what had excited the curious apprehensions within me. Nevertheless, I had that night told my secret to Ambler Jevons, who was often my visitor of an evening, and over our whiskies had asked his advice, with the unsatisfactory result which I have already written down.

CHAPTER II.
"A VERY UGLY SECRET."

The consulting-room in Harley Street, where Sir Bernard Eyton saw his patients and gathered in his guineas for his ill-scribbled prescriptions, differed little from a hundred others in the same severe and depressing thoroughfare.

It was a very sombre apartment. The walls were painted dark green and hung with two or three old portraits in oils; the furniture was of a style long past, heavy and covered in brown morocco, and the big writing-table, behind which the great doctor would sit blinking at his patient through the circular gold-rimmed glasses, that gave him a somewhat Teutonic appearance, was noted for its prim neatness and orderly array. On the one side was an adjustable couch; on the other a bookcase with glass doors containing a number of instruments which were, however, not visible because of curtains of green silk behind the glass.

Into that room, on three days a week, Ford, the severely respectable footman, ushered in patients one after the other, many of them Society women suffering from what is known in these degenerate days as "nerves." Indeed, Eyton was *par excellence* a ladies' doctor, for so many of the gentler sex get burnt up in the mad rush of a London season.

I had made up my mind to consult my chief, and with that object entered his room on the following afternoon at a quarter before four.

"Well, Boyd, anything fresh?" he asked, putting off his severely professional air and lolling back in his padded writing-chair as I entered.

"No, nothing," I responded, throwing myself in the patient's chair opposite him and tossing my gloves on the table. "A hard day down at the hospital, that's all. You've been busy as usual, I suppose."

"Busy!" the old man echoed, "why, these confounded women never let me alone for a single instant! Always the same story – excitement, late hours, little worries over erring husbands, and all that sort of thing. I always know what's coming as soon as they get seated and settled. I really don't know what Society's coming to, Boyd," and he blinked over at me through his heavy-framed spectacles.

About sixty, of middle height, he was slightly inclined to rotundity, with hair almost white, a stubbly grey beard, and a pair of keen eyes rather prominently set in a bony but not unpleasant countenance. He had a peculiar habit of stroking his left ear when puzzled, and was not without those little eccentricities which run hand in hand with genius. One of them was his fondness for amateur theatricals, for he was a leading member of the Dramatic Club at Hove and nearly always took part in the performances. But he was a pronounced miser. Each day when he arrived at Victoria Station from Hove, he purchased three ham sandwiches at the refreshment bar and carried them in his black bag to Harley Street. He there concealed them in a drawer in the writing-table and stealthily ate them instead of taking half-an-hour for luncheon. Sometimes he sent Ford out to the nearest greengrocer's in the Marylebone Road for a penny apple, which he surreptitiously ate as dessert.

Indeed, he was finishing his last sandwich when I entered, and his mouth was full.

It may have been that small fact which caused me to hesitate. At any rate, sitting there with those big round eyes peering forth upon me, I felt the absurdity of the situation.

Presently, when he had finished his sandwich, carefully brushed the crumbs from his blotting-pad and cast the bag into the waste-paper basket, he raised his head and with his big eyes again blinking through his spectacles, said:

"You've had no call to poor old Courtenay, I suppose?"

"No," I responded. "Why?"

"Because he's in a bad way."

"Worse?"

"Yes," he replied. "I'm rather anxious about him. He'll have to keep to his bed, I fear."

I did not in the least doubt this. Old Mr. Henry Courtenay, one of the Devonshire Courtenays, a very wealthy if somewhat eccentric old gentleman, lived in one of those prim, pleasant, detached houses in Richmond Road, facing Kew Gardens, and was one of Sir Bernard's best patients. He had been under him for a number of years until they had become personal friends. One of his eccentricities was to insist on paying heavy fees to his medical adviser, believing, perhaps, that by so doing he would secure greater and more careful attention.

But, strangely enough, mention of the name suddenly gave me the clue so long wanting. It aroused within me a sense of impending evil regarding the very man of whom we were speaking. The sound of the name seemed to strike the sympathetic chord within my brain, and I at once became cognisant that the unaccountable presage of impending misfortune was connected with that rather incongruous household down at Kew.

Therefore, when Sir Bernard imparted to me his misgivings, I was quickly on the alert, and questioned him regarding the progress of old Mr. Courtenay's disease.

"The poor fellow is sinking, I'm afraid, Boyd," exclaimed my chief, confidentially. "He doesn't believe himself half so ill as he is. When did you see him last?"

"Only a few days ago. I thought he seemed much improved," I said.

"Ah! of course," the old doctor snapped; his manner towards me in an instant changed. "You're a frequent visitor there, I forgot. Feminine attraction and all that sort of thing. Dangerous, Boyd! Dangerous to run after a woman of her sort. I'm an older man than you. Why haven't you taken the hint I gave you long ago?"

"Because I could see no reason why I should not continue my friendship with Ethelwynn Mivart."

"My dear Boyd," he responded, in a sympathetic fatherly manner, which he sometimes assumed, "I'm an old bachelor, and I see quite sufficient of women in this room – too much of them, in fact. The majority are utterly worthless. Recollect that I have never taken away a woman's character yet, and I refuse to do so now – especially to her lover. I merely warn you, Boyd, to drop her. That's all. If you don't, depend upon it you'll regret it."

"Then there's some secret or other of her past which she conceals, I suppose?" I said hoarsely, feeling confident that being so intimate with his patient, old Mr. Courtenay, he had discovered it.

"Yes," he replied, blinking again at me through his glasses. "There is – a very ugly secret."

CHAPTER III.
THE COURTENAYS

I determined to spend that evening at Richmond Road with open eyes.

The house was a large red-brick one, modern, gabled, and typically suburban. Mr. Courtenay, although a wealthy man with a large estate in Devonshire and extensive properties in Canada, where as a young man he had amassed a large fortune, lived in that London suburb in order to be near his old friends. Besides, his wife was young and objected to being buried in the country. With her husband an invalid she was unable to entertain, therefore she had found the country dull very soon after her marriage and gladly welcomed removal to London, even though they sank their individuality in becoming suburban residents.

Short, the prim manservant, who admitted me, showed me at once up to his master's room, and I stayed for half-an-hour with him. He was sitting before the fire in a padded dressing gown, a rather thick-set figure with grey hair, wan cheeks, and bright eyes. The hand he gave me was chill and bony, yet I saw plainly that he was much better than when I had last seen him. He was up, and that was a distinctly good sign. I examined him, questioned him, and as far as I could make out he was, contrary to my chief's opinion, very much improved.

Indeed, he spoke quite gaily, offered me a whisky and soda, and made me tell him the stories I had heard an hour earlier at the Savage. The poor old fellow was suffering from that most malignant disease, cancer of the tongue, which had caused him to develop peripheral neuritis. His doctors had recommended an operation, but knowing it to be a very serious one he had declined it, and as he had suffered great pain and inconvenience he had taken to drink heavily. He was a lonely man, and I often pitied him. A doctor can very quickly tell whether domestic felicity reigns in a household, and I had long ago seen that with the difference of age between Mrs. Courtenay and her husband – he sixty-two and she only twenty-nine – they had but few ideas in common.

That she nursed him tenderly I was well aware, but from her manner I had long ago detected that her devotedness was only assumed in order to humour him, and that she possessed little or no real affection for him. Nor was it much wonder, after all. A smart young woman, fond of society and amusement, is never the kind of wife for a snappy invalid of old Courtenay's type. She had married him, some five years before, for his money, her uncharitable enemies said. Perhaps that was so. In any case it was difficult to believe that a pretty woman of her stamp could ever entertain any genuine affection for a man of his age, and it was most certainly true that whatever bond of sympathy had existed between them at the time of their marriage had now been snapped.

Instead of remaining at home of an evening and posing as a dutiful wife as she once had done, she was now in the habit of going up to town to her friends the Penn-Pagets, who lived in Brook Street, or the Hennikers in Redcliffe Square, accompanying them to dances and theatres with all the defiance of the "covenances" allowed nowadays to the married woman. On such occasions, growing each week more frequent, her sister Ethelwynn remained at home to see that Mr. Courtenay was properly attended to by the nurse, and exhibited a patience that I could not help but admire.

Yes, the more I reflected upon it the more curious seemed that ill-assorted *ménage*. On her marriage Mary Mivart had declared that her new home in Devonshire was deadly dull, and had induced her indulgent husband to allow her sister to come and live with her, and Ethelwynn and her maid had formed part of the household ever since.

We doctors, providing we have not a brass plate in lieu of a practice, see some queer things, and being in the confidence of our patients, know of many strange and incomprehensible families. The one at Richmond Road was a case in point. I had gradually seen how young Mrs. Courtenay had tired of her wifely duties, until, by slow degrees, she had cast off the shackles altogether – until she now thought more of her new frocks, smart suppers at the Carlton, first-nights and "shows" in

Mayfair than she did of the poor suffering old man whom she had not so long ago vowed to "love, honour and obey." It was to be regretted, but in my position I had no necessity nor inclination to interfere. Even Ethelwynn made no remark, although this sudden breaking forth of her sister must have pained her considerably.

When at length I shook hands with my patient, left him in the hands of the nurse and descended to the drawing room, I found Ethelwynn awaiting me.

She rose and came forward, both her slim white hands outstretched in glad welcome.

"Short told me you were here," she exclaimed. "What a long time you have been upstairs. Nothing serious, I hope," she added with a touch of anxiety, I thought.

"Nothing at all," I assured her, walking with her across to the fire and seating myself in the cosy-corner, while she threw herself upon a low lounge chair and pillowed her dark head upon a big cushion of yellow silk. "Where is Mary?" I asked.

"Out. She's dining with the Hennikers to-night, I think."

"And leaves you at home to look after the invalid?" I remarked.

"Oh, I don't mind in the least," she declared, laughing.

"And the old gentleman? What does he say to her constant absence in the evening?"

"Well, to tell the truth, Ralph, he seldom knows. He usually believes her to be at home, and I never undeceive him. Why should I?"

I grunted, for I was not at all well pleased with her connivance at her sister's deceit. The sound that escaped my lips caused her to glance across at me in quick surprise.

"You are displeased, dear," she said. "Tell me why. What have I done?"

"I'm not displeased with you," I declared. "Only, as you know, I'm not in favour of deception, and especially so in a wife."

She pursed her lips, and I thought her face went a trifle paler. She was silent for a moment, then said:

"I don't see why we should discuss that, Ralph. Mary's actions concern neither of us. It is not for us to prevent her amusing herself, neither is it our duty to create unpleasantness between husband and wife."

I did not reply, but sat looking at her, drinking in her beauty in a long, full draught. How can I describe her? Her form was graceful in every line; her face perfect in its contour, open, finely-moulded, and with a marvellous complexion – a calm, sweet countenance that reminded one of Raphael's "Madonna" in Florence, indeed almost its counterpart. Her beauty had been remarked everywhere. She had sat to a well-known R.A. for his Academy picture two years before, and the artist had declared her to be one of the most perfect types of English beauty.

Was it any wonder, then, that I was in love with her? Was it any wonder that those wonderful dark eyes held me beneath their spell, or those dark locks that I sometimes stroked from off her fair white brow should be to me the most beautiful in all the world? Man is but mortal, and a beautiful woman always enchants.

As she sat before me in her evening gown of some flimsy cream stuff, all frills and furbelows, she seemed perfect in her loveliness. The surroundings suited her to perfection – the old Chippendale and the palms, while the well-shaded electric lamp in its wrought-iron stand shed a mellow glow upon her, softening her features and harmonising the tints of the objects around. From beneath the hem of her skirt a neat ankle encased in its black silk stocking was thrust coquettishly forward, and her tiny patent leather slipper was stretched out to the warmth of the fire. Her pose was, however, restful and natural. She loved luxury, and made no secret of it. The hour after dinner was always her hour of laziness, and she usually spent it in that self-same chair, in that self-same position.

She was twenty-five, the youngest daughter of old Thomas Mivart, who was squire of Neneford, in Northamptonshire, a well-known hunting-man of his day, who had died two years ago leaving a widow, a charming lady, who lived alone at the Manor. To me it had always been a mystery why the

craving for gaiety and amusement had never seized Ethelwynn. She was by far the more beautiful of the pair, the smartest in dress, and the wittier in speech, for possessed of a keen sense of humour, she was interesting as well as handsome – the two qualities which are *par excellence* necessary for a woman to attain social success.

She stirred slightly as she broke the silence, and then I detected in her a nervousness which I had not noticed on first entering the room.

"Sir Bernard Eyton was down here yesterday and spent over an hour with the old gentleman. They sent the nurse out of the room and talked together for a long time, upon some private business, nurse thinks. When Sir Bernard came down he told me in confidence that Mr. Courtenay was distinctly weaker."

"Yes," I said, "Sir Bernard told me that, but I must confess that to-night I find a decided improvement in him. He's sitting up quite lively."

"Very different to a month ago," my well-beloved remarked. "Do you recollect when Short went to London in a hansom and brought you down at three in the morning?"

"I gave up all hope when I saw him on that occasion," I said; "but he certainly seems to have taken a new lease of life."

"Do you think he really has?" she inquired with an undisguised eagerness which struck me as distinctly curious. "Do you believe that Sir Bernard's fears are after all ungrounded?"

I looked at her surprised. She had never before evinced such a keen interest in her sister's husband, and I was puzzled.

"I really can't give an opinion," I responded mechanically, for want of something or other to say.

It was curious, that question of hers – very curious.

Yet after all I was in love – and all lovers are fools in their jealousy.

CHAPTER IV.
A NIGHT CALL

"Do you know, Ralph," she faltered presently, "I have a faint suspicion that you are annoyed about something. What is it? Be frank now and tell me."

"Annoyed?" I laughed. "Not at all, dearest. Nervous and impatient, perhaps. You must make allowances for me. A doctor's life is full of professional worries. I've had a trying day at the hospital, and I suppose I'm quarrelsome – eh?"

"No, not quarrelsome, but just inclined to be a little suspicious."

"Suspicious? Of what?"

Her woman's power of penetration to the innermost secrets of the heart was marvellous.

"Of me?"

"How absurd!" I exclaimed. "Why should I be suspicious – and of what?"

"Well," she laughed, "I really don't know, only your manner is peculiar. Why not be frank with me, Ralph, dear, and tell me what it is that you don't like. Have I offended you?"

"Not at all, darling," I hastened to assure her. "Why, you're the best little woman in the world. Offend me – how absurd!"

"Then who has offended you?"

I hesitated. When a woman really loves, a man can have but few secrets from her. Ethelwynn always read me like an open book.

"I'm worried over a critical case," I said, in an endeavour to evade her question.

"But your patients don't annoy you, surely," she exclaimed. "There is a distinction between annoyance and worry."

I saw that she had detected my suspicion, and at once hastened to reassure her that she had my entire confidence.

"If Mary finds her life a trifle dull with her husband it is surely no reason why I should be blamed for it," she said, in a tone of mild complaint.

"No, you entirely misunderstand me," I said. "No blame whatever attaches to you. Your sister's actions are no affair of ours. It is merely a pity that she cannot see her error. With her husband lying ill she should at least remain at home."

"She declares that she has suffered martyrdom for his sake long enough," my well-beloved said. "Perhaps she is right, for between ourselves the old gentleman is a terrible trial."

"That is only to be expected from one suffering from such a disease. Yet it can serve no excuse for his wife taking up with that gay set, the Penn-Pagets and the Hennikers. I must say I'm very surprised."

"And so am I, Ralph. But what can I do? I'm utterly powerless. She is mistress here, and does exactly as she likes. The old gentleman dotes on her and allows her to have her way in everything. She has ever been wilful, even from a child."

She did not attempt to shield her sister, and yet she uttered no condemnation of her conduct. I could not, even then, understand the situation. To me one of two things was apparent. Either she feared to displease her sister because of some power the latter held over her, or this neglect of old Mr. Courtenay was pleasing to her.

"I wonder you don't give Mary a hint that her conduct is being noticed and remarked upon. Of course, don't say that I've spoken of it. Merely put it to her in the manner of a vague suggestion."

"Very well, if you wish it," she responded promptly, for she was ever ready to execute my smallest desire.

"And you love me quite as truly and as well as you did a year ago?" I asked, eagerly, stroking the dark tendrils from her white brow.

"Love you?" she echoed. "Yes, Ralph," she went on, looking up into my face with unwavering gaze. "I may be distrait and pre-occupied sometimes, but, nevertheless, I swear to you, as I did on that summer's evening long ago when we were boating together at Shepperton, that you are the only man I have ever loved – or shall ever love."

I returned her caress with a passion that was heartfelt. I was devoted to her, and these tender words of hers confirmed my belief in her truth and purity.

"Need I repeat what I have told you so many times, dearest?" I asked, in a low voice, as her head rested upon my shoulder and she stood in my embrace. "Need I tell you how fondly I love you – how that I am entirely yours? No. You are mine, Ethelwynn – mine."

"And you will never think ill of me?" she asked, in a faltering tone. "You will never be suspicious of me as you have been to-night? You cannot tell how all this upsets me. Perfect love surely demands perfect confidence. And our love is perfect – is it not?"

"It is," I cried. "It is. Forgive me, dearest. Forgive me for my churlish conduct to-night. It is my fault – all my fault. I love you, and have every confidence in you."

"But will your love last always?" she asked, with just a tinge of doubt in her voice.

"Yes, always," I declared.

"No matter what may happen?" she asked.

"No matter what may happen."

I kissed her fervently with warm words of passionate devotion upon my lips, and went forth into the rainy winter's night with my suspicions swept away and with love renewed within me.

I had been foolish in my suspicions and apprehensions, and hated myself for it. Her sweet devotedness to me was sufficient proof of her honesty. I was not wealthy by any means, and I knew that if she chose she could, with her notable beauty, captivate a rich husband without much difficulty. Husbands are only unattainable by the blue-stocking, the flirt and the personally angular.

The rain pelted down in torrents as I walked to Kew Gardens Station, and as it generally happens to the unlucky doctor that calls are made upon him in the most inclement weather, I found, on returning to Harley Place, that Lady Langley, in Hill Street, had sent a message asking me to go round at once. I was therefore compelled to pay the visit, for her ladyship – a snappy old dowager – was a somewhat exacting patient of Sir Bernard's.

She was a fussy old person who believed herself to be much worse than she really was, and it was, therefore, not until past one o'clock that I smoked my final pipe, drained my peg, and retired to bed, full of recollections of my well-beloved.

Just before turning in my man brought me a telegram from Sir Bernard, dispatched from Brighton, regarding a case to be seen on the following day. He was very erratic about telegrams and sent them to me at all hours, therefore it was no extraordinary circumstance. He always preferred telegraphing to writing letters. I read the message, tossed it with its envelope upon the fire, and then retired with a fervent hope that I should at least be allowed to have a complete night's rest. Sir Bernard's patients were, however, of that class who call the doctor at any hour for the slightest attack of indigestion, and summonses at night were consequently very frequent.

I suppose I had been in bed a couple of hours when I was awakened by the electric bell sounding in my man's room, and a few minutes later he entered, saying: —

"There's a man who wants to see you immediately, sir. He says he's from Mr. Courtenay's, down at Kew."

"Mr. Courtenay's!" I echoed, sitting up in bed. "Bring him in here."

A few moments later the caller was shown in.

"Why, Short!" I exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"Matter, doctor," the man stammered. "It's awful, sir!"

"What's awful?"

"My poor master, sir. He's dead – he's been murdered!"

CHAPTER V
DISCLOSES A MYSTERY

The man's amazing announcement held me speechless.

"Murdered!" I cried when I found tongue. "Impossible!"

"Ah! sir, it's too true. He's quite dead."

"But surely he has died from natural causes – eh?"

"No, sir. My poor master has been foully murdered."

"How do you know that?" I asked breathlessly. "Tell me all the facts."

I saw by the man's agitation, his white face, and the hurried manner in which he had evidently dressed to come in search of me, that something tragic had really occurred.

"We know nothing yet, sir," was his quick response. "I entered his room at two o'clock, as usual, to see if he wanted anything, and saw that he was quite still, apparently asleep. The lamp was turned low, but as I looked over the bed I saw a small dark patch upon the sheet. This I discovered to be blood, and a moment later was horrified to discover a small wound close to the heart, and from it the blood was slowly oozing."

"Then he's been stabbed, you think?" I gasped, springing up and beginning to dress myself hastily.

"We think so, sir. It's awful!"

"Terrible!" I said, utterly dumbfounded by the man's amazing story. "After you made the discovery, how did you act?"

"I awoke the nurse, who slept in the room adjoining. And then we aroused Miss Mivart. The shock to her was terrible, poor young lady. When she saw the body of the old gentleman she burst into tears, and at once sent me to you. I didn't find a cab till I'd walked almost to Hammersmith, and then I came straight on here."

"But is there undoubtedly foul play, Short?"

"No doubt whatever, sir. I'm nothing of a doctor, but I could see the wound plainly, like a small clean cut just under the heart."

"No weapon about?"

"I didn't see anything, sir."

"Have you called the police?"

"No, sir. Miss Mivart said she would wait until you arrived. She wants your opinion."

"And Mrs. Courtenay. How does she bear the tragedy?"

"The poor lady doesn't know yet."

"Doesn't know? Haven't you told her?"

"No, sir. She's not at home."

"What? She hasn't returned?"

"No, sir," responded the man.

That fact was in itself peculiar. Yet there was, I felt sure, some strong reason if young Mrs. Courtenay remained the night with her friends, the Hennikers. Trains run to Kew after the theatres, but she had possibly missed the last, and had been induced by her friends to remain the night with them in town.

Yet the whole of the tragic affair was certainly very extraordinary. It was Short's duty to rise at two o'clock each morning and go to his master's room to ascertain if the invalid wanted anything. Generally, however, the old gentleman slept well, hence there had been no necessity for a night nurse.

When I entered the cab, and the man having taken a seat beside me, we had set out on our long night drive to Kew, I endeavoured to obtain more details regarding the Courtenay *ménage*. In

an ordinary way I could scarcely have questioned a servant regarding his master and mistress, but on this drive I saw an occasion to obtain knowledge, and seized it.

Short, although a well-trained servant, was communicative. The shock he had sustained in discovering his master made him so.

After ten years' service he was devoted to his master, but from the remarks he let drop during our drive I detected that he entertained a strong dislike of the old gentleman's young wife. He was, of course, well aware of my affection for Ethelwynn, and carefully concealed his antipathy towards her, an antipathy which I somehow felt convinced existed. He regarded both sisters with equal mistrust.

"Does your mistress often remain in town with her friends at night?"

"Sometimes, when she goes to balls."

"And is that often?"

"Not very often."

"And didn't the old gentleman know of his wife's absence?"

"Sometimes. He used to ask me whether Mrs. Courtenay was at home, and then I was bound to tell the truth."

By his own admission then, this man Short had informed the invalid of his wife's frequent absences. He was an informer, and as such most probably the enemy of both Mary and Ethelwynn. I knew him to be the confidential servant of the old gentleman, but had not before suspected him of tale-telling. Without doubt Mrs. Courtenay's recent neglect had sorely grieved the old gentleman. He doted upon her, indulged her in every whim and fancy and, like many an aged husband who has a smart young wife, dared not to differ from her or complain of any of her actions. There is a deal of truth in the adage, "There's no fool like an old fool."

But the mystery was increasing, and as we drove together down that long interminable high road through Hammersmith to Chiswick, wet, dark and silent at that hour, I reflected that the strange presage of insecurity which had so long oppressed me was actually being fulfilled. Ambler Jevons had laughed at it. But would he laugh now? To-morrow, without doubt, he would be working at the mystery in the interests of justice. To try to keep the affair out of the Press would, I knew too well, be impossible. Those men, in journalistic parlance called "liners," are everywhere, hungry for copy, and always eager to seize upon anything tragic or mysterious.

From Short I gathered a few additional details. Not many, be it said, but sufficient to make it quite clear that he was intensely antagonistic towards his mistress. This struck me as curious, for as far as I had seen she had always treated him with the greatest kindness and consideration, had given him holidays, and to my knowledge had, a few months before, raised his wages of her own accord. Nevertheless, the *ménage* was a strange one, incongruous in every respect.

My chief thoughts were, however, with my love. The shock to her must, I knew, be terrible, especially as Mary was absent and she was alone with the nurse and servants.

When I sprang from the cab and entered the house she met me in the hall. She had dressed hastily and wore a light shawl over her head, probably to conceal her disordered hair, but her face was blanched to the lips.

"Oh, Ralph!" she cried in a trembling voice. "I thought you were never coming. It's terrible – terrible!"

"Come in here," I said, leading her into the dining room. "Tell me all you know of the affair."

"Short discovered him just after two o'clock. He was then quite still."

"But there may be life," I exclaimed suddenly, and leaving her I rushed up the stairs and into the room where the old man had chatted to me so merrily not many hours before.

The instant my gaze fell upon him I knew the truth. Cadaveric rigidity had supervened, and he had long been beyond hope of human aid. His furrowed face was as white as ivory, and his lower jaw had dropped in that manner that unmistakably betrays the presence of death.

As the man had described, the sheet was stained with blood. But there was not much, and I was some moments before I discovered the wound. It was just beneath the heart, cleanly cut, and about three-quarters of an inch long, evidently inflicted by some sharp instrument. He had no doubt been struck in his sleep, and with such precision that he had died without being able to raise the alarm.

The murderer, whoever he was, had carried the weapon away.

I turned and saw Ethelwynn, a pale wan figure in her light gown and shawl, standing on the threshold, watching me intently. She stood there white and trembling, as though fearing to enter the presence of the dead.

I made a hasty tour of the room, examining the window and finding it fastened. As far as I could discover, nothing whatever was disturbed.

Then I went out to her and, closing the door behind me, said —

"Short must go along to the police station. We must report it."

"But is it really necessary?" she asked anxiously. "Think of the awful exposure in the papers. Can't we hush it up? Do, Ralph – for my sake," she implored.

"But I can't give a death certificate when a person has been murdered," I explained. "Before burial there must be a *post-mortem* and an inquest."

"Then you think he has actually been murdered?"

"Of course, without a doubt. It certainly isn't suicide."

The discovery had caused her to become rigid, almost statuesque. Sudden terror often acts thus upon women of her highly nervous temperament. She allowed me to lead her downstairs and back to the dining room. On the way I met Short in the hall, and ordered him to go at once to the police station.

"Now, dearest," I said, taking her hand tenderly in mine when we were alone together with the door closed, "tell me calmly all you know of this awful affair."

"I – I know nothing," she declared. "Nothing except what you already know. Short knocked at my door and I dressed hastily, only to discover that the poor old gentleman was dead."

"Was the house still locked up?"

"I believe so. The servants could, I suppose, tell that."

"But is it not strange that Mary is still absent?" I remarked, perplexed.

"No, not very. Sometimes she has missed her last train and has stopped the night with the Penn-Pagets or the Hennikers. It is difficult, she says, to go to supper after the theatre and catch the last train. It leaves Charing Cross so early."

Again there seemed a distinct inclination on her part to shield her sister.

"The whole thing is a most profound mystery," she went on. "I must have slept quite lightly, for I heard the church clock strike each quarter until one o'clock, yet not an unusual sound reached me. Neither did nurse hear anything."

Nurse Kate was an excellent woman whom I had known at Guy's through several years. Both Sir Bernard and myself had every confidence in her, and she had been the invalid's attendant for the past two years.

"It certainly is a mystery – one which we must leave to the police to investigate. In the meantime, however, we must send Short to Redcliffe Square to find Mary. He must not tell her the truth, but merely say that her husband is much worse. To tell her of the tragedy at once would probably prove too great a blow."

"She ought never to have gone to town and left him," declared my well-beloved in sudden condemnation of her sister's conduct. "She will never forgive herself."

"Regrets will not bring the poor fellow to life again," I said with a sigh. "We must act, and act promptly, in order to discover the identity of the murderer and the motive of the crime. That there is a motive is certain; yet it is indeed strange that anyone should actually kill a man suffering from a disease which, in a few months at most, must prove fatal. The motive was therefore his immediate decease, and that fact will probably greatly assist the police in their investigations."

"But who could have killed him?"

"Ah! that's the mystery. If, as you believe, the house was found to be still secured when the alarm was raised, then it would appear that someone who slept beneath this roof was guilty."

"Oh! Impossible! Remember there are only myself and the servants. You surely don't suspect either of them?"

"I have no suspicion of anyone at present," I answered. "Let the police search the place, and they may discover something which will furnish them with a clue."

I noticed some telegraph-forms in the stationery rack on a small writing-table, and taking one scribbled a couple of lines to Sir Bernard, at Hove, informing him of the mysterious affair. This I folded and placed in my pocket in readiness for the re-opening of the telegraph office at eight o'clock.

Shortly afterwards we heard the wheels of the cab outside, and a few minutes later were joined by a police inspector in uniform and an officer in plain clothes.

In a few brief sentences I explained to them the tragic circumstances, and then led them upstairs to the dead man's room.

After a cursory glance around, they went forth again out upon the landing in order to await the arrival of two other plain-clothes officers who had come round on foot, one of them the sergeant of the Criminal Investigation Department attached to the Kew station. Then, after giving orders to the constable on the beat to station himself at the door and allow no one to enter or leave without permission, the three detectives and the inspector entered the room where the dead man lay.

CHAPTER VI.
IN WHICH I MAKE A DISCOVERY

Having explained who I was, I followed the men in and assisted them in making a careful and minute examination of the place.

Search for the weapon with which the crime had been committed proved fruitless; hence it was plain that the murderer had carried it away. There were no signs whatever of a struggle, and nothing to indicate that the blow had been struck by any burglar with a motive of silencing the prostrate man.

The room was a large front one on the first floor, with two French windows opening upon a balcony formed by the big square portico. Both were found to be secured, not only by the latches, but also by long screws as an extra precaution against thieves, old Mr. Courtenay, like many other elderly people, being extremely nervous of midnight intruders. The bedroom itself was well furnished in genuine Sheraton, which he had brought up from his palatial home in Devonshire, for the old man denied himself no personal comfort. The easy chair in which he had sat when I had paid my visit was still in its place at the fireside, with the footstool just as he had left it; the drawers which we opened one after another showed no sign of having been rummaged, and the sum result of our investigations was absolutely *nil*.

"It looks very much as though someone in the house had done it," whispered the inspector seriously to me, having first glanced at the door to ascertain that it was closed.

"Yes," I admitted, "appearances certainly do point to that."

"Who was the young lady who met us downstairs?" inquired the detective sergeant, producing a small note-book and pencil.

"Miss Ethelwynn Mivart, sister to Mrs. Courtenay."

"And is Mrs. Courtenay at home?" he inquired, making a note of the name.

"No. We have sent for her. She's staying with friends in London."

"Hulloa! There's an iron safe here!" exclaimed one of the men rummaging at the opposite side of the room. He had pulled away a chest of drawers from the wall, revealing what I had never noticed before, the door of a small fireproof safe built into the wall.

"Is it locked?" inquired the inspector.

The man, after trying the knob and examining the keyhole, replied in the affirmative.

"Keeps his deeds and jewellery there, I suppose," remarked one of the other detectives. "He seems to have been very much afraid of burglars. I wonder whether he had any reason for that?"

"Like many old men he was a trifle eccentric," I replied. "Thieves once broke into his country house years ago, I believe, and he therefore entertained a horror of them."

We all examined the keyhole of the safe, but there was certainly no evidence to show that it had been tampered with. On the contrary, the little oval brass plate which closed the hole was rusty, and had not apparently been touched for weeks.

While they were searching in other parts of the room I directed my attention to the position and appearance of my late patient. He was lying on his right side with one arm slightly raised in quite a natural attitude for one sleeping. His features, although the pallor of death was upon them and they were relaxed, showed no sign of suffering. The blow had been unerring, and had no doubt penetrated to the heart. The crime had been committed swiftly, and the murderer had escaped unseen and unheard.

The eider-down quilt, a rich one of Gobelin blue satin, had scarcely been disturbed, and save for the small spot of blood upon the sheet, traces of a terrible crime were in no way apparent.

While, however, I stood at the bedside, at the same spot most probably where the murderer had stood, I suddenly felt something uneven between the sole of my boot and the carpet. So intent was I

upon the examination I was making that at first my attention was not attracted by it, but on stepping on it a second time I looked down and saw something white, which I quickly picked up.

The instant I saw it I closed my hand and hid it from view.

Then I glanced furtively around, and seeing that my action had been unobserved I quickly transferred it to my vest pocket, covering the movement by taking out my watch to glance at it.

I confess that my heart beat quickly, and in all probability the colour at that moment had left my face, for I had, by sheer accident, discovered a clue.

To examine it there was impossible, for of such a character was it that I had no intention, as yet, to arouse the suspicions of the police. I intended at the earliest moment to apprise my friend, Ambler Jevons, of the facts and with him pursue an entirely independent inquiry.

Scarcely had I safely pocketed the little object I had picked up from where the murderer must have stood when the inspector went out upon the landing and called to the constable in the hall:

"Four-sixty-two, lock that door and come up here a moment."

"Yes, sir," answered a gruff voice from below, and in a few moments the constable entered, closing the door after him.

"How many times have you passed this house on your beat to-night, four-sixty-two?" inquired the inspector.

"About eight, sir. My beat's along the Richmond Road, from the Lion Gate down to the museum, and then around the back streets."

"Saw nothing?"

"I saw a man come out of this house hurriedly, soon after I came on duty. I was standing on the opposite side, under the wall of the Gardens. The lady what's downstairs let him out and told him to fetch the doctor quickly."

"Ah! Short, the servant," I observed.

"Where is he?" asked the inspector, while the detective with the ready note-book scribbled down the name.

"He came to fetch me, and Miss Mivart has now sent him to fetch her sister. He was the first to make the discovery."

"Oh, was he?" exclaimed the detective-sergeant, with some suspicion. "It's rather a pity that he's been sent out again. He might be able to tell us something."

"He'll be back in an hour, I should think."

"Yes, but every hour is of consequence in a matter of this sort," remarked the sergeant. "Look here, Davidson," he added, turning to one of the plain-clothes men, "just go round to the station and send a wire to the Yard, asking for extra assistance. Give them a brief outline of the case. They'll probably send down Franks or Moreland. If I'm not mistaken, there's a good deal more in this mystery than meets the eye."

The man addressed obeyed promptly, and left.

"What do you know of the servants here?" asked the inspector of the constable.

"Not much, sir. Six-forty-eight walks out with the cook, I've heard. She's a respectable woman. Her father's a lighterman at Kew Bridge. I know 'em all here by sight, of course. But there's nothing against them, to my knowledge, and I've been a constable in this sub-division for eighteen years."

"The man – what's his name? – Short. Do you know him?"

"Yes, sir. I've often seen him in the 'Star and Garter' at Kew Bridge."

"Drinks?"

"Not much, sir. He was fined over at Brentford six months ago for letting a dog go unmuzzled. His greatest friend is one of the gardeners at the Palace – a man named Burford, a most respectable fellow."

"Then there's no suspicion of anyone as yet?" remarked the inspector, with an air of dissatisfaction. In criminal mysteries the police often bungle from the outset, and to me it appeared as though, having no clue, they were bent on manufacturing one.

I felt in my vest pocket and touched the little object with a feeling of secret satisfaction. How I longed to be alone for five minutes in order to investigate it!

The inspector, having dismissed the constable and sent him back to his post to unlock the door for the detective to pass out, next turned his attention to the servants and the remainder of the house. With that object we all descended to the dining-room.

Ethelwynn met us at the foot of the stairs, still wearing the shawl about her head and shoulders. She placed a trembling hand upon my arm as I passed, asking in a low anxious voice:

"Have you found anything, Ralph? Tell me."

"No, nothing," I replied, and then passed into the dining-room, where the nurse and domestics had been assembled.

The nurse, a plain matter-of-fact woman, was the first person to be questioned. She explained to us how she had given her patient his last dose of medicine at half-past eleven, just after Miss Mivart had wished her good-night and retired to her room. Previously she had been down in the drawing-room chatting with the young lady. The man Short was then upstairs with his master.

"Was the deceased gentleman aware of his wife's absence?" the inspector asked presently.

"Yes. He remarked to me that it was time she returned. I presume that Short had told him."

"What time was this?"

"Oh! about half-past ten, I should think," replied Nurse Kate. "He said something about it being a bad night to go out to a theatre, and hoped she would not take cold."

"He was not angry?"

"Not in the least. He was never angry when she went to town. He used to say to me, 'My wife's a young woman, nurse. She wants a little amusement sometimes, and I'm sure I don't begrudge it to her.'"

This puzzled me quite as much as it puzzled the detective. I had certainly been under the impression that husband and wife had quarrelled over the latter's frequent absences from home. Indeed, in a household where the wife is young and the husband elderly, quarrels of that character are almost sure to occur sooner or later. As a doctor I knew the causes of domestic infelicity in a good many homes. Men in my profession see a good deal, and hear more. Every doctor could unfold strange tales of queer households if he were not debarred by the bond of professional secrecy.

"You heard no noise during the night?" inquired the inspector.

"None. I'm a light sleeper as a rule, and wake at the slightest sound," the woman replied. "But I heard absolutely nothing."

"Anyone, in order to enter the dead man's room, must have passed your door, I think?"

"Yes, and what's more, the light was burning and my door was ajar. I always kept it so in order to hear if my patient wanted anything."

"Then the murderer could see you as he stood on the landing?"

"No. There's a screen at the end of my bed. He could not see far into the room. But I shudder to think that to-night I've had an assassin a dozen feet from me while I slept," she added.

Finding that she could throw no light upon the mysterious affair, the officer turned his attention to the four frightened domestics, each in turn.

All, save one, declared that they heard not a single sound. The one exception was Alice, the under housemaid, a young fair-haired girl, who stated that during the night she had distinctly heard a sound like the low creaking of light shoes on the landing below where they slept.

This first aroused our interest, but on full reflection it seemed so utterly improbable that an assassin would wear a pair of creaky boots when on such an errand that we were inclined to disregard

the girl's statement as a piece of imagination. The feminine mind is much given to fiction on occasions of tragic events.

But the girl over and over again asserted that she had heard it. She slept alone in a small room at the top of the second flight of stairs and had heard the sound quite distinctly.

"When you heard it what did you do?"

"I lay and listened."

"For how long?"

"Oh, quite a quarter of an hour, I should think. It was just before half-past one when I heard the noise, for the church clock struck almost immediately afterwards. The sound of the movement was such as I had never before heard at night, and at first I felt frightened. But I always lock my door, therefore I felt secure. The noise was just like someone creeping along very slowly, with one boot creaking."

"But if it was so loud that you could hear it with your door closed, it is strange that no one else heard it," the detective-sergeant remarked dubiously.

"I don't care what anybody else heard, I heard it quite plainly," the girl asserted.

"How long did it continue?" asked the detective.

"Oh, only just as though someone was stealing along the corridor. We often hear movements at nights, because Short is always astir at two o'clock, giving the master his medicine. If it hadn't ha' been for the creaking I should not have taken notice of it. But I lay quite wide awake for over half an hour – until Short came banging at our doors, telling us to get up at once, as we were wanted downstairs."

"Well," exclaimed the inspector, "now, I want to ask all of you a very simple question, and wish to obtain an honest and truthful reply. Was any door or window left unfastened when you went to bed?"

"No, sir," the cook replied promptly. "I always go round myself, and see that everything is fastened."

"The front door, for example?"

"I bolted it at Miss Ethelwynn's orders."

"At what time?"

"One o'clock. She told me to wait up till then, and if mistress did not return I was to lock up and go to bed."

"Then the tragedy must have been enacted about half an hour later?"

"I think so, sir."

"You haven't examined the doors and windows to see if any have been forced?"

"As far as I can see, they are just as I left them when I went to bed, sir."

"That's strange – very strange," remarked the inspector, turning to us. "We must make an examination and satisfy ourselves."

The point was one that was most important in the conduct of the inquiry. If all doors and windows were still locked, then the assassin was one of that strange household.

Led by the cook, the officers began a round of the lower premises. One of the detectives borrowed the constable's bull's-eye and, accompanied by a second officer, went outside to make an examination of the window sashes, while we remained inside assisting them in their search for any marks.

Ethelwynn had been called aside by one of the detectives, and was answering some questions addressed to her, therefore for an instant I found myself alone. It was the moment I had been waiting for, to secretly examine the clue I had obtained.

I was near the door of the morning room, and for a second slipped inside and switched on the electric light.

Then I took from my vest pocket the tiny little object I had found and carefully examined it.

My heart stood still. My eyes riveted themselves upon it. The mystery was solved.

I alone knew the truth!

CHAPTER VII.
THE MAN SHORT AND HIS STORY

A light footstep sounded behind me, and scarcely had I time to thrust the little object hastily back into my pocket when my well-beloved entered in search of me.

"What do the police think, Ralph?" she asked eagerly. "Have they any clue? Do tell me."

"They have no clue," I answered, in a voice which I fear sounded hard and somewhat abrupt.

Then I turned from her, as though fully occupied with the investigations at which I was assisting, and went past her, leaving her standing alone.

The police were busy examining the doors and windows of the back premises, kitchens, scullery, and pantry, but could find no evidence of any lock or fastening having been tampered with. The house, I must explain, was a large detached red brick one, standing in a lawn that was quite spacious for a suburban house, and around it ran an asphalte path which diverged from the right hand corner of the building and ran in two parts to the road, one a semi-circular drive which came up to the portico from the road, and the other, a tradesmen's path, that ran to the opposite extremity of the property.

From the back kitchen a door led out upon this asphalted tradesmen's path, and as I rejoined the searchers some discussion was in progress as to whether the door in question had been secured. The detective-sergeant had found it unbolted and unlocked, but the cook most positively asserted that she had both locked and bolted it at half-past ten, when the under housemaid had come in from her "evening out." None of the servants, however, recollected having undone the door either before the alarm or after. Perhaps Short had done so, but he was absent, in search of the dead man's widow.

The police certainly spared no pains in their search. They turned the whole place upside down. One man on his hands and knees, and carrying a candle, carefully examined the blue stair-carpet to see if he could find the marks of unusual feet. It was wet outside, and if an intruder had been there, there would probably remain marks of muddy feet. He found many, but they were those of the constable and detectives. Hence the point was beyond solution.

The drawing-room, the dining-room, the morning-room, and the big conservatory were all closely inspected, but without any satisfactory result. My love followed us everywhere, white-faced and nervous, with the cream chenille shawl still over her shoulders. She had hastily put up her wealth of dark hair, and now wore the shawl wrapped lightly about her.

That shawl attracted me. I managed to speak with her alone for a moment, asking her quite an unimportant question, but nevertheless with a distinct object. As we stood there I placed my hand upon her shoulder – and upon the shawl. It was for that very reason – in order to feel the texture of the silk – that I returned to her.

The contact of my hand with the silk was convincing. I turned from her once again, and rejoined the shrewd men whose object it was to fasten the guilt upon the assassin.

Presently we heard the welcome sound of cab wheels outside, and a few minutes later young Mrs. Courtenay, wild eyed and breathless, rushed into the hall and dashed headlong up the stairs. I, however, barred her passage.

"Let me pass!" she cried wildly. "Short has told me he is worse and has asked for me. Let me pass!"

"No, Mary, not so quickly. Let me tell you something," I answered gravely, placing my hand firmly upon her arm. The police were again re-examining the back premises below, and only Ethelwynn was present at the top of the stairs, where I arrested her progress to the dead man's room.

"But is there danger?" she demanded anxiously. "Tell me."

"The crisis is over," I responded ambiguously. "But is not your absence to-night rather unusual?"

"It was entirely my own fault," she admitted. "I shall never forgive myself for this neglect. After the theatre we had supper at the Savoy, and I lost my last train. Dolly Henniker, of course, asked me to stay, and I could not refuse." Then glancing from my face to that of her sister she asked: "Why do you both look so strange? Tell me," she shrieked. "Tell me the worst. Is he – is he *dead*?"

I nodded in the affirmative.

For a second she stood dumb, then gave vent to a long wail, and would have fallen senseless if I had not caught her in my arms and laid her back upon the long settee placed in an alcove on the landing. She, like all the others, had dressed hurriedly. Her hair was dishevelled beneath her hat, but her disordered dress was concealed by her long ulster heavily lined with silver fox, a magnificent garment which her doting husband had purchased through a friend at Moscow, and presented to her as a birthday gift.

From her manner it was only too plain that she was filled with remorse. I really pitied her, for she was a light-hearted, flighty, little woman who loved gaiety, and, without an evil thought, had no doubt allowed her friends to draw her into that round of amusement. They sympathised with her – as every woman who marries an old man is sympathised with – and they gave her what pleasures they could. Alas! that such a clanship between women so often proves fatal to domestic happiness. Judged from a logical point of view it was merely natural that young Mrs. Courtenay should, after a year or two with an invalid husband, aged and eccentric, beat her wings against the bars. She was a pretty woman, almost as pretty as her sister, but two years older, with fair hair, blue eyes, and a pink and white, almost doll-like complexion. Indeed, I knew quite well that she had long had a host of admirers, and that just prior to her marriage with Courtenay it had been rumoured that she was to marry the heir to an earldom, a rather rakish young cavalry officer up at York.

To restore her to consciousness was not a difficult matter, but after she had requested me to tell her the whole of the ghastly truth she sat speechless, as though turned to stone.

Her manner was unaccountable. She spoke at last, and to me it seemed as though the fainting fit had caused her an utter loss of memory. She uttered words at random, allowing her tongue to ramble on in strange disjointed sentences, of which I could make nothing.

"My head! Oh! my head!" she kept on exclaiming, passing her hand across her brow as though to clear her brain.

"Does it pain you?" I inquired.

"It seems as though a band of iron were round it. I can't think. I – I can't remember!" And she glanced about her helplessly, her eyes with a wild strange look in them, her face so haggard and drawn that it gave her a look of premature age.

"Oh! Mary, dear!" cried Ethelwynn, taking both her cold hands. "Why, what's the matter? Calm yourself, dear." Then turning to me she asked, "Can nothing be done, Ralph? See – she's not herself. The shock has unbalanced her brain."

"Ralph! Ethelwynn!" gasped the unfortunate woman, looking at us with an expression of sudden wonder. "What has happened? Did I understand you aright? Poor Henry is dead?"

"Unfortunately that is the truth." I was compelled to reply. "It is a sad affair, Mary, and you have all our sympathy. But recollect he was an invalid, and for a long time his life has been despaired of."

I dared not yet tell her the terrible truth that he had been the victim of foul play.

"It is my fault!" she cried. "My place was here – at home. But – but why was I not here?" she added with a blank look. "Where did I go?"

"Don't you remember that you went to London with the Hennikers?" I said.

"Ah! of course!" she exclaimed. "How very stupid of me to forget. But do you know, I've never experienced such a strange sensation before. My memory is a perfect blank. How did I return here?"

"Short fetched you in a cab."

"Short? I – I don't recollect seeing him. Somebody knocked at my door and said I was wanted, because my husband had been taken worse, so I dressed and went down. But after that I don't recollect anything."

"Her mind is a trifle affected by the shock," I whispered to my love. "Best take her downstairs into one of the rooms and lock the door. Don't let her see the police. She didn't notice the constable at the door. She'll be better presently."

I uttered these words mechanically, but, truth to tell, these extraordinary symptoms alarmed and puzzled me. She had fainted at hearing of the death of her husband, just as many other wives might have fainted; but to me there seemed no reason whatsoever why the swoon should be followed by that curious lapse of memory. The question she had put to me showed her mind to be a blank. I could discern nothing to account for the symptoms, and the only remedy I could suggest was perfect quiet. I intended that, as soon as daylight came, both women should be removed to the house of some friend in the vicinity.

The scene of the tragedy was no place for two delicate women.

Notwithstanding Mrs. Courtenay's determination to enter her husband's room I managed at last to get them both into the morning-room and called the nurse and cook to go in and assist in calming her, for her lapse of memory had suddenly been followed by a fit of violence.

"I must see him!" she shrieked. "I will see him! You can't prevent me. I am his wife. My place is at his side!"

My love exchanged looks with me. Her sister's extraordinary manner utterly confounded us.

"You shall see him later," I promised, endeavouring to calm her. "At present remain quiet. No good can possibly be done by this wild conduct."

"Where is Sir Bernard?" she inquired suddenly. "Have you telegraphed for him? I must see him."

"As soon as the office is open I shall wire."

"Yes, telegraph at the earliest moment. Tell him of the awful blow that has fallen upon us."

Presently, by dint of much persuasion, we managed to quiet her. The nurse removed her hat, helped her out of her fur-lined coat, and she sat huddled up in a big "grandfather" chair, her handsome evening gown crushed and tumbled, the flowers she had worn in her corsage on the previous night drooping and withered.

For some time she sat motionless, her chin sunk upon her breast, the picture of dejection, until, of a sudden, she roused herself, and before we were aware of her intention she had torn off her marriage ring and cast it across the room, crying wildly:

"It is finished. He is dead – dead!"

And she sank back again, among the cushions, as though exhausted by the effort.

What was passing through her brain at that moment I wondered. Why should a repulsion of the marriage bond seize her so suddenly, and cause her to tear off the golden fetter under which she had so long chafed? There was some reason, without a doubt; but at present all was an enigma – all save one single point.

When I returned to the police to urge them not to disturb Mrs. Courtenay, I found them assembled in the conservatory discussing an open window, by which anyone might easily have entered and left. The mystery of the kitchen door had been cleared up by Short, who admitted that after the discovery he had unlocked and unbolted it, in order to go round the outside of the house and see whether anyone was lurking in the garden.

When I was told this story I remarked that he had displayed some bravery in acting in such a manner. No man cares to face an assassin unarmed.

The man looked across at me with a curious apprehensive glance, and replied:

"I was armed, sir. I took down one of the old Indian daggers from the hall."

"Where is it now?" inquired the inspector, quickly, for at such a moment the admission that he had had a knife in his possession was sufficient to arouse a strong suspicion.

"I hung it up again, sir, before going out to call the doctor," he replied quite calmly.

"Show me which it was," I said; and he accompanied me out to the hall and pointed to a long thin knife which formed part of a trophy of antique Indian weapons.

In an instant I saw that such a knife had undoubtedly inflicted the wound in the dead man's breast.

"So you armed yourself with this?" I remarked, taking down the knife with affected carelessness, and examining it.

"Yes, doctor. It was the first thing that came to hand. It's sharp, for I cut myself once when cleaning it."

I tried its edge, and found it almost as keen as a razor. It was about ten inches long, and not more than half an inch broad, with a hilt of carved ivory, yellow with age, and inlaid with fine lines of silver. Certainly a very dangerous weapon. The sheath was of purple velvet, very worn and faded.

I walked back to where the detectives were standing, and examined the blade beneath the light. It was bright, and had apparently been recently cleaned. It might have been cleaned and oil smeared upon it after the commission of the crime. Yet as far as I could discern with the naked eye there was no evidence that it had recently been used.

It was the man's curious apprehensive glance that had first aroused my suspicion, and the admissions that he had opened the back door, and that he had been armed, both increased my mistrust. The detectives, too, were interested in the weapon, but were soon satisfied that, although a dangerous knife, it bore no stain of blood.

So I put it back in its case and replaced it. But I experienced some difficulty in getting the loop of wire back upon the brass-headed nail from which it was suspended; and it then occurred to me that Short, in the excitement of the discovery, and ordered by Ethelwynn to go at once in search of me, would not without some motive remain there, striving to return the knife to its place. Such action was unnatural. He would probably have cast it aside and dashed out in search of a cab. Indeed, the constable on the beat had seen him rush forth hurriedly and, urged by Ethelwynn, run in the direction of Kew Bridge.

No. Somehow I could not rid myself of the suspicion that the man was lying. To my professional eye the weapon with which the wound had been inflicted was the one which he admitted had been in his possession.

The story that he had unlocked the door and gone in search of the assassin struck the inspector, as it did myself, as a distinctly lame tale.

I longed for the opening of the telegraph office, so that I might summon my friend Jevons to my aid. He revelled in mysteries, and if the present one admitted of solution I felt confident that he would solve it.

CHAPTER VIII.
AMBLER JEVONS IS INQUISITIVE

People were about me the whole time. Hence I had no opportunity of re-examining the little object I had picked up from the spot where the murderer must have stood.

When morning dawned two detectives from Scotland Yard arrived, made notes of the circumstances, examined the open window in the conservatory, hazarded a few wise remarks, and closely scrutinised the dagger in the hall.

Ethelwynn had taken her sister to a friend in the vicinity, accompanied by the nurse and the cook. The house was now in the possession of the police, and it had already become known in the neighbourhood that old Mr. Courtenay was dead. In all probability early passers-by, men on their way to work, had noticed a constable in uniform enter or leave, and that had excited public curiosity. I hoped that Ambler Jevons would not delay, for I intended that he should be first in the field. If ever he had had a good mystery before him this certainly was one. I knew how keen was his scent for clues, and how carefully and ingeniously he worked when assisting the police to get at the bottom of any such affair.

He came a little after nine in hot haste, having driven from Hammersmith in a hansom. I was upstairs when I heard his deep cheery voice crying to the inspector from Scotland Yard:

"Hulloa, Thorpe. What's occurred? My friend Doctor Boyd has just wired to me."

"Murder," responded the inspector. "You'll find the doctor somewhere about. He'll explain it all to you. Queer case – very queer case, sir, it seems."

"Is that you, Ambler?" I called over the banisters. "Come up here."

He came up breathlessly, two steps at a time, and gripping my hand, asked:

"Who's been murdered?"

"Old Mr. Courtenay."

"The devil!" he ejaculated.

"A most mysterious affair," I went on. "They called me soon after three, and I came down here, only to find the poor old gentleman stone dead – stabbed to the heart."

"Let me see him," my friend said in a sharp business-like tone, which showed that he intended to lose no time in sifting the matter. He had his own peculiar methods of getting at the bottom of a mystery. He worked independently, and although he assisted the police and was therefore always welcomed by them, his efforts were always apart, and generally marked by cunning ingenuity and swift logical reasoning that were alike remarkable and marvellous.

I gave him a brief terse outline of the tragedy, and then, unlocking the door of the room where the dead man still lay in the same position as when discovered, allowed him in.

The place was in darkness, so I drew up the Venetian blinds, letting in the grey depressing light of the wintry morning.

He advanced to the bed, stood in the exact spot where I had stood, and where without doubt the murderer had stood, and folding his arms gazed straight and long upon the dead man's features.

Then he gave vent to a kind of dissatisfied grunt, and turned down the coverlet in order to examine the wound, while I stood by his side in silence.

Suddenly he swung round on his heel, and measured the paces between the bed and the door. Then he went to the window and looked out; afterwards making a tour of the room slowly, his dark eyes searching everywhere. He did not open his lips in the presence of the dead. He only examined everything, swiftly and yet carefully, opening the door slowly and closing it just as slowly, in order to see whether it creaked or not.

It creaked when closed very slowly. The creaking was evidently what the under-housemaid had heard and believed to be the creaking of boots. The murderer, finding that it creaked, had probably

closed it by degrees; hence it gave a series of creaks, which to the girl had sounded in the silence of the night like those of new boots.

Ambler Jevons had, almost at the opening of his inquiry, cleared up one point which had puzzled us.

When he had concluded his examination of the room and re-covered the dead face with the sheet, we emerged into the corridor. Then I told him of the servant's statement.

"Boots!" he echoed in a tone of impatience. "Would a murderer wear creaking boots? It was the door, of course. It opens noiselessly, but when closed quietly it creaks. Curious, however, that he should have risked the creaking and the awakening of the household in order to close it. He had some strong motive in doing so."

"He evidently had a motive in the crime," I remarked. "If we could only discover it, we might perhaps fix upon the assassin."

"Yes," he exclaimed, thoughtfully. "But to tell the truth, Ralph, old chap, the fact which is puzzling me most of all at this moment is that extraordinary foreboding of evil which you confessed to me the day before yesterday. You had your suspicions aroused, somehow. Cudgel your brains, and think what induced that very curious presage of evil."

"I've tried and tried over again, but I can fix on nothing. Only yesterday afternoon, when Sir Bernard incidentally mentioned old Mr. Courtenay, it suddenly occurred to me that the curious excitement within me had some connection with him. Of course he was a patient, and I may have studied his case and given a lot of thought to it, but that wouldn't account for such an oppression as that from which I've been suffering."

"You certainly did have the blues badly the night before last," he said frankly. "And by some unaccountable manner your curious feeling was an intuition of this tragic occurrence. Very odd and mysterious, to say the least."

"Uncanny, I call it," I declared.

"Yes, I agree with you," he answered. "It is an uncanny affair altogether. Tell me about the ladies. Where are they?"

I explained how Mrs. Courtenay had been absent, and how she had been prostrated by the news of his death.

He stroked his moustache slowly, deeply reflecting.

"Then at present she doesn't know that he's been murdered? She thinks that he was taken ill, and expired suddenly?"

"Exactly."

And I went on to describe the wild scene which followed my admission that her husband was dead. I explained it to him in detail, for I saw that his thoughts were following in the same channel as my own. We both pitied the unfortunate woman. My friend knew her well, for he had often accompanied me there and had spent the evening with us. Ethelwynn liked him for his careless Bohemianism, and for the fund of stories always at his command. Sometimes he used to entertain us for hours together, relating details of mysteries upon which he had at one time or another been engaged. Women are always fond of mysteries, and he often held both of them breathless by his vivid narratives.

Thorpe, the detective from Scotland Yard, a big, sturdily-built, middle-aged man, whose hair was tinged with grey, and whose round, rosy face made him appear the picture of good health, joined us a moment later. In a low, mysterious tone he explained to my friend the circumstance of Short having admitted possession of the knife hanging in the hall.

In it Ambler Jevons at once scented a clue.

"I never liked that fellow!" he exclaimed, turning to me. "My impression has always been that he was a sneak, and told old Courtenay everything that went on, either in drawing-room or kitchen."

Thorpe, continuing, explained how the back door had been found unfastened, and how Short had admitted unfastening it in order to go forth to seek the assassin.

"A ridiculous story – utterly absurd!" declared Jevons. "A man doesn't rush out to shed blood for blood like that!"

"Of course not," agreed the detective. "To my mind appearances are entirely against this fellow. Yet, we have one fact to bear in mind, namely, that being sent to town twice he was afforded every opportunity for escape."

"He was artful," I remarked. "He knew that his safest plan was to remain and face it. If, as seems very probable, the crime was planned, it was certainly carried out at a most propitious moment."

"It certainly was," observed my friend, carefully scrutinising the knife, which Thorpe had brought to him. "This," he said, "must be examined microscopically. You can do that, Boyd. It will be easy to see if there are any traces of blood upon it. To all appearances it has been recently cleaned and oiled."

"Short admits cleaning it, but he says he did so three days ago," I exclaimed.

He gave vent to another low grunt, from which I knew that the explanation was unsatisfactory, and replaced the knife in its faded velvet sheath.

Save for the man upon whom suspicion had thus fallen, the servants had all gone to the house where their mistress was lodged, after being cautioned by the police to say nothing of the matter, and to keep their mouths closed to all the reporters who would no doubt very soon be swarming into the district eager for every scrap of information. Their evidence would be required at the inquest, and the police forbade them, until then, to make any comment, or to give any explanation of the mysterious affair. The tongues of domestics wag quickly and wildly in such cases, and have many times been the means of defeating the ends of justice by giving away important clues to the Press.

Ambler Jevons, however, was a practised hand at mysteries. He sat down in the library, and with his crabbed handwriting covered two sheets of paper with notes upon the case. I watched as his pencil went swiftly to work, and when he had finished I saw him underline certain words he had written.

"Thorpe appears to suspect that fellow Short," he remarked, when I met him again in the library a quarter of an hour later. "I've just been chatting with him, and to me his demeanour is not that of a guilty man. He's actually been upstairs with the coroner's officer in the dead man's room. A murderer generally excuses himself from entering the presence of his victim."

"Well," I exclaimed, after a pause, "you know the whole circumstances now. Can you see any clue which may throw light on the affair?"

He slowly twisted his moustache again; then twisted his plain gold ring slowly round the little finger on the left hand – a habit of his when perplexed.

"No, Ralph, old chap; can't say I do," he answered. "There's an unfathomable mystery somewhere, but in what direction I'm utterly at a loss to distinguish."

"But do you think that the assassin is a member of the household? That seems to me our first point to clear up."

"That's just where we're perplexed. Thorpe suspects Short; but the police so often rush to conclusions on a single suspicion. Before condemning him it is necessary to watch him narrowly, and note his demeanour and his movements. If he is guilty he'll betray himself sooner or later. Thorpe was foolish to take down that knife a second time. The fellow might have seen him and had his suspicions aroused thereby. That's the worst of police inquiries. They display so little ingenuity. It is all method – method – method. Everything must be done by rule. They appear to overlook the fact that a window in the conservatory was undoubtedly left open," he added.

"Well?" I asked, noticing that he was gazing at me strangely, full in the face.

"Well, has it not occurred to you that that window might have been purposely left open?"

"You mean that the assassin entered and left by that window?"

"I mean to suggest that the murder might have been connived at by one of the household, if the man we suspect were not the actual assassin himself."

The theory was a curious one, but I saw that there were considerable grounds for it. As in many suburban houses, the conservatory joined the drawing-room, an unlocked glass door being between them. The window that had been left unfastened was situated at the further end, and being low down was in such a position that any intruder might easily have entered and left. Therefore the suggestion appeared a sound one – more especially so because the cook had most solemnly declared that she had fastened it securely before going up to bed.

In that case someone must have crept down and unfastened it after the woman had retired, and done so with the object of assisting the assassin.

But Ambler Jevons was not a man to remain idle for a single moment when once he became interested in a mystery. To his keen perception and calm logical reasoning had been due the solution of "The Mornington Crescent Mystery," which, as all readers of this narrative will remember, for six months utterly perplexed Scotland Yard; while in a dozen other notable cases his discoveries had placed the police on the scent of the guilty person. Somehow he seemed to possess a peculiar facility in the solving of enigmas. At ordinary times he struck one as a rather careless, easy-going man, who drifted on through life, tasting and dealing in tea, with regular attendance at Mark Lane each day. Sometimes he wore a pair of cheap pince-nez, the frames of which were rusty, but these he seldom assumed unless he was what he termed "at work." He was at work now, and therefore had stuck the pince-nez on the bridge of his nose, giving him a keener and rather more intelligent appearance.

"Excuse me," he exclaimed, suddenly twisting his ring again round his finger. "I've just thought of something else. I won't be a moment," and he rushed from the library and ran upstairs to the floor above.

His absence gave me an opportunity to re-examine the little object which I had picked up from the floor at the earlier stages of the inquiry; and advancing to the window I took it from my pocket and looked again at it, utterly confounded.

Its appearance presented nothing extraordinary, for it was merely a soft piece of hard-knotted cream-coloured chenille about half-an-inch long. But sight of it lying in the palm of my hand held me spellbound in horror.

It told me the awful truth. It was nothing less than a portion of the fringe of the cream shawl which my love had been wearing, and just as chenille fringes will come to pieces, it had become detached and fallen where she had stood at that spot beside the victim's bed.

There was a smear of blood upon it.

I recollected her strangely nervous manner, her anxiety to ascertain what clue we had discovered and to know the opinion of the police. Yes, if guilt were ever written upon a woman's face, it was upon hers.

Should I show the tiny fragment to my friend? Should I put it into his hands and tell him the bitter truth – the truth that I believed my love to be a murderess?

CHAPTER IX.
SHADOWS

The revelation held me utterly dumfounded.

Already I had, by placing my hand in contact with the shawl, ascertained its exact texture, and saw that both its tint and its fabric were unquestionably the same as the knotted fragment I held in my hand. Chenille shawls, as every woman knows, must be handled carefully or the lightly-made fringe will come asunder; for the kind of cord of floss silk is generally made upon a single thread, which will break with the slightest strain.

By some means the shawl in question had accidentally become entangled – or perhaps been strained by the sudden uplifting of the arm of the wearer. In any case the little innocent-looking fragment had snapped, and dropped at the bedside of the murdered man.

The grave suspicions of Ethelwynn which I had held on the previous night when she endeavoured to justify her sister's neglect again crowded upon me, and Sir Bernard's hint at the secret of her past thrust the iron deeply into my heart.

My eyes were fixed upon the little object in my palm – the silent but damning evidence – and my mind became filled by bitterest regrets. I saw how cleverly I had been duped – I recognised that this woman, whom I thought an angel, was only a cunning assassin.

No, believe me: I was not prejudging her! The thought had already occurred to me that she might have entered the room wearing that shawl perhaps to wish the invalid good-night. She had, however, in answer to my question, declared that she had retired to bed without seeing him – for Nurse Kate had told her that he was sleeping. She had therefore not disturbed him.

Then, yet another thought had occurred to me. She might have worn the shawl when she entered after the raising of the alarm. In order to clear up that point I had questioned the servants, one by one, and all had told me the same story, namely, that Miss Ethelwynn had not entered the room at all. She had only come to the door and glanced in, then turned away in horror and shut herself in her own room. As far as anyone knew, she had not summoned sufficient courage to go in and look upon the dead man's face. She declared herself horrified, and dared not to enter the death chamber.

In the light of my discovery all these facts as related to me made the truth only too apparent. She had entered there unknown to anyone, and that her presence had been with a fell purpose I could no longer doubt.

If I gave the clue into Ambler Jevons' hands he would, I knew, quickly follow it, gathering up the threads of the tangled skein one by one, until he could openly charge her with the crime. I stood undecided how to act. Should I leave my friend to make his own investigations independently and unbiassed, or should I frankly tell him of my own startling discovery?

I carefully went through the whole of the circumstances, weighing point after point, and decided at last to still retain the knowledge I had gained. The point which outbalanced my intention was that curious admission of Short regarding the possession of the knife. So I resolved to say nothing to my friend until after the inquest.

As may be imagined, the London papers that afternoon were full of the mystery. Nothing like a first-class "sensation," sub-editors will tell you. There is art in alliterative headlines and startling "cross-heads." The inevitable interview with "a member of the family" – who is generally anonymous, be it said – is sure to be eagerly devoured by the public. The world may sneer at sensational journalism, but after all it loves to have its curiosity excited over the tragic dénouement of some domestic secret. As soon as the first information reached the Central News and Press Association, therefore, reporters crowded upon us. Representatives, not only of the metropolitan press, but those of the local newspapers, the "Richmond and Twickenham Times," the "Independent," over at Brentford,

the "Middlesex Chronicle" at Hounslow, and the "Middlesex Mercury," of Isleworth, all vied with each other in obtaining the most accurate information.

"Say nothing," Jevons urged. "Be civil, but keep your mouth closed tight. There are one or two friends of mine among the crowd. I'll see them and give them something that will carry the story further. Remember, you mustn't make any statement whatsoever."

I obeyed him, and although the reporters followed me about all the morning, and outside the house the police had difficulty in preventing a crowd assembling, I refused to express any opinion or describe anything I had witnessed.

At eleven o'clock I received a wire from Sir Bernard at Hove as follows: —

"Much shocked at news. Unfortunately very unwell, but shall endeavour to be with you later in the day."

At mid-day I called at the neighbour's house close to Kew Gardens Station, where the widow and her sister had taken refuge. Mrs. Courtenay was utterly broken down, for Ethelwynn had told her the terrible truth that her husband had been murdered, and both women pounced upon me eagerly to ascertain what theory the police now held.

I looked at the woman who had held me so long beneath her spell. Was it possible that one so open-faced and pure could be the author of so dastardly and cowardly a crime? Her face was white and anxious, but the countenance had now reassumed its normal innocence of expression, and in her eyes I saw the genuine love-look of old. She had arranged her hair and dress, and no longer wore the shawl.

"It's terrible – terrible, Ralph," she cried. "Poor Mary! The blow has utterly crushed her."

"I am to blame – it is my own fault!" exclaimed the young widow, hoarsely. "But I had no idea that his end was so near. I tried to be a dutiful wife, but oh – only Ethelwynn knows how hard it was, and how I suffered. His malady made him unbearable, and instead of quarrelling I thought the better plan was to go out and leave him with the nurse. What people have always said, was, alas! too true. Owing to the difference of our ages our marriage was a ghastly failure. And now it has ended in a tragedy."

I responded in words as sympathetic as I could find tongue to utter. Her eyes were red with crying, and her pretty face was swollen and ugly. I knew that she now felt a genuine regret at the loss of her husband, even though her life had been so dull and unhappy.

While she sat in a big armchair bowed in silence, I turned to Ethelwynn and discussed the situation with her. Their friends were most kind, she said. The husband was churchwarden at Kew Church, and his wife was an ardent church worker, hence they had long ago become excellent friends.

"You have your friend, Mr. Jevons, with you, I hear. Nurse has just returned and told me so."

"Yes," I responded. "He is making an independent inquiry."

"And what has he found?" she inquired breathlessly.

"Nothing."

Then, as I watched her closely, I saw that she breathed again more freely. By the manner in which she uttered Ambler's name I detected that she was not at all well-disposed towards him. Indeed, she spoke as though she feared that he might discover the truth.

After half-an-hour I left, and more puzzled than ever, returned to the house in Richmond Road. Sometimes I felt entirely convinced that my love was authoress of the foul deed; yet at others there seemed something wanting in the confirmation of my suspicions. Regarding the latter I could not overlook the fact that Short had told a story which was false on the face of it, while the utter absence of any motive on my love's part in murdering the old gentleman seemed to point in an entirely opposite direction.

Dr. Diplock, the coroner, had fixed the inquest for eleven o'clock on the morrow; therefore I assisted Dr. Farmer, of Kew, the police surgeon, to make the post-mortem.

We made the examination in the afternoon, before the light faded, and if the circumstances of the crime were mysterious, the means by which the unfortunate man was murdered were, we found, doubly so.

Outwardly, the wound was an ordinary one, one inch in breadth, inflicted by a blow delivered from left to right. The weapon had entered between the fourth and fifth ribs, and the heart had been completely transfixed by some sharp cutting instrument. The injuries we discovered within, however, increased the mystery ten-fold, for we found two extraordinary lateral incisions, which almost completely divided the heart from side to side, the only remaining attachment of the upper portion to the lower being a small portion of the anterior wall of the heart behind the sternum.

Such a wound was absolutely beyond explanation.

The instrument with which the crime had been committed by striking between the ribs had penetrated to the heart with an unerring precision, making a terrible wound eight times the size within, as compared with the exterior puncture. And yet the weapon had been withdrawn, and was missing!

For fully an hour we measured and discussed the strange discovery, hoping all the time that Sir Bernard would arrive. The knife which the man Short confessed he had taken down in self-defence we compared with the exterior wound and found, as we anticipated, that just such a wound could be caused by it. But the fact that the exterior cut was cleanly done, while the internal injuries were jagged and the tissues torn in a most terrible manner, caused a doubt to arise whether the Indian knife, which was double-edged, had actually been used. To be absolutely clear upon this point it would be necessary to examine it microscopically, for the corpuscles of human blood are easily distinguished beneath the lens.

We were about to conclude our examination in despair, utterly unable to account for the extraordinary wound, when the door opened and Sir Bernard entered.

He looked upon the body of his old friend, not a pleasing spectacle indeed, and then grasped my hand without a word.

“I read the evening paper on my way up,” he said at last in a voice trembling with emotion. “The affair seems very mysterious. Poor Courtenay! Poor fellow!”

“It is sad – very sad,” I remarked. “We have just concluded the post-mortem;” and then I introduced the police surgeon to the man whose name was a household word throughout the medical profession.

I showed my chief the wound, explained its extraordinary features, and asked his opinion. He removed his coat, turned up his shirt-cuffs, adjusted his big spectacles, and, bending beside the board upon which the body lay, made a long and careful inspection of the injury.

“Extraordinary!” he ejaculated. “I’ve never known of such a wound before. One would almost suspect an explosive bullet, if it were not for the clean incised wound on the exterior. The ribs seem grazed, yet the manner in which such a hurt has been inflicted is utterly unaccountable.”

“We have been unable to solve the enigma,” Dr. Farmer observed. “I was an army surgeon before I entered private practice, but I have never seen a similar case.”

“Nor have I,” responded Sir Bernard. “It is most puzzling.”

“Do you think that this knife could have been used?” I asked, handing my chief the weapon.

He looked at it, raised it in his hand as though to strike, felt its edge, and then shook his head, saying: “No, I think not. The instrument used was only sharp on one edge. This has both edges sharpened.”

It was a point we had overlooked, but at once we agreed with him, and abandoned our half-formed theory that the Indian dagger had caused the wound.

With Sir Bernard we made an examination of the tongue and other organs, in order to ascertain the progress of the disease from which the deceased had been suffering, but a detailed account of our discoveries can have no interest for the lay reader.

In a word, our conclusions were that the murdered man could easily have lived another year or more. The disease was not so advanced as we had believed. Sir Bernard had a patient to see in Grosvenor Square; therefore he left at about four o'clock, regretting that he had not time to call round at the neighbour's and express his sympathy with the widow.

"Give her all my sympathies, poor young lady," he said to me. "And tell her that I will call upon her to-morrow." Then, after promising to attend the inquest and give evidence regarding the post-mortem, he shook hands with us both and left.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.